

# Disputing the Character of the City: Heritage, Regeneration and the Urban Design Turn

*Jill L. Grant and Gladys Wai Kwan Leung*

## Abstract

Like many cities with an abundant legacy of heritage structures and aspirations to expand their economic and population base, Halifax (Nova Scotia) experiences significant tensions between heritage conservation and urban development ambitions. On the one hand, Halifax has a vigorous heritage movement spawned in the wake of slum clearance and urban redevelopment efforts in the 1960s; heritage advocates work consistently to conserve the low-rise character of the historic city. On the other hand, it has an emergent urban design lobby supported by economic development interests and creative class ideas; development advocates call for signature high-rise buildings to attract investment and young people. With each new development proposal, community groups argue about the meaning of past and future, the nature of cultural identity and the image of the city. In this essay we examine the recent emergence of a social network of young urban professionals whose influence is growing rapidly in local debates about urban regeneration. Whereas a decade ago heritage conservation enjoyed high priority in planning debates in many parts of the world, today it competes with arguments for signature architecture and greater urban density. The urban design turn reflects changing cultural priorities but also reveals the operation of new governance mechanisms within local growth machines.

## Introduction

We live in a time when global cities are competing for growth. Cities such as Bilbao and Barcelona in Spain,<sup>1</sup> and Birmingham and Liverpool in the UK,<sup>2</sup> have embraced an urban design agenda as a key component of economic development strategies for urban regeneration.<sup>3</sup> John Punter notes that the focus on urban design and regeneration penetrates further down the urban hierarchy as local professionals and policy-makers emulate successful models and practices they see elsewhere. Thus cities increasingly look for signature structures or prestige projects designed by ‘starchitects’ to establish a vibrantly innovative and contemporary identity.<sup>4</sup>

Canadian cities are not immune to this international fever. In a context where the largest cities are growing most quickly,<sup>5</sup> smaller cities such as the eastern seaport of Halifax feel a strong need to keep pace. The earliest major settlement planted by the British in Canada, Halifax conserved its major heritage assets over the centuries by virtue of relatively slow growth. In recent decades, however, Halifax has experienced something of a renaissance and has enjoyed increasing success in terms of attracting young people.<sup>6</sup> The turnaround in the city’s prospects at a time when international competition among cities was growing significantly affected the nature and dynamics of local development discussions.

Development debates shift through time to incorporate new planning theories and popular wisdom about urban conditions.<sup>7</sup> Planning processes that determine the character of development and the processes used for making decisions about urban regeneration occur in a broad cultural, political, social and economic context. In many Western countries, planning hearings provide venues for citizens and other players to express visions of the city and influence development priorities. We can interpret the discourse of development cases as scripts within which actors enact their attitudes about themes such as heritage, class, age and urban design. In this essay we discuss the way that development discourses have been changing in Halifax. Recent developments in the city centre reveal the growing influence of creative class arguments, drawing on the work of Richard Florida.<sup>8</sup> Cities as disparate as Johannesburg, South Africa,<sup>9</sup> Barcelona, Spain,<sup>10</sup> and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK,<sup>11</sup> have pursued creative class and creative city strategies to promote an urban renaissance. Such approaches reflect a turn towards prioritizing contemporary urban design and innovative

architecture. We profile the role of a social network of young professionals in Halifax as evidence of the new dynamics of local growth machines at work in the neoliberal city.

## The politics of urban growth

Local authorities typically encourage urban growth. For Canadian cities, property taxes constitute the principal source of revenues. Increasing demands for expenditures can be accommodated only through growth in the tax base. Consequently, social networks of business, development, political and professional leaders mobilize to promote local growth, often through organizations such as chambers of commerce or business commissions. Molotch described such networks as local growth machines or growth coalitions operating to naturalize expectations of growth and facilitate urban development.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the political economy of cities reveals conflicts over growth as groups articulate competing social constructions and claims about place.<sup>13</sup> Since the 1980s, however, most cities have adopted governance strategies that involve collaboration between the public and private sectors in managing urban development: the shift to urban entrepreneurialism<sup>14</sup> reflects the growing influence of neoliberal thinking among governments at all levels.<sup>15</sup>

