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Impose minimum height on big boxes

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It is a problem, but one that can be fixed.

We're talking about the growing suburbanization of the city. In recent years, a whole new layer of suburban-scale development – highway-like roads, malls and subdivisions – has been added to Toronto.

It represents planning at its worse, a failure to take advantage of the urban conditions.

The most egregious example is an ill-conceived proposal to build a big-box outlet on Eastern Ave. at Leslie St. But they are everywhere one turns – the LCBO on Yonge north of Davisville, the Canadian Tire at Lake Shore Blvd. E. and Leslie, the Shoppers Drug Mart at Queen and Parliament and, worst of all, the Shoppers Drug Mart under construction on Danforth east of Broadview.

None of these buildings deserves to exist. They are an affront to the city, painful demonstrations of what can happen once the corporate agenda is disengaged from the community in which it operates.

These large, bland, thoughtless, single-storey structures are conceived by corporate myrmidons who see no farther than the bottom line.

But the city need not roll over and play dead as usual. Last year, when the Planning Act was amended, the province gave Toronto (and all cities in Ontario) the authority to set minimum height requirements for all new buildings. Even if that were to be set as low as two storeys, it would force the corporations to rethink the way they operate in the city. Most likely, it would require mixed use, which, of course, is exactly what we want.

As the corporations themselves are well aware, the height of the building makes no difference to them. Consider the fact that these same businesses also operate in towers, underground malls and wherever else makes sense. Shoppers can be found in the ground floor of an office tower at King and Yonge. LCBO outlets are all over the place.

Then there's the most interesting case of all, perhaps, the Canadian Tire in the Ryerson School of Management Building at Dundas and Bay. In its own way, this structure, which opened several years ago, points the way to Toronto's future. Canadian Tire occupies the ground floor; above that there's a parking garage, and above that, the school itself.

Thus the density so necessary to the proper functioning of an urban centre has been enhanced. It is a win-win-win; all the players get what they want.

In the case of the Eastern Ave. scheme, which comes complete with surface parking for 1,900 cars, minimum height requirements would fundamentally alter the form of the proposal. It would force designers – if indeed any are involved – to reconfigure these retail behemoths, to make them part of something larger, something more urban in its form and content. Adding one, two or three floors would mean more and varied uses.

After all, the essential difference between cities and suburbs lies in the diversity and density of the former, the lack thereof in the latter. Since most growth occurs in the suburbs, perhaps it's not surprising that corporate thinking has become lazy and one-dimensional.

Clearly, operating in the city requires they learn to walk and chew gum at the same time. In a city, they can't just throw up boxes that sit dumbly in the middle of a parking lot. As much as business prefers that model, it doesn't apply, or at least it shouldn't. To build downtown is to build within a context. It requires intelligence, creativity and a little sophistication. That may be asking a lot of these corporations, but then, they take a lot from Toronto. That's why they want to be here.

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