

# PRICE TAGS

## *Issue 16*

January 15, 2004

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## Vancouver As It Might Have Been

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After a quarter century, it is still one of the finest small office buildings in Canada. And it is still one of the best examples of 'neighbourliness,' the special quality that changed the way of doing development in Vancouver - and changed the city itself.

Occupying a commanding site at the northeast corner of Burrard and Hastings, it is still called by many the Daon Building, though the company that built it is long gone.

Angled to the corner, cloaked in gold mirror glass and trimmed with brick, the Daon Building acknowledges subservience to its more majestic neighbour across the street by offering a glittering reflection of the Marine Building, the art-deco masterpiece that punctuates the end of the Hastings Street corridor.



To the east, the Daon Building shows its respect to the historic Vancouver Club with massing and proportions appropriate to its four-storey neighbour.

The Daon Building is also famous for what it isn't. The building that was originally proposed for the site by one of the city's most powerful developers came as the first significant test of Vancouver's innovative development-approval process, based on new notions of what made for good design.

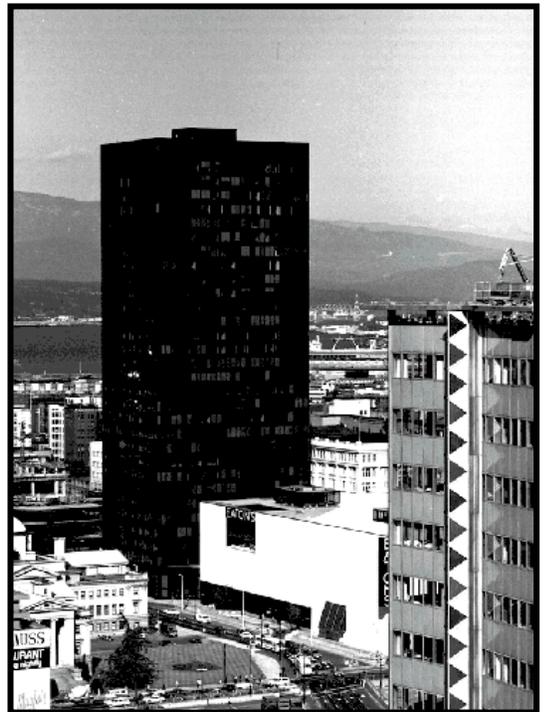


*The Seagram Building: Mother of all International-Style boxes*

The construction of the TD tower – a black Miesian monolith – was the final straw.

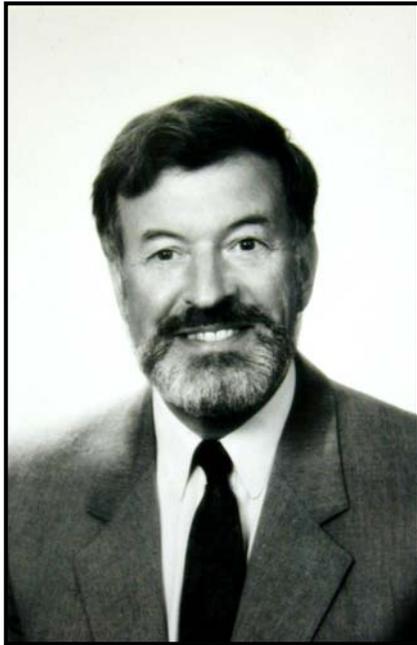
How did this stuff get approved? Didn't anyone at City Hall care?

By the 1970s, like arguably every other city in the western world, Vancouver had had it with modernism. People were fed up with endless undistinguished copies of the International-Style box, plonked down without respect to context, heritage or environment.



*And her children ...*

*Pacific Centre – the black tower*



In 1974, a newly elected City Council was determined to revise the development process from top to bottom.

Ray Spaxman, a British-trained architect with recent experience in Toronto, was the new Director of Planning charged with introducing the mechanisms that would fulfil the political commitments of a

Council majority that had promised more citizen accountability.

## **New Conditions**

What was required was a mechanism that allowed negotiation to occur throughout the development-approval process, including the way the final decision was made. By making everything in the downtown core conditional with no outright density, approvals became dependent on the quality of design and the response of the project to the public realm.