Canada witnessed a resurgence of political interest in cities during the 1990s, as the federal government initiated an urban agenda.<sup>16</sup> The decline of manufacturing and growth in the knowledge economy strengthened theories which argued that cities play a central role in the wealth of nations.<sup>17</sup> Several provinces acted to amalgamate their hub cities to make them more competitive nationally and internationally. For instance, Nova Scotia created Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) in 1996, and Ontario unified Toronto with many of its suburbs in 1998. By the early 2000s Canadian cities were interested in supporting creativity to enhance growth prospects;<sup>18</sup> most accepted that attracting the creative class – that is, talented and creative young professionals – offered an important strategy for stimulating growth and investment.<sup>19</sup> Even in relatively small cities, such as Kingston (Ontario), growth machine politics and creative class logic combined to elevate ‘the consumption and lifestyle preferences of mostly younger, dynamic, mobile, well-educated knowledge workers’.<sup>20</sup>

Finding ways to adapt policy practices to perceived market needs stimulated new governance mechanisms and processes in many cities as

neoliberalism gained in influence over the 1980s to the current period. New players and new scripts began to emerge in development debates in many cities. For instance, interest in regenerating waterfront areas to transform them for entertainment and commercial purposes grew, leading to the formation of new types of public-private development organizations and new citizen groups eager to influence outcomes.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, community groups formed in an earlier era, when protecting built heritage was a central concern in development debates in cities such as Halifax, found the discourse of discussions changing. Although, as Graham argued, 'heritage is part of the wider debate about the ways in which regions are being seen as the most vital sites within which to convene and capitalize on the flows of knowledge in contemporary globalisation',<sup>22</sup> heritage was often marginalized in discussions of appropriate choices for the knowledge-based city.<sup>23</sup> Even the critics of neoliberalism expressed reservations about heritage arguments in regeneration discussions, noting that heritage discourses typically privilege colonial history and advance the material interests of middle-class professionals living in historic houses in gentrifying (or gentrified) neighbourhoods.<sup>24</sup>

Marketing cities to the creative class soon aligned with the growing influence of urban design as a strategy for making places more attractive to people and investors.<sup>25</sup> Improving the quality and aesthetics of the public realm – buildings, streets and open spaces – gained impetus in planning during the 1980s following the influence of new urbanism and renewed attention to physical planning and design.<sup>26</sup> As Gospodini noted in discussing European cities:

While for centuries the quality of the urban environment has been an outcome of economic growth of cities, nowadays the quality of urban space has become a prerequisite for the economic development of cities; and urban design has undertaken an enhanced new role as a means of economic development.<sup>27</sup>

Recent development debates in Halifax reflect these international trends. Local growth machines have adopted creative class strategies and have turned to urban design as a tool for attracting people and investment dollars to the city. The next section reviews the city's development history and the context of recent development discussions. As Madanipour suggested, development strategies and the role that urban design plays within them are heavily contested.<sup>28</sup>

## Development disputes in Halifax

Established as a military stronghold to support the British foothold in eastern Canada in 1749, Halifax prospered in times of war and languished in peace.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the twentieth century it experienced relatively slow growth, while central and western Canada thrived. As early as the 1920s city councillors called for slum clearance to help modernize the city and help it keep up with developments in other parts of the country.<sup>30</sup> With federal government funding in the 1950s and 1960s, the city documented problem areas, expropriated properties and began the process of downtown redevelopment.<sup>31</sup> Large areas of the northern part of the city centre were cleared and replaced within the next decade by an expressway interchange and large modernist structures developed by a local partnership of major investors.<sup>32</sup>

By the late 1960s citizen groups had formed to try to prevent demolition of heritage properties, to safeguard views from the city's highest point at the Citadel, and to influence planning and development activities downtown.<sup>33</sup> From the 1970s onwards, debates over high-rise development projects typically pitted heritage advocates against those promoting growth.<sup>34</sup>

