

Creating Positive Environments

An Exploration of Architectural Design Control

Have you noticed the dramatic changes occurring in the design of our suburban neighbourhoods? With increasing frequency, our streets are becoming friendly, and houses are once again beginning to look like homes. This is no accident, as municipalities are stepping in and taking a hands-on approach in regulating the look and feel of our communities. While we see the physical results of these efforts in the form of visually pleasing, well-detailed homes, few are aware of how this system works. Conversations with John Williams and John Tassiopoulos of *Williams and Stewart, Design Control Architects*, shed an interesting light on this vital element in the planning process.

Seeking to improve the quality of the built environment, many municipalities are now requiring that architects and developers comply with a stringent set of design-based guidelines. Similar in nature to the building code says John Tassiopoulos, "these guidelines are essentially performance and architectural recommendations designed to illustrate the minimum acceptable standards of design." Established by the individual municipalities, approved by local council, and finally refined on a per-project basis by an external control architect, the process by which these guidelines are administered is known as *Architectural Design Control*.



Objectives

Involving the collaborative efforts of municipalities, architects and developers, architectural control is a multi-tiered, peer-review based initiative. The intent is to promote a high degree of streetscape quality within a strong overall community plan. Hardly a new process, the idea has been implemented in many communities in North America for over 15 years. It is only recently, however, that it has reached mainstream application. While the specifics of each community may vary, the overall objectives remain the same. These include:

- ▶ creating distinct and appealing streetscapes through attention to the architectural design and detailing, massing, materials and building siting;
- ▶ ensuring sensitive design compatibility;
- ▶ encouraging pedestrian-based streets and spaces by reducing the importance of those elements that squelch the overall appearance of the neighbourhood;
- ▶ identifying specific design requirements for high street presence structures;
- ▶ establishing a timely schedule for design reviews.

The process of implementing architectural control begins with a commitment from the municipality when it es-

establishes macro-level intents and methodologies for its long-term urban growth strategies. Often included in these is the provision that site plan approval is conditional upon an independent architectural review. While the municipality may handle this review internally, it is largely the responsibility of the developer to retain the services of an external control architect.

Control Architect

The control architect serves as the liaison between the municipality and the architect/developer. Overseeing the entire process from initial site plan application through to final construction, the first step in the process is to establish the pertinent contextual conditions of each individual project—such as local architectural or historical references, geography, or desired theme. From this information, along with the macro-goals of the municipality, the control architect then prepares a set of micro-level planning and architectural recommendations to which the builder must adhere.

The scope for these recommendations is both wide-sweeping and explicit. Guided by the need to create a unified community, virtually every aspect of the design is subject to review. Architectural form, style and massing must respond to local contexts and conditions, facade detailing should be consistent throughout, and even colour selection must conform to the overall theme of the neighbourhood. A typical architectural recommendation for example, states that corner units, given their prominent position in the streetscape, must receive special treatments such as wrap-around porches and detailing on both facades.

At the urban level, the siting of a building is equally as important. Often the guidelines mandate the number and proximity of repeated house styles on a specific block. Under this scrutiny, no two identical homes can ever be in direct proximity to each other. This ensures variety in the streetscape and eliminates the repetitiveness so often seen in conventional suburban designs. While this process of oversight may appear excessive, compare a current suburban development with its counterpart of 20 years ago, and the results will speak for themselves.

Long-term Goals

Design control works best when municipalities, architects and developers work hand-in-hand. It goes without saying, then, that the key players must unify themselves around the long-term goals of the community. It is important to note though, that these guidelines are really just recommendations. While explicit in their intent, it is often through the process of compromise that the needs of all stakeholders are met. A typical case-in-point, recalls Tassiopoulos, illustrates the potential conflicts. "There was a situation where the guidelines recommended paired, narrow driveways in the hopes of increasing the amount of green space and plantable area, as well as effectively streamlining the location of municipal services. Although well within the design objectives, and approved by the urban design department, the zoning department however refused to approve the site plan based on conflicts with their regulations. A classic case of the left- and right-hand scenario, snags of this nature severely delayed the process and served only the needs of individual departments, and of course ultimately compromised the quality of overall urban design."

While the process of design control requires internal shifts in thinking, and front-end planning efforts by the municipality, the long-term advantages for the community and region are significant. The most salient feature is the creation of positive neighbourhoods and spaces with architectural variety, which are at the same time respectful of local styles, traditions and themes. It is important to remember, says John Williams, a control architect for over 20 years that you are not only selling a product, you are selling a community, and the impacts will be felt for the next 50 years. It goes without saying, that a network of quality public spaces and forms will increase the overall social, psychological and monetary value of the neighbourhood for future generations.

Incremental Process

Design control also allows smaller municipalities to respond proactively to rapid development. A large suburban

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project can add 15% growth to the size of a town, and easily overwhelm the municipal and physical infrastructure. As many municipalities simply do not have the resources, the application of external architectural controls relieves the internal burden. Williams reminds that design control is very much an *incremental process*, where standards continuously evolve and are upgraded. From this, municipal managers are wise to take full advantage of the experience of the control architect and should welcome the opportunity to leapfrog over the mistakes of the past, rather than remake them. Tassiopoulos concurs and suggests the chance to take *sobering second thoughts* based on experienced guidance is critical in moving toward a policy of smart growth.

Brampton, Whitby, Markham, Ajax and Aurora head a growing list of Ontario municipalities with these controls already in place.

While some may see architectural control as a fly-in-the-ointment of accepted municipal procedures, the overall good of the community should be the umbrella under which all departments operate. If key municipal players and architects adopt these principles and rally around the idea that suburban design need not mean repetitive, monotonous facades, then we will all benefit in the long run. *MW*

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municipal calendar



OCTOBER 2001

1 Monday

On or before this date [1st day of October] in every year, a pipe line company shall notify the assessment commission of each municipality of the age, length and diameter of all its transmission pipe lines located in each municipality on September 1 of that year. *Assessment Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. A.31, s. 25 (2).

Except as may be provided for by order of the Minister made under section 4 of the *Northern Services Boards Act*, that the term of office of a local services board member shall be for one year from this date [1st day of October] to the 30th day of September in the next year. The fiscal year of the board shall also commence on this date. *Northern Services Boards Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. L.28, s. 5.

Council may by by-law, before or after passing a by-law for imposing the rates for the current year, authorize the head and treasurer to borrow, until taxes are collected and other revenues are received, such sums as council considers necessary to meet the current expenditures of the corporation for the year. This includes the amounts required for sinking fund, principal and interest falling due within the year upon any debt of the corporation, school purposes, special rates purposes, and for any board, commission or body and other purposes for which the corporation is required by law to provide. The amount that may be borrowed at any one time for the purposes mentioned in subsection 187 (2) of the *Municipal Act*, together with the total of any similar borrowings that have not been repaid, shall not, except with the approval of the Municipal Board, exceed from January 1 to September 30 of the year 50 per cent of the total and from October 1 to December 31, 25 per cent of the total for the estimated revenues of the corporation as set forth in the estimates adopted for the year. *Municipal Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. M.45, ss. 187 (1), (2). See also the *County of Oxford Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. C.42, s. 87 (2); *District of Muskoka Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. D.14, s. 86 (2); and *Regional Municipalities Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. R.8, ss. 110 (1), (2).

8 Monday - Thanksgiving Day.