

## Imagine people, not buildings, coming first

PETER CALLAGHAN; THE NEWS TRIBUNE

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Tacoma brought architect Lars Gemzoe all the way from Copenhagen, Denmark, last week to tell us how to fix the barren swath of pavement known as Tollefson Plaza.

Budget cuts, weak design and a series of lamentable decisions turned the triangle into a case study for bad urban design. Gemzoe is the second expert to study the dead zone, making me wonder whether there's enough genius on the planet to restore it.

But if the people who make decisions in Tacoma follow two other pieces of Gemzoe's advice, his visit will be money well spent.

First, he advised that design for public and private spaces should begin with people, not buildings. Most cities build the buildings first, then toss in the landscaping and hope it comes to life. There's no better example than Tollefson Plaza, which was built on leftover space after a convention center, a hotel and light-rail tracks were located.

As if it doesn't do enough on its own to poison the streetscape, Tollefson Plaza is asked to compensate for its neighbor across the street. We've spent a lot of breath and ink on Tollefson Plaza but not nearly enough on the equally hostile space in front of the Tacoma Art Museum.

Someone strolling down Pacific toward downtown has to choose which barren landscape to traverse – the plaza side or the museum side. Suddenly, standing in the middle of Pacific dodging cars and trains doesn't seem like such a bad option.

It isn't just government projects. Windswept Wells Fargo Plaza is a notorious example of 1970s design that looked great in the model but repelled people once built.

Do better, Gemzoe urged. Paraphrasing President Kennedy's famous address, he challenged public and private developers to "Ask not what your city can do for your building, ask what your building can do for your city."

He then advised planners to rethink the audience. Cities should worry about creating urban places the locals will enjoy and use.

“If you can make something great for yourself, these are things generally tourists will like to see,” he said.

Seems simple. But so often we’ve built spaces with the tourist in mind, that mythical being who will come and toss around dollars like pixie dust, transforming the economy and putting us on the map.

Because tourists and their dollars are considered found money, they’ve become the Holy Grail. Spending money on our selves is considered an indulgence, but spending it on tourists is economic development.

So planners envision what might attract someone who doesn’t live here and has never been here rather than the people who are already here.

It rarely works, and we need look no further than the convention center as an example. Even Tacoma’s parks budgets tilt so dramatically toward tourist attractions such as Point Defiance and Northwest Trek that we lack adequate places for kids to play sports and adults to walk and run.

Even when the planners think about people – not just buildings – budgets get in the way. Often the first things trimmed are public places. Again, Tollefson is the poster plaza.

Thankfully, just down the street are some of the best public places in the city – those in and around the University of Washington Tacoma.

While covering the creation of the campus, I don’t recall the architects and planners filling up white boards with ideas for making it attractive to tourists. Instead they wanted it to work for students and staff. Not surprisingly, the area attracts a lot of other people who go down for lunch or dinner or simply to walk and sit and drink coffee and watch people. Some of them are tourists.

Gemzoe ended with some hope, or perhaps just a sales pitch for his services:

“If you make a building that you don’t like, you’re stuck with it. If you build a public space you don’t like, you can change it.”

[peter.callaghan@thenewstribune.com](mailto:peter.callaghan@thenewstribune.com)      [blogs.thenewstribune.com/politics](http://blogs.thenewstribune.com/politics)

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