Citizen groups made strong emotional appeals, presented petitions with thousands of signatures and hired experts to offer scientific arguments against projects.<sup>35</sup> Although they drew on arguments from the planning literature – especially the work of Jane Jacobs<sup>36</sup> and new urbanists such as Andres Duany<sup>37</sup> – until the 1990s, citizen groups struggled to influence development decisions in a city eager for growth.<sup>38</sup>

Several events and decisions during the 1990s began to change the development dynamic in Halifax. In 1995 Halifax was the host city to the meeting of the G7 heads of state. To ready the city for the event, the federal government provided extensive funding for waterfront improvements. The city enjoyed its moment in the international spotlight and built tourism campaigns around the beauty of the waterfront and the heritage character of the city. As cities in western Canada began to experience rapid economic growth following a resource boom, Halifax struggled to keep pace. Under Liberal premier John Savage, in 1996 the province of Nova Scotia amalgamated the City of Halifax with three surrounding municipal governments (Bedford, Dartmouth and Halifax County) to form Halifax Regional Municipality or HRM.<sup>39</sup> The government aimed to increase Halifax's international and regional

economic competitiveness by integrating resources, mitigating internal costs and increasing urban scale. Governmental restructuring initiated new strategies for promoting economic development targeted at revitalizing Halifax's urban core; such actions facilitated opportunities to take advantage of growing financial opportunities for real-estate investments.<sup>40</sup> Also in 1996, the Greater Halifax Partnership was created as a public-private partnership to direct economic development and to develop stronger relations with the private sector. Neoliberal policies and practices had come to Halifax.<sup>41</sup>

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, local planners were promoting new urbanism and smart growth ideas for development in the city centre.<sup>42</sup> In the context of some development disputes over high-rise buildings, they suggested that developers could achieve appropriate densities with more complementary scale and character: their arguments often aligned with those of community groups fighting high-rise projects in those years.<sup>43</sup>

Halifax began to move towards changing the context of urban development by the early 2000s. Like many Canadian cities, the municipality hired an urban designer and grew increasingly interested in creative city<sup>44</sup> and creative class<sup>45</sup> approaches. In 2004, the Greater Halifax Partnership brought Richard Florida to Halifax and commissioned a study of the city's potential to compete on creativity.<sup>46</sup> The economic development strategy produced the next year by a committee of business, political and community leaders reflected the ascendance of creative class sentiments, smart growth strategies and urban design qualities.<sup>47</sup> Projects such as the Seaport mixed-use redevelopment reflected the influence of social networks generated through new urban entrepreneurial policymaking processes.<sup>48</sup>

Following creative class arguments, the Partnership identified a need to develop strategies to encourage talented and creative young people to come to and stay in Halifax.<sup>49</sup> It commissioned a study of what talented young people need and want.<sup>50</sup> Based on the consultants' recommendations, the Partnership helped to initiate Fusion Halifax in 2007 as a formal network organization to connect young professionals and enhance their voices in the city.<sup>51</sup> The organization soon developed secondary functions within local regeneration debates.

In the wake of the terror attacks on the US in 2001, tourism to Nova Scotia declined. With tourism revenues diminishing, financial interest in real estate increasing, and creative class approaches becoming more influential among decision-makers, heritage arguments faced new challenges in Halifax. Often the same people who fought

earlier battles to protect heritage stepped forward to make their cases in new development applications: over the decades they had enhanced the rationality and professionalism of their presentations. While citizen groups did not abandon emotional appeals for conserving heritage and views, in recent years they more frequently augmented presentations with scientific data and consultant reports.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, however, advocates of urban growth in Halifax lamented the lack of high-rise cranes in the downtown area. Developers were clearly distressed with local opposition to development and bureaucratic red tape, as one explained to a reporter:

... it's over-regulated, things take too long to get developed and it's not development friendly. There's a lot of developers in real estate that would love to come to Halifax, but the time things take to get approved, or the uncertainty more than anything, is a problem, particularly with that appeal process.<sup>53</sup>

Halifax changed its approach to planning in the 2000s. It began regional planning around 2002 and then initiated a process for transforming the planning and development of the city centre. The HRM by Design downtown planning process ran from 2005 to 2008, managed by the city's urban designer and run by Toronto-based consultants. The municipality established an Urban Design Task Force – comprised of local professionals, development representatives and community leaders – to work with staff in developing the city centre plan. Workshops, charrettes and open houses engaged community residents and built support for the plan.

