

# Architectural miscues have long shelf life

## *sitelines*

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I suspect that many young architects enter the profession with a desire to build something that will last longer than they will.

Most buildings, though, do not last very long. Even important works of architecture are often demolished a surprisingly short time after they are constructed.

Most of Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings had already been torn down by the time he died. And several buildings by our current icon of the profession, Frank Gehry, have been torn down because of the expense of maintaining his formally complex creations.

The irony is that cultural artifacts that are physically much more vulnerable — words written on paper, music played into the wind and dramatic performances lasting little more than an hour — have a better chance of achieving eternal life than bricks, stone and steel.

Powerful works of art can be central to our lives for centuries; weaker creations do not last so long.

If we happen to go to a bad movie or exhibition of paintings, we can leave and forget the experi-



Big-box-style development will scar this strip of Portage Avenue for a long time to come.

ence quickly. If it really is terrible, the rest of the world will soon forget it, too, and this oblivion is the blessing that protects us from constant bombardment from creative acts that did not quite make it.

This potential for very quick oblivion in the other arts has an interesting impact on creation: The "right" to fail and be quickly forgotten gives the practitioners of these other arts licence to make very big mistakes without crippling effect, and this licence also gives freedom to make breakthroughs and compelling new markers for all of us.

Though the lifespan of a single building may be

relatively short, when mistakes are made in our built environment they are with us, and stare us in the face, for a long time. A second-rate book has a shelf life of a few months. A poor building or planning decision can be a part of our collective lives for decades.

Because poor architecture does not have the blessing of quick oblivion, owners and architects elect to only slowly move beyond today's norms and expectations.

Because the impact of error is so permanent (40-year permanent, not forever permanent), and because errors are so visible to us all, the arts of architecture and planning are subject to much

stricter rules and approval procedures than are the other arts. At the civic level, we have levels of artistic oversight and control that would never be accepted in other creative disciplines.

My normal response to these levels of control in planning and architecture is to wish for less; to hope that many clients and designers working together can — on their own — challenge existing norms, and create a better collective environment.

But sometimes things happen that are truly destructive to our urban environment; when we see this occur, we can only wish that even stricter levels of control had been in place.

Winnipeg has recently experienced such a development. One of the recent influx of national chain pharmacies has just opened on the land on which the Winnipeg Supply building stood. The new building is set behind an immense parking lot, just as it would be if it were a store in "big-box-land."

This has been done not in low-density suburbia, but in a downtown area where the buildings are set close to the sidewalk, where pedestrians actually walk, and where diverse storefronts are a part of normal urban experience.

The destruction of a coherent urban space and relationship is palpable (yes, even Portage Avenue is nice), and it will be a long time before it can be healed.