

Editorials & Opinion

Urban change requires vision

Scarcity is a fact of life for many these days. Frustrations mount about homelessness, poverty, ill health and environmental degradation – problems whose solutions are often implemented too slowly or are too small in scope for reasons of cost.

It is times like these, with new legislators and tight budgets, that we need to consult with our visionaries – leaders with a holistic perspective who have low-cost ways to overcome scarcity.

One visionary, Martin Liefhebber, recommends simple solutions that have the potential for large-scale implementation – legislative changes that, if enacted, would turn our politicians into heroes. Liefhebber, principal architect of Breathe Architects, is the internationally recognized designer of the Toronto “healthy houses” on Sparkhall Ave., and sustainable buildings and technologies in Canada, including York University’s Calumet College, OCAD’s Rosalie Sharp Pavilion and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre.

Liefhebber’s solutions are based on the need to provide for our changing population. More people are living alone, paying more to do so, and our aging populace needs community supports for independence. “Employment options are diminishing for a greater proportion of people,” says StatsCanada – one reason why more young adults are living with their parents. Employment scarcity exacerbates the need for affordable housing.

Toronto’s 2003 Report Card on Housing and Homelessness stated the crisis: About one-quarter of our city’s population is earning less than the low income cut-off (\$34,572 for a family of four, \$18,371 for one person). Approximately 885,000 Ontario families (250,000 in Toronto) are paying more than 30 per cent of their income for shelter, and more than 71,000 Toronto households are on the waiting list for affordable housing. Liefhebber’s answers to these issues stress the need for



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legislative changes and natural systems “to create humane ways for people to live more affordably in difficult economic times.”

What do these natural systems and legislative changes include?

★ **Mixed use:** change land use zoning everywhere to include live/work

People should be able to start a business within their home but most land is now zoned either residential or commercial. “Having retail operations at street corners, even in the suburbs, would provide grocery stores at more frequent intervals and negate the need for a car,” Liefhebber says.

★ **Intensification**

Liefhebber states: “Traditional means of achieving affordability call for large-scale apartment buildings.” He suggests that instead we double our GTA housing capacity by “rezoning to accommodate a doubling of families per housing unit – a more cost effective use of road and public transit infrastructure while slowing sprawl.” Currently, municipal zoning does not allow lots to contain more than one dwelling for a single family.

Rezoning could also facilitate converting laneways into ecological villages. “This creates a huge supply of inexpensive housing for the elderly, for grown children and for students,” says Liefhebber. “Why do we have cars in garages when we have people sleeping on the streets?”

★ **Alternative technologies**

In the buildings he designs, Liefhebber often opts for alternative technologies found to be superior to standard (legislated) ones, which offer an eco-

logical solution to indoor and outdoor air quality concerns.

In his Clarkson co-housing home, straw bales create a breathing wall technology that has been deemed to be superior to conventional walls by building code specialists. Yet, its use must be applied for by special permit each time, although buildings that can breathe instead of having a tight seal are suitable for people with respiratory sensitivities and reduce health-care costs.

Liefhebber adds: “Most buildings primarily are designed without any clue about the sun and its ability to heat air and water, and they fail to address our growing urgency to lower our energy consumption, use renewables, and live more lightly on the planet.”

★ **Redesign residential streets and sewage systems**

Liefhebber says, “We can redesign residential streets so pedestrians are treated as more valuable than cars. Calming the traffic would promote a 3-C neighbourhood – a commons of community and commerce similar to those in the Netherlands.”

Additionally, he notes, “Why continue to design a closed storm sewage system – the pipe approach – depriving our water table of rainwater penetration and causing it to deteriorate through dropped water levels? Having an open storm water system would also help cool our city because we would rely more on natural, grassy surfaces (rather than paved ones).” This seepage principle “would water our drought-ridden urban trees.”

People and markets are hungry for viable societal, health and ecological alternatives. Given tighter government budgets, we need political leadership to help us achieve these changes through legislation that is less restrictive and which creates opportunities for an improved quality of life.

Sonja Persram is a former member of the Star’s community editorial board.