

Cart Before Horse(sense) & HRMbyDesign

Over the last year serious concerns have been raised about the compromise of democracy in HRMbyDesign, about assumptions the plan holds regarding the need for more office space in the Central Business District, and about the elimination of Municipal Planning Strategy heritage protection policies. But there is also an equally critical issue which now surprisingly links heritage and development in the Downtown: Sustainability. When it comes to sustainability, HRMbyDesign asks Council to approve a plan for development before the city has put a plan for sustainability into law.

Nova Scotia is 90% dependent on foreign coal and oil to heat, cool, light and service our buildings, as well as drive our cars, trucks and machinery. The age of cheap oil is over. We can see and feel the effects of increasing CO2 emissions, to which Halifax contributes about 30% of Nova Scotia's total. We send almost all our gas and oil south, and much of our wood pellets off to Europe. And we know that it will be quite sometime until renewable energy sources become dependably available replacements for all of the energy we now import (and export).

Despite all that knowledge, this Spring HRMbyDesign will ask HRM Council to approve a plan that will permit buildings to rise to energy-intensive, high consumption heights on sites across the Downtown: McKelvie's could go from 2 to 11 storeys, the Five Fishermen from 3¹/₂ to 9, the Waterfront Warehouse from 2 to 16 storeys. Throughout the Downtown, those buildings and others (like the YMCA site—up to 16 storeys) will put at risk the sustainability of the heart of Halifax. Furthermore, because of those heights the city's heritage buildings will be threatened first with decay due to loss of sun and circulation, and then with demolition as their owners realize they're worth more down than up.

To demolish heritage buildings which long ago paid their carbon construction costs makes no sustainable sense. To build new, taller buildings that will incur much heavier costs in concrete, glass, steel and transportation CO2 emissions with much shorter life spans makes no sustainable sense. (Think of the 40 year old Joe Howe Building, now up for the most expensive retrofit in the Province's history.)

HRMbyDesign asks us to wait till after the Design is passed for a Sustainability Functional Plan. That's putting the cart before the horse at a time when plain old horse sense tells us that now is the time to pre-fit HRMbyDesign with that plan, not retrofit it afterwards as we have had to do

so often in the past revising plans made without adequate foresight. We know what's coming, because it's already here. Now.

And we don't need to start over. Because our heritage buildings have suddenly, unexpectedly become surprisingly modern and green. They stand as models of how to build to topographical proportion (think of the viewplanes), of climate-sensitive energy conservation (think of Historic Properties in the Age of Sail), and as examples of genuine architectural grace (think of the Bank of Nova Scotia building, the St. Paul's Building, or the Morris St. Scottish dormer row houses).

By building to standards of least possible energy intensity, on downtown lands obviously vacant, now is the time to make sustainability the primary practice in the life of the city. Now is the time to ensure the long life of the heritage buildings that give Halifax, to use HRMbyDesign's word, it's "distinction" in Canada — and in a rare moment of auspicious convergence between heritage and development, support the growth of authentically green development for long-term financial vitality and civic pride.

What does Sustainability mean? In 1989, the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) articulated what has now become a widely accepted definition of sustainability: "[to meet] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

What does Sustainability mean for HRM? In 2007, HRM became a founding member of the Atlantic Canada Sustainability Initiative, which follows The Natural Step Canada. The Natural Step Canada defines sustainability as:

"A state in which society does not systematically undermine natural or social systems within the biosphere. Achieving sustainability would happen when the four system conditions of The Natural Step are met.

"System Conditions: Four conditions for achieving sustainability. The conditions are stated in the negative to create the constraints within which creativity can flourish. They are:

"In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing:

- Concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust
- Concentrations of substances produced by society
- Degradation by physical means
- And people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs."

What does Sustainability mean for HRMbyDesign? "Architecture, landscape and engineering that establishes the conservation of energy, materials, and natural resources and systems, as a primary consideration in their planning, design, construction and life cycle. This includes public as well as private development, and encompasses streets, parks, and buildings."