The scale of projects proposed and the significance of urban design as a selling feature of development proposals increased during the 2000s in Halifax. One prominent case involved redevelopment of a former parking garage site in central Halifax. The developer hired a prominent Toronto architect to design twin towers twisting slightly as they soared 27 storeys above Granville Street.<sup>54</sup> Soon dubbed the Twisted Sisters, the proposed project garnered support in some quarters as an iconic structure that would generate economic activity; at the same time it faced resistance from groups concerned about views from the Citadel and the impact of such a large project on the historic city centre.<sup>55</sup> Planning staff acknowledged previous issues with high-rise buildings, but supported the project:

The limited experience HRM has had with tall buildings *has* resulted in several tall buildings which have created harsh

pedestrian environments and are unsympathetic to adjacent heritage assets. It is therefore not surprising that many citizens oppose taller buildings. Architecture and urban design, however, have come a long way towards understanding how to create liveable cities since the unadorned glass and concrete slabs, which were constructed in the 1960's and 70's. There are numerous proven strategies for making taller buildings fit into and even enhance a city.<sup>56</sup>

The progress of the Twisted Sisters proposal through the decision process paralleled and influenced HRM by Design. The city centre plan aimed to enhance the clarity of the city's vision, the predictability of the planning process and the design quality of development.<sup>57</sup> The plan embedded new urbanism, smart growth and creative class principles while simplifying and streamlining the approvals process for developers. The project manager of HRM by Design described it as 'a plan that strikes a balance between encouraging new growth and protecting our built heritage', while the mayor viewed it as enabling 'a new streamlined development approval process that will stimulate economic growth and, ultimately, make our downtown a more vibrant place to live and work'.<sup>58</sup> The plan introduced the planning tool known as form-based codes, used to regulate the form of development, and design guidelines to control aesthetics. While traditional land-use policies monitored the types of uses on a property, the downtown plan reinforced the growing role of urban design as a force guiding development outcomes. At the same time, by spelling out development requirements and removing many opportunities for public engagement and appeals of decisions, the plan transformed the political context of development in the city centre. As Rutland noted, the municipality facilitated the movement of finance capital into the real estate market by eviscerating the potential of citizen groups to oppose projects:<sup>59</sup>

Rather than waiting for finance to arrive, the form of downtown Halifax has anticipated it; block by block, it now stands like a three-dimensional ghost upon the landscape, a set of hollow forms that push away development politics and wait simply and patiently to be filled in whenever developers and worldwide financial markets decide the time is ripe.<sup>60</sup>

By the late 2000s HRM had dealt with a flurry of high-rise projects.<sup>61</sup> Although the council had approved the Twisted Sisters project in 2007,



and appeals from citizen groups were denied, the developer failed to initiate work by the date required in the development agreement. Subsequently, in 2012 the developers sought permission for a different project – Skye Halifax –with 48-storey towers on the same site, asking for plan amendments to exceed the height guidelines of the downtown plan and waive some provisions of the view planes legislation. The developers argued that, ‘It is time to re-consider whether protecting the rampart views on this site for the purposes of tourism is still preferred over the benefits of economic revitalisation, creating an interesting skyline with a new internationally recognised landmark, and the importance of protecting views at the pedestrian level for year-round downtown users’.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the developers appealed directly to a younger cohort: ‘There are now younger people in the marketplace looking for affordable housing options. Buildings need to be able to provide a range of housing for all the market groups: young students, empty nesters, professionals, and high-end buyers’.<sup>63</sup> Arguments about the importance of high-quality urban design and downtown density were increasingly linked with attracting and retaining specific types of young residents, while heritage arguments connected to tourism were minimized. Although the council denied the request for Skye Halifax, it was clear that young voices – often expressed by members of the group Fusion Halifax – had become a powerful lobby in the development debate.

