

Good infill development breathes life into cities

BY SEAN TREMBATH, THE STARPHOENIX FEBRUARY 14, 2011



Architect Harold Madi points out an example of an acceptable infill building in Saskatoon on Saturday during a visit to the city

Photograph by: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix, The StarPhoenix

Architect Harold Madi was in Saskatoon last week speaking about infill, the practice of developing new buildings in established neighbourhoods.

Canadian cities such as Vancouver, Calgary and Ottawa have prepared guidelines to help property owners plan development. According to Madi, Saskatoon should do the same.

He gave a talk on "breathing new life into older neighbourhoods" Thursday at the Mendel Art Gallery. The event attracted a full house, with many people turned away due to lack of space.

On Saturday, he led a workshop on the topic.

The area around a property needs to be considered whenever infill development takes place, said Madi. An unpleasant building in a neighbourhood can make residents distrustful of the practice and hinder future growth.

"It needs to fit in a neighbourhood. It shouldn't undermine the qualities," said Madi.

Infill makes better use of the space, allowing more people to live in urban areas.

"The good thing about infill is it demonstrates an investment in an old neighbourhood," he said.

Madi took some time to offer some dos and don'ts related to infill development, described below.

GOOD INFILL

- "Buildings should be well mannered, respectful and civil," said Madi, comparing them to good neighbours.
- Good infill adds growth, but fits in the context of the neighbourhood. An example is working with a colour palette that matches other houses.
- Madi is a big supporter of back lanes, as they "help tuck the nasty stuff behind the house." By nasty stuff, he means garbage pickup and garage doors.
- Back lanes also free up room in front of houses for trees. A canopy over a street adds a lot to a neighbourhood.
- In places where there is no back lane, architecture should accentuate the entrance of a house, rather than the garage.

BAD INFILL

- Trying to look "old" from a design standpoint without using materials that are high enough quality can undermine the desired aesthetic.
- Be careful of buildings that take up the whole width of a lot. "The rhythm of the buildings is created by the spaces between them," said Madi.
- Duplexes with no entrance facing the street stick out on a block full of houses with traditional entryways.
- A suburban-style house doesn't belong in an urban area.
- "Snout houses," where the garage sticks out further than the front door, draw the eye to the wrong area. "It looks like the cars live here, not the people," said Madi.

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