The approval itself came from the Development Permit Board, consisting of the City Engineer, the Director of

Social Planning and the Director of Planning as chair - and notably not a single politician. (In fact, it was considered inappropriate for a politician to even be in the same room as the decision-makers.)

If things went well, it was because the project had been sufficiently well massaged to avoid any need for outright rejection. Most Development Permit Board meetings concerned themselves with matters that would address citizen concerns and make the design more 'neighbourly.'

That was Spaxman's term, and it summed up an approach that tried to avoid the personal aesthetic judgments of the adjudicators but still made urban design a priority.

## **Urban Design institutionalized**

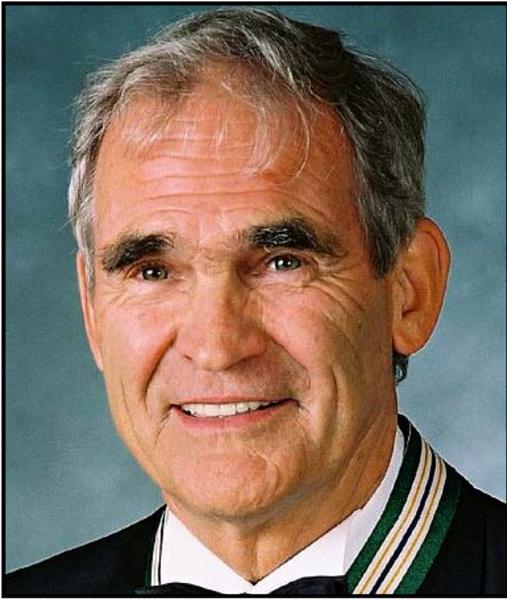
In fact, much of the discussion about issues of urban design would have taken place already. The Urban Design Panel was also purely advisory, but it met separately from the Development Permit Board and its advisory group. Key to its success, in Spaxman's opinion, was that the Director of Planning was not the chair of the panel and that only design professionals were members, nominated by their peers.

Not only did such a structure add to the respect the industry gave the panel, it also required the members to move away from 'architect-speak,' the value-laden argot of impression and value ("The tower gives a feeling of dominance"), and more towards precision and specificity ("Lower the massing so it doesn't overshadow the public space.")

The Daon Building was the test.

The first design put forward by Musson Cattell, a respected Vancouver-based firm, was leaden. Dominantly brick and blocky, with an overhanging wing that met the Vancouver Club with a blank and arrogant wall, it was heading for outright rejection.





Informed of the likely decision a few days before, Jack Poole, head of the company, agreed to a meeting with the Director of Planning to discuss options. After presentations by both sides, the developer recognized a number of advantages to the community - that 'neighbourliness'

thing - and withdrew the proposal to accommodate the changes and achieve what turned out to be a win-win solution.

## **Self-interest and Certainty**

Important to the survival of the development-permit and urban-design process was the assessment on the part of the development industry that the politicians would support it - and that the citizens would support the politicians.

Of course, it was ultimately in the developers' own interest. Unless design improved, unless people believed again in progress and the prospect of something better, development would be frustrated

and delayed, even perhaps prohibited in a backlash of downzoning and restrictive preservation bylaws.

What the industry wanted in return was certainty, and the understanding that their submissions would not be unduly delayed or negotiated to death with additional demands at the last moment.

The checks and balances built into the system, and the absence of political intrusion, have restrained critics who may not like the conditional nature of the zoning but fear the alternatives could be even worse.

There have been three reviews of the Development Permit Board; none has led to significant change.

Citizens, too, have been by and large receptive. At least they have sufficient notification. They can see how the process works. They can participate. And Vancouverites generally have become increasingly proud of their city as others have praised the overall quality of urban design.

For more information on the Development Permit Board, its meeting dates and agendas, [click here](#).

No question, the bar has been raised. The public is now more willing to accept a scale of development that would have been unthinkable a few decades previous.

Design alone is not sufficient in the making of a good and great city; other social, economic and environmental factors play as important a role.

But today, the Daon Building still commands its corner, still reflects the past, and still reminds us that good design can pay for itself both in assessed values and in the assessment of citizens.

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This article originally appeared in *Arcade*, a Seattle-based journal of architecture and design. For the unabridged version, [click here](#) and go to the Spring 2003 edition: *Regulating Design, the Public Way*.