## **Fusion Halifax<sup>64</sup>**

In 2007, the Greater Halifax Partnership – the region’s economic development agency – helped establish Fusion Halifax to connect young professionals (aged 20–40) across diverse sectors through providing social networking and entertainment opportunities. Those who established the organization positioned youth participation as intrinsically good for Halifax:

We have a demographic that is eager to be engaged and our governments and businesses understand that young people must be involved in leadership opportunities, community capacity building and a plan for the future.<sup>65</sup>

Fusion incrementally assumed a prominent role in the urban development process by becoming an effective lobbying group.<sup>66</sup>

Organized with a small number of paid staff, Fusion engaged members in specific interest groups, or action teams, which tackled themes such as arts and culture, immigration, sustainability, professional development and health. The most active of the groups, the urban design action team, involved many young professionals from the disciplines of architecture, planning and real estate (alongside small-business owners, lawyers and others). Members of Fusion Halifax often participated in planning activities and offered support for prestigious development projects with contemporary urban design aimed at repositioning the city economically and symbolically. Fusion Halifax defined urban design as a challenge within the city and emphasized the issue within its strategic focus. The distinct voice that the organization developed often opposed long-standing heritage voices within the city.<sup>67</sup>

Barber suggested that developers are less organized than heritage groups in setting the agenda of dispute discourses in Halifax.<sup>68</sup> However, he noted that the Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Business Commission and Fusion Halifax offered 'a platform of legitimacy' for those promoting growth.<sup>69</sup> With its appearance of being independent and not-for-profit, Fusion enjoyed a privileged position. One of the first projects that Fusion Halifax supported and later endorsed was the HRM by Design plan.<sup>70</sup> Along with those contributing to the Skyscraper Forum – a website devoted to those who love tall buildings – members of Fusion spoke out in favour of high-rise development and criticized prioritizing heritage conservation.<sup>71</sup> Their spokespersons were generally perceived as having no immediate self-interest at stake.

Although only some of Fusion's 2,000 members work for firms or groups involved in the development industry, the organization draws primary funding from the province, municipality, local firms, banks and media companies. In other words, those most closely associated with local growth machines provide sponsorship and other kinds of institutional support for Fusion. Membership in Fusion is free to those who accept the vision: 'By joining FUSION Halifax, you will be a part of a family of like-minded individuals, looking to make the city a better place for all of us'.<sup>72</sup> The focus on improving the city is a central tenet of the organization, alongside the opportunity to meet other young professionals. Is Fusion a disinterested party in urban development? Does it contribute to contemporary urban entrepreneurialism? In 2013, Leung examined five contested development projects with noteworthy architectural designs proposed in the city centre over recent years to assess the role that Fusion members and discussions of urban design played in development debates.<sup>73</sup>

In the development cases Leung reviewed, developers featured contemporary urban design as a strategy to enhance economic development. Actors repeatedly used the words ‘signature’, ‘landmark’, ‘striking’ and ‘state-of-the-art’ to describe proposed buildings. The developer for one project told the council, ‘The site was purchased with the intention of creating a landmark for Halifax. The goal . . . is to create an innovative and artistic focal point for downtown and help revitalise the city core’.<sup>74</sup> Project proponents also played the youth card consistently in promoting projects. For instance, in supporting Skye Halifax, Leroy noted, ‘. . . Skye provides the necessary residential mass that will attract and retain an under-served youth market’.<sup>75</sup>

In each case, heritage advocates opposed elements of the projects, often looking for reduced height to conserve views from the Citadel, and more sympathetic design and massing to support heritage buildings in the vicinity. Heritage groups clearly acknowledged the growing influence of Fusion. A citizen spoke at one public hearing:

The development would damage the integrity of a historic part of Halifax; I moved to the area from Ontario to start my career and part of the reason was the city’s history and historic buildings. I acknowledge that Council often heard of young people wanting tall, modern buildings, however, I advise council to be careful about making such assumptions . . . as a building is much more than just its façade.<sup>76</sup>

