

sitelines

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We should aspire to greatness

Innovative everyday architecture
isn't beyond our grasp

MOST of us were first exposed to myths in high school, where we learned the stories handed down by the ancient Greeks or Norsemen. Though these myths provided a core interpretation of reality to their contemporary cultures, their basis in fact is, at best, limited.

The scientific unreality of myths has led to the belief that a myth is no more than a fairy tale, or even a lie. "That's just a myth" is regularly used as a disparaging reference to foolish or naive conceptions.

However, myths can also be seen in a different light. The ancient myths provided their cultures with the equivalent of the scientific explanation of things; they also, more importantly, defined their culture's central world-view.

We still need such core values, even in a scientific and technical age. We all build, as part of our cultural growth and survival, a framework of values, aspirations and priorities. This framework serves as the measure against which we judge ourselves, our society, and our culture.

Our myths are our measure; they provide the essential form of our social and intellectual lives.



The focus of these articles is the importance of making well our buildings, our city and our physical world. At a technical level, it's clear — of course the streets have to work, elevators have to deliver people to high places, plumbing systems must separate sewage from drinking water, and buildings must not fall down.

But there is another level at which we have to make our physical world: The level of esthetic, cultural and social quality. We can only achieve this when the wish to build our homes well is part of our collective psyche and will.

The myth that innovative and compelling architecture is essential is widely held in many parts of the world. The citizens of Helsinki and Copenhagen know who their architects are and regularly discuss their relative merits.

London, which had relatively little high-quality modern architecture after the Second World War, now has remarkably good buildings going up wherever one looks. Chicagoans have long considered Chicago the architecture city and this self-proclaimed label has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Montreal has become, in the last two decades, an amazingly vital centre for architectural discourse and accomplishment — and that this is a relatively recent phenomenon gives some hope that the current level of a city's architectural consciousness is not its permanent level.

In Winnipeg, things are changing.

There is hope that the new Museum of Human Rights will be a significant architectural project. There are indications that the new Hydro Building will be a signal building — both as a piece of architecture and as an example of ecological responsibility. The expansion of the Centennial Library is being pursued with serious architecture in mind. And the city has instituted an annual international design competition that has raised our visibility in the world of architecture. These are all really good things.

The big projects, though, are the easy part.

The proof of the pudding is to be found when even relatively mundane projects absolutely have to be of high quality from an architectural standpoint. We are not there, but maybe we can get there.

A program in Montreal, in place for several years, may point the way. Every year, projects are entered in a citywide design competition to name the best project of the past year. The winning project receives \$2 million (yes, \$2 million!) in free advertising from the city's media.

Last year, the winning project was a laundromat.

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