

# Cities need a vision, great architecture



## OUR TOWN BY TED WINTERER

In my last column I lamented that Santa Monica's extensive public review and codified design standards scare away some architects and dilute and undermine the individual expression of those who continue to work here. You know the old aphorism that a camel is a horse designed by a committee? Well, over the years what we've often gotten here are dull and sturdy beast-of-burden buildings instead of provocative thoroughbreds.

While much of my thesis derives from my curmudgeonly perspective, I also spoke with many local architects who believe Santa Monica is not a hospitable place to practice their craft. As I'm just a loudmouthed lay person, I sought the opinions on these issues of our Architectural Review Board (ARB), whose members are our arbiters on matters of building design. Michael Folonis, an accomplished architect, ARB member and as gracious a man as you'll meet, was kind enough to chat with me.

Folonis believes city officials have gone to great lengths in the last year to make City Hall more user friendly for architects and that recent reforms to the planning process have made it less time-consuming and labyrinthine. He's also convinced the ARB is striving to encourage good design in the projects it reviews and, in particular, lauds its chair, Joan Charles, for her leadership and the city staff that assists the board for "doing an incredible job."

So perhaps there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of architecture in our town. However, I still believe we ought to take the following steps to stimulate better architecture in Santa Monica and to persuade architects who have been alienated by past experience to once again work here:

■ City officials are now seeking a new director for the planning department and should hire someone who has the vision and intellectual pedigree to recognize and cultivate better architecture, and the courage and self-confidence to not interfere with its creation. He or she should reach out to local architects to assure them their designs will be nurtured and respected.

■ The ARB should not just reject or approve projects but instead actively promote fine design. City officials already waive permit fees for landmarked build-

ings and are moving toward expedited permits for green buildings, so why not similarly reward great architecture by having the ARB designate a certain percentage of designs as meritorious and granting these projects fast-tracked approvals or other incentives? At the very least, the ARB should foster the best possible architecture by awarding commendations to public and private works and acknowledging these designs in the local media and the city's Web site.

■ When our new zoning ordinance is written in the next two years, it should be streamlined to be easier for architects to navigate and should eliminate all design standards, sticking instead to its fundamental purpose of shaping land use rather than aesthetics. There should be no more of this malarkey about how you can build only a flat roof or a pitched roof with a specified rise and run, so that the result is a cookie-cutter design. If you want a sloped roof without a peak or a minaret, or an onion dome, you should be able to build it as long as it conforms to the required height and mass. Likewise, parameters such as the Ocean Park guidelines, which stipulate that buildings in that neighborhood must comply with one of three dated styles of architecture, should be tossed out. While these sort of well-intended constraints may be appropriate for places like Nantucket, their unintended consequence here is a mediocre uniformity.

■ City officials should initiate a competition among the best architects available to oversee the remaining buildings in the Civic Center makeover, to assure that this critical component of our town's future benefits from a singular and harmonious vision. Our current approach, with architects hired ad hoc for each component as it's funded, runs too great a risk the final result will be an ungainly hodgepodge. Likewise, if city officials must proceed with a development agreement to remodel Santa Monica Place, they should insist on a competition among architects to seek out the best possible scheme for a project that will define our city for decades to come.

Ours is a progressive city that celebrates diversity, fosters the arts and cultivates freedom of expression, yet it seems to me when it comes to the art of architecture we have encouraged homogeneity, stifled individual autonomy and have been overly cautious — dare I say even conservative. Why exactly are we afraid? Great cities are defined by many measures, one of which is great architecture.

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