Where heritage groups developed considerable sophistication in their presentations in order to enhance their potential influence before council and appeal tribunals,<sup>77</sup> those interviewed noted that Fusion members spoke with passion but proffered little research. One heritage group member explained to Leung that Fusion Halifax members ‘lobby more on the emotional level rather than on the factual level’,<sup>78</sup> employing what Bailey called the tactical use of passion.<sup>79</sup> Ironically, in an earlier period, planners and developers lobbed similar critiques at heritage groups.<sup>80</sup> Once they were using sophisticated codes in presenting their cases,<sup>81</sup> however, the heritage groups found that expectations had changed. Fusion members were saying what decision-makers want to hear, as a heritage group member explained: ‘They [those promoting developments] can be constructive rather than be obstructive, because they all have the same opinion. Every time they stand up they say exactly the same thing, “I want to raise my children here and I want to stay here. I won’t stay here unless this developer builds this 24 storey

class-A ... building”.<sup>82</sup> As an organized lobby supporting regeneration projects, Fusion had significant influence.

Without necessarily identifying themselves by their organization, members of Fusion spoke in support of projects, often highlighting the quality of design and referencing the needs of young people. Municipal planners welcomed the coherent voice that Fusion represented as a counterpoint to heritage advocates. One planner told Leung that ‘it seems quite a positive thing to have a group that promotes planning projects that fit within our planning structure’.<sup>83</sup> Another planner explained:

There really wasn’t a mechanism for that kind of conversation [in support of innovative design]: it was just individual e-mails. How did you find people, thoughts and ideas? And do they know that they have those kinds of opinions? You’ve got to get people together talking to others and explore the ideas before they even know that have got the ideas ... That was the power of Fusion.<sup>84</sup>

Some cases reflected the challenge of establishing a coherent and consistent message on urban development in the loose organization that Fusion represented. For instance, some members spoke in favour of development projects that Fusion’s board of directors felt contradicted the downtown plan, which the organization had officially endorsed. A Fusion member explained to Leung:

The Waterside Centre is one of the first ones that Fusion took a stance on and they [the executive of Fusion Halifax] didn’t really know how to properly represent that many people ... when you are representing 1,000, 2,000 to 2,500 people it is really hard to get unanimous votes, and so you don’t want to misrepresent. So then it became, you know, you can go to these public hearings and say ‘I am a Fusion member and I support this’ instead of ‘Fusion supports this’. It’s a bit about the dialogue and about how it is exactly worded.<sup>85</sup>

Outside the context of public presentations, young people supporting development projects often participated in exchanges on Skyscraper Forum pages. An urgent post on one project tried to rally action.

**UNITED GULF ‘TWISTED SISTERS’ ACTION REQUIRED  
BEFORE EOB JANUARY 26, 2007.**

IF YOU ARE IN SUPPORT OF THIS PROJECT YOU MUST  
INDICATE AS SUCH AT: [uarb.board@gov.ns.ca](mailto:uarb.board@gov.ns.ca).

IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT YOU DO THIS BEFORE END OF  
BUSINESS FRIDAY JANUARY 26, 2007.

IF WE FAIL HERE WE WILL LIKELY NEVER SEE SUCH A  
DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED WITHIN THE DOWNTOWN CORE  
AGAIN. WE MUST INUNDATE THE BOARD WITH OUR LETTERS  
OF APPROVAL. IT’S A NUMBERS GAME. ‘JUST DO IT.’<sup>86</sup>

Between Fusion Halifax and the Skyscraper Forum, young people took advantage of mechanisms to engage actively in debates about urban design and heritage. A comment posted following Taylor’s story about the Skye Halifax proposal<sup>87</sup> revealed disdain for heritage arguments that participants in the public hearings presented:

This project needs to be approved and needs to start tomorrow. While all the anti-development types will be screaming bloody murder, their irrational fear of tall buildings needs ot [sic] be overcome once and for all. This would be truly iconic for Halifax and represents something that would revitalize the downtown. It needs to be done – no drawn-out debate, no arbitrary lopping off of a few floors to appease the obstructionists. Bring it on!<sup>88</sup>

