

With design, you get what you pay for

Hiring architects based on lowest price has led to a generation of public buildings that range from bland to grim

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OPINION



ARCHITECTURE

To create an excellent building, there is one essential ingredient: a great designer. Yet governments across Canada have neglected this truth. They largely hire architects and other consultants based on who offers the lowest price. The results have been a generation of public buildings that range from bland to grim.

That might, at last, be changing. This month the Toronto Community Housing Corporation named the architects for two buildings in the Regent Park neighbourhood, and they are genuinely world-class: local practice architects Alliance and the Danish firm Cobe.

It's hard to overstate the significance of this move. Design procurement sounds deathly boring, and yet it shapes everything. The broader public sector should be paying attention.

Cobe and aA's project will be a 26-storey, 276-unit apartment building that marks the next phase of the revitalization of Regent Park, which was originally built in the 1940s — cheaply and poorly designed — as a public housing complex. This stage will include more than 3,200 homes, mixing condos and social housing, as well as a new library and significant public amenities. The plan was approved by Toronto City Council this month.

The hiring of Cobe and aA is part of an initiative at the housing agency called “quality-based selection.” The urban design for the new phase was led by the first-rank London firm KCA, and that work is both innovative and beautiful.

Essentially, the agency is now interviewing consultants based on their history and approach. Once they've chosen a team, “we negotiate a specific scope of work and a fee structure that is within the industry standard,” says Peter Zimmerman, senior director of development at TCHC.

In this case, they've chosen well. These same two firms recently finished a private-sector apartment complex which, as I wrote in May, includes Toronto's best housing in a generation.

Cobe “brings a Nordic sensibility ... from a country and culture that views housing as a fundamental design and social imperative,” founder Dan Stubbergaard said in an e-mail. Peter Clewes, the respected Toronto architect who runs aA, says the two will imagine the building “as a neighbourhood that can foster collegiality through the careful design of interior and social spaces.”

Together, the firms are highly competent, familiar with Toronto, and skilled at delivering beautiful buildings that create a good public realm. Local sustainability consultants Purpose Building will help the tower achieve the city's aggressive new environment standard.

All this stands in stark contrast to the way things are usually done in Toronto and by most governments outside of Quebec. The status quo is wildly dysfunctional. Many of the best designers in the country don't even try to win public jobs.

Why? Architects, and also landscape architects, compete for a

job in a points-based scoring system; while lip service is paid to quality, the result “is often substantially based on price,” as Mr. Zimmerman puts it. A design firm comes in with a low fee, in some cases ready to lose money, in order to treat a library or rec centre as a marketing tool.

If they do aim to make a profit, they do it through hustle, going as fast as possible and employing junior staff members who often work unpaid overtime. They hire subconsultants, such as engineers, using the same fast-and-cheap approach.

The results — surprise! — are often bad. In many recent public buildings, the spatial ideas driving the design are vague, poorly considered and repetitive, the details inelegant, and the actual construction a mess. When a technical detail hasn't been correctly thought through, mistakes happen; electrical lines and water pipes might overlap, for example. Such errors require areas to be redesigned through change orders, which are “endemic in the industry,” Mr. Zimmerman says. “The design fee might be 4 or 5 per cent of the total cost. One mistake can easily add 1 or 2 per cent.

“The money we've spent on architecture will pay off on savings

in the delivery of the building. It is an investment.”

The agency won't disclose how much it's paying, but TCHC is following the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada's fee guidelines, Mr. Zimmerman said. The Regent Park building, based on industry standards, will cost about \$200-million to construct; the architects' fees are likely around \$8-million. The extra cost to hire Cobe and aA, versus a local team with less technical and creative capacity, is almost certainly under \$1-million.

And if the building stands for a century or more, then even tiny yearly savings on operations costs will dwarf the architects' and engineers' fees in the long term.

In short, the way we build now is penny-wise and pound-foolish in the extreme. That's why some advocates, such as Edmonton city architect Carol Belanger and Ottawa architect Toon Dreesen, have been pushing for systemic change. The alternatives include a design competition process or, as at TCHC, tweaking the procurement rules. Such tiny bureaucratic changes can deliver cost savings and something that has been too often lacking in this country: ambitious, coherent, humane public design.