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DARE TO DREAM

In the ancient Roman Forum, the Sewer God stood proudly beside Venus – the goddess of beauty and bloom. The Romans knew health, beauty and landscape were the keys to a city's ability to delight.

Here we live in a land of lush rainforests, soaring mountain ranges, azure lakes, undulating prairie grasses, lavish stands of hardwood and thousands of miles of rugged coastline.

Our cities cut into this wondrous landscape like festering lesions. They pay little tribute to the land and the seasons celebrated by our poets and writers and artists. Rather, Canada's cities, largely built since World War II, are mean places.

Other than the classic buildings that first began our sense of nationhood – like our many legislatures or the few special places of our current time – our cities are largely places of banal cores linked by freeways to suburban wastelands. Places where cars rule, ferrying us to dull structures that may be offices, shopping centres, garages or hospitals – you often need a sign to tell you which is which.



"Can you imagine visiting Winnipeg instead of Paris ... I can."

This is the modern heritage of a cabal of city planners, zoning by-laws and architectural design approval panels where those with vested interests interact with councillors and cranks. No matter which way the mayors and councillors turn, they're doomed to criticism or even corruption.

The concept of zoning is a failure in all Canadian cities. There's the office building zone (highrise) and then there's the office building zone (medium rise), the high rise apartment zone (now sprinkled here and there by the pressures of time), the shopping zone (once downtown and now a shopping centre or a big box zone) and the single family residential zones, separate from all others. A place for everything. Everything separate from the other. The word alienation comes to mind.

City cores empty at 5:30, their inhabitants rushing to the castled suburban sanctuary of the middle classes free from all that could harm. These zoning by-laws have failed us. They have robbed us of a sense of teeming, pulsing city life. We are not elevated by the cities we live in, but rather by our occasional escape from them – away to that patchwork of azure lake and forest that surrounds us or to the warmth of southern climes.

Enough! What can be done?

It begins with the way we treat people. Industry and businesses must offer their employees more than paychecks. Cities must offer more incentives to landlords. Cut the taxes of those buildings that elevate the spirit of our citizenry and that win design awards. Cut them by 15% annually. Others will follow if they see there is a benefit to them. Let's call it creative taxing; it can be a powerful tool for positive change.

Let us no longer put our trust in the hands of the mayors and the councillors and the city planners. Let us not be held ransom by a handful of cranks who show up at town hall meetings and who therefore are seen to dignify the process of so-called interactive civic participation. This is a farce. These are not the 'experts' who will change our urban fates.

The special landscapes of cities, now the unspoken preserves of the wealthy, must be brought back to the public domain. River banks captured by mansions built nearby must be free for all to walk. Special places – city lakes, parks, ravines and neighbourhood enclaves of lovely homes – must be accessible to everyone. Line their edges with cafes, markets and meeting places.

Build schools that charm and delight the students who must spend so many years in them. These are not places to build with the prudent economies of the short-sighted and virtuous. These are places where our children form a vision of our society.

There is no formula or tidy recipe for success. If there was, I am sure the mayors, councillors and planners would have made wonderful, chocolate-cake cities. But we do have a choice. We can continue to debate our feelings or we can invite, through open competitions, the best and brightest to develop comprehensive plans – visions to reshape our cities into the most delightful places – places that everyone in Canada as well as those from other lands will wish to come to – to feel the vibrancy, to delight in the texture of our streets. Can you imagine visiting Winnipeg or Halifax or Toronto instead of Paris, Prague or New York? I can.

It's the dream we must make real.