Recent debates not only pitted heritage against urban design but youths against older residents. One local planner explained that, ‘What was going on in the downtown in terms of development was too much vested in older people, an older generation, people with a more traditional perspective and it was time to hear from young professionals who want to live in the downtown and see it become more vibrant’.<sup>89</sup> The interests of non-professional youths rarely garnered attention. Some participants found creative class arguments that privileged talented youths somewhat ageist. One member of Fusion saw the dichotomy as problematic:

That’s the nature of a young organization, run by passionate people, is that unless you have elder voices in the conversation, the group is biased based on the fact that it is young. To be completely honest I see value in it [Fusion Halifax] but ideologically, fundamentally I disagree with the idea of segregating people

into a young group to get a youth voice. It's like our politics where you have liberal voices versus conservative voices.<sup>90</sup>

Participants in development discussions in Halifax recognized that Fusion changed the content and dynamic of debates. Where prior to 2007 organized citizen groups primarily opposed high-rise projects on heritage grounds, Fusion members supported the projects on the basis of innovative urban design and the need for housing and jobs for talented young people. A member of the development community explained to Leung, '[Fusion Halifax] support is very important, as a label. There are certain labels or groups you want to support your project before you go to council, you want the Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Halifax Business Commission and you want Fusion.'<sup>91</sup> A more explicit statement connecting Fusion Halifax with other organizations generally seen as central to local growth machines is difficult to imagine.

## **Growth machines and the urban design turn**

Our overview of the way that development debates changed over time in Halifax provides an example of regeneration planning processes at work in many mid-sized cities with relatively slow growth trajectories. Heritage appeals prove powerful at times. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, heritage groups convinced decision-makers to stop freeway (motorway) projects and protect particular structures. Halifax benefited from powerful local investors who conserved buildings and repurposed them as the infrastructure for a booming tourism industry. Time has shown, however, that heritage arguments are not hegemonic, especially for sites farther away from amenities such as the waterfront and Citadel views, and certainly not at a time when creative class theories and entrepreneurial governance increasingly dominate development planning. In Halifax, the HRM by Design process changed mechanisms for downtown development. It ensured a turn to urban design as a development strategy. By setting regulations and heights for downtown and creating streamlined decision processes, the municipality limited the ability of community groups to affect outcomes and to appeal decisions.<sup>92</sup> The ability of community organizations to influence redevelopment of the city centre has been limited to participating in visioning and plan renewal processes. Such constraints on the ability of citizen groups to shape urban growth constitute a potential limit on democratic governance.

## Conclusion

By promoting quality urban design in new development, Fusion Halifax played an important, if unacknowledged, role in facilitating the local growth machine in improving conditions for private property interests in downtown regeneration. Those advocating urban growth argued that Fusion members added balance to the debate: that is, young people offered a counterpoint to heritage spokespersons calling for reduced height and architecture sympathetic to historic forms. We suggest, however, that Fusion differs in many ways from the community groups it spoke against in development debates. Unlike the heritage groups that were founded and funded by community members with a shared commitment to protecting structures and landscapes, Fusion is a product of urban entrepreneurialism and corporate interests. It was initiated by and financed with the support of government, public-private partnerships and private-sector firms with the mission of attracting young people to the city. While Fusion is by no means a mere puppet of growth promoters, its identity and mission are so closely linked to seeing the city grow in a particular way that it functions to achieve many of the same ends as the Downtown Business Commission, Chamber of Commerce and Greater Halifax Partnership. Fusion played a key role in raising the profile of urban design as part of the development mandate and vision for the city centre. As a consequence of recent planning processes in Halifax that established form-based codes and guidelines as a streamlined way of making decisions, the city is now positioned to achieve private sector-led growth within a governance system that effectively excludes organized citizen groups from intervening on individual redevelopment proposals. Thus the urban design turn in cities everywhere is not a politically neutral innovation: it empowers developers and planners to get on with the business of growth without interference and delays from those who previously enjoyed and exercised the right to argue that heritage and community opinion matter.

## Notes

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