

Pamela Madoff: Seeking the authentic Victoria

AAREN MADDEN

Born and raised in Victoria, city councillor and heritage advocate Pam Madoff knows the city in a “fine-grained” way.

Nimble. Like the effortless grace of a dancer who, after years of training, gains deep corporeal knowledge. Can a civic body aspire to such a state?

We have been drinking tea and talking cities for almost an hour before Pamela Madoff, the always artfully embellished Victoria city councillor of 16 years, applies the word “nimble” to civic governance. It tidily gathers together many threads we have unravelled as we examined challenges that seem unique to our city, like the ongoing tensions between status quo and moving forward, and those every city faces.

Nimble means responsive, not reactive. “If you are nimble, you are not just fast, you are strategic. Well-informed. You can have policies in place to guide your decision-making, and if you know you need a new policy, you get on it,” she says. You know your city; you respond to its strengths, limitations and potentials in a “fine-grained” way.

We have that luxury here in Victoria, Madoff assures. “This is a small enough town, that when a land use issue comes up, I’ll know the site no matter what neighbourhood it’s in. We need to put that kind of a lens on planning Victoria, to capitalize on [our smaller size]. That’s what’s going to protect our authenticity, the character of the neighbourhoods.”

We agree that Victoria is blessed in that regard. When you are in Fairfield, you know it. You don’t need to check a map or even a street sign; you can *feel* your passage into Rockland, James Bay, Fernwood. Maybe it’s the way the gardens grow, the posture of the houses, the trim of the trees (certainly it’s the people who live there) that give each neighbourhood its palpable and distinct *genius loci*. Whatever the intangible sum, sense of place abounds here to an extent many cities cannot boast.

As a heritage advocate and past president of the Hallmark Society, maintaining authenticity is Madoff’s purview, but she places equal value in a city’s “grit.” Born and raised in Victoria, she spent her teen years haunting the thrift shops and hanging with the artists and “urban pioneers” that first made Old Town special; she scraped paint off timbers to help Gene Miller bring Open Space to life. She rallied with fellow Battery Street residents to save heritage homes being sacrificed to the expansion of a rest home after moving there in 1984. (“No Assault on Battery,” says the sign she still has tucked in her attic.)

Her political education came when she joined the battle to save the stretch of Broad Street and the buildings that stood in the block the Bay (then Eaton) Centre now dominates. With a different perspective than Ken Stratford gave me last month, she recalls thousands of people attending public meetings, presenting plans to city council and retail developers Cadillac Fairview, suggesting a downtown shopping centre that worked *with* the existing urban form such as had been done in San Francisco’s Ghirardelli Square and Boston’s Faneuil Hall. All voices fell on deaf ears, and Madoff still grieves today.

“That’s when I realized ... the only way to have had an impact



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

“WHERE IS THE HERITAGE OF THE FUTURE? What are we building now that somebody would chain themselves to if there was a proposal to demolish it?”

—Pamela Madoff

was to have a vote,” she says of her reluctant decision to run for council. Though “an anarchist at heart” (she is more surprised than anyone at her regulatory role), Madoff hit the ground running, determined, she says, to “completely revolutionize the budget,” only to learn that upwards of 80 percent of the costs are fixed, policing being a large chunk right off the top. “So we get to be wildly creative with about 10 percent of the budget,” she sighs—adding that for every dollar of provincial, federal and property tax collected, municipalities receive, “on a good day, about eight percent.”

We talk about how strict parameters can become a crucible for creativity. People who marvelled at legendary modern architect Fred Hollingsworth’s Vancouver work, Madoff tells me, learned that the finished product had at least as much to do with the size of the plywood available at the lumberyard as it did some lofty esoteric vision. And yet his structures belong so eloquently within their West Coast locations, they could make your heart sing.

So for Madoff, authenticity doesn’t mean a city frozen in time, it means one where great contemporary architecture holds its own beside the jewels of the past, reflecting and resonating this place. “Where is the heritage of the future?” she asks. “What are we building now that somebody would chain themselves to if there was a proposal to demolish it?” It doesn’t mean becoming something we’re not: “When people say ‘why can’t we be like Bilbao or have the Sydney Opera House in the Inner Harbour, I say, why can’t we find our *own* thing?’”

We can learn from other cities, though. In the 1990s, Quebec City moved their entire planning department—under duress, Madoff divulges—to the then-dodgy St Roch neighbourhood, which was their current focus. They created a park, restored a theatre, and peeled back a covered mall to reveal historic buildings. Now the area thrives. The thing is, the planners got to know it by being in it,

discovering and drawing out what made it unique. Now they don’t want to leave.

Here in Victoria, Madoff’s dearest wish is to see “our downtown plan and our neighbourhood plans up-to-date and consistently supported by council, so we are not spending 60 to 70 percent of our time dealing with rezoning requests,” Madoff says of the Byzantine zoning map one developer labelled a crazy-quilt. “Think of what we could be doing with all of our spare time!” she laughs.

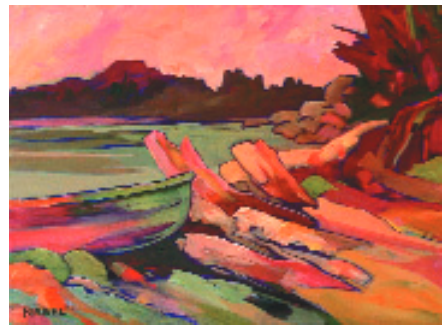
With the slowdown in the building boom, Madoff is looking forward to an opportunity to regroup, but regrets that with no solid bonus density programs in place, public benefits that should have resulted for the average citizen are sadly lacking. However, this administration is already finding ways to be responsive, like creating much-needed rental housing in the stalled Wing condominium on Wilson Street, for instance. Though the city can’t go as far as she would like and enact an anti-demolition bylaw for this .3 percent vacancy rental market (Vancouver has one but our charter won’t legally allow for one here), Madoff is certain more Wing-like situations will be deftly handled.

All the while we are talking, *Dark Age Ahead*, Jane Jacobs’ last book, exhorts quietly beside Madoff’s elbow on the table. A speaker at the 47th International Livable Cities conference in Portland, from which Madoff had just returned, quoted Jacobs’ question, “do you want a city that reinvents itself, or a city reborn?” Madoff answers, “Jacobs always said it’s the city reborn that you want. You build on your strengths.”

And what do you need to be to do that? Nimble.



Writer Aaren Madden’s two young children, along with her *Focus* deadlines, keep her nimble.



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