

sitelines

BY STEVE COHLMAYER



Design gaffe has good side

Architectural moxie pays off

A little more than 20 years ago, Martin Bergen, a Winnipeg developer, completed a very large project, Fort Garry Place, immediately south of the Hotel Fort Garry.

It was the last significant private development of rental housing in the city. Outrage over its construction and design resulted in a formal design-review process for downtown buildings. And the project has been the tacit demonstration of the dangers of bad design ever since it was built.

I have brought designers who are visiting from out of town to the project and, on more than one occasion, one has leapt from my car, camera in hand, shouting "I have to get a picture of this!"

The project was a personal dream for Bergen, who directed the design and construction of the project in nearly every detail. Before construction began, he visited many towns in Germany and obtained permission to make moulds of their civic buildings' stone sculptures. He obtained their agreement by promising that in payment he would make first-class cast-stone replicas for the towns' archives.

(This was a very attractive proposition at the time because Germany's acid rains were quickly making mush of their centuries-old limestone civic sculptures.)

To make the moulds and the stone castings, Bergen engaged a master heritage building technician and craftsman in Germany. The craftsman's name was Alfred Widmer. He came to Winnipeg to complete the stone castings for Bergen's project, and has remained here ever since.

The net result of this story is that Winnipeg gained a level of restoration skill that is almost unavailable in North America.

Widmer has become the city's pre-eminent heritage-building technical specialist and contractor. Many of our heritage buildings have since undergone major restoration. The quality of much of the work — especially work on terra cotta, rendered cement, specialty mortars and stone repair — has been exceptional, thanks to Widmer's knowledge and insistence that work be completed to the best restoration standards.

But the value of Bergen's beehemoth is not just the feel-good story of the unintended benefit of Widmer's presence.

The value lies more in the fact that one person had the gumption and gall to build something absolutely huge that represented his idea of the right thing to do.

Most of us might feel that what he did is an architectural disaster, but that's only part of the story.

I am grateful we live in a city large enough to allow follies of this scale to happen.

At the same time, I am saddened that our political and administrative response to something a bit outrageous seems to be consistently to stick our thumbs in the dike to keep such a thing from happening again.

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