

A banner year for building

Year brought critical mass of first- class projects to city accustomed to the second rate
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A few more years like 2006 and Torontonians will have to get used to feeling good about architecture.

With some exceptions, this has been one the best years ever for the city.

Toronto was enhanced by a number of projects, mostly cultural, academic and institutional, that remind us we are capable of excellence after all. It may not qualify as a habit just yet - Toronto hasn't suddenly become Chicago - but a critical mass of architectural engagement is forming and changing the landscape, both physical and mental.

This is hugely important in a city where second rate has historically been good enough.

The private sector has been slow to break its dependence on mediocrity, but there are signs that Torontonians are growing more sophisticated and unwilling to settle for the kind of architectural banality developers have traditionally offered.

On the other hand, various cultural institutions, universities, colleges and public agencies have grasped the centrality of architecture to their efforts. They have hired the best design firms, and despite seriously restricted budgets, enabled them to produce works of the highest calibre.

More important, perhaps, is the fact that these buildings are not all the stand-alone, one-of-a-kind icons with which we tend to be obsessed. Instead they are projects of surpassing urbanism, projects that make a point of fitting into their context and giving back as much as they take. In other words, this is architecture that forms part of the public realm even when not fully public.

It is ironic, of course, that the one project that should have been an icon, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, was an architectural dud. Clad in blue-black masonry, and blank on two of its four facades, it feels more industrial than cultural, more inwardly focused than outward looking.

On the other hand, when a pair of otherwise conventional developers suddenly launched an international competition to design a condo tower for the corner of Hurontario and Burnhamthorpe in Mississauga, expectations were turned happily upside down.

The winner, a young Beijing-based firm, MAD, came up with a remarkably sensual skyscraper nicknamed Marilyn Monroe. It could well be the first icon of its kind in Canada, let alone the GTA.

Also good news was the advent of four commercial towers in the downtown core. The bad news was that none has any architectural merit. Instead, they are slick and shiny but ordinary.

Regardless, the tall building did make something of a comeback. The University of Toronto is the site of two superb examples, the Terrence Donnelly Centre for Cellular and Biomolecular Research and the Leslie Dan Pharmacy Building, and a third, 180 Queen St. W., also opened this year.

Each proves there's lots of life left in a form that has been allowed to deteriorate into dullness and predictability.

After 2006, there can be no doubt that Toronto's Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg has established itself as the best. Though the work of Daniel Libeskind (Royal Ontario Museum) and Frank Gehry (Art Gallery of Ontario) may attract more attention, KPMB did something only the bravest and most mature architects are capable of they designed architecture that serves the city. This may sound obvious, but in fact it's rare; either we're talking starchitects whose buildings make no effort to belong, or the inept who don't know how.

KPMB has found that elusive balance between self-assurance and self-restraint, ego and sublimation, that makes them such a great asset to this city.

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[Illustration]

Beijing firm MAD's sensual concept for a Mississauga skyscraper nicknamed Marilyn Monroe could become a Canadian icon.

Credit: Toronto Star

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