



Andrew Cohen . Capital lament

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Citizen Special

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On December 2, 1997, a new sports arena opened in Washington. D.C. It was called the MCI Centre, and it was built in Chinatown, a storied if ragged neighbourhood between the White House and Capitol Hill.

The arena sits on F Street, once the city's most prominent commercial thoroughfare. By the 1990s, though, F Street was an ugly tableau of empty storefronts and pawn shops at the heart of a distressed urban core. Like much of downtown, it had never recovered from the race riots of 1968.

But the Verizon Center, as it is now called, has changed that. The home of the Washington Capitals and the Washington Wizards, the arena began drawing people from the suburbs on the safe, clean Metro, which stops under it.

A decade later, the neighborhood is thriving, and so is downtown. Across the street from the arena, 19th century homes are no longer crack houses and shooting galleries. Stores, restaurants and cinemas have opened. Things have changed.

On January 17, 1996, a new sports arena opened in Ottawa. It was called the Palladium, and it was built in a field in Kanata, 28 kilometres from Parliament Hill.

While the arena, now called Scotiabank Place, is said to be "15 minutes" from downtown, it is closer to 30 minutes. At rush hour or game time, it is 45 minutes or more.

Parking costs \$11, and in winter it comes with a long, chilly walk. Going home, it can take so long to get out of the parking lot that some leave mid-way through the third period. There is no rapid transit. There are no nearby restaurants, theatres or shops.

So, this is the tale of two capitals and where they built their arenas. Washington chose downtown, which was what cities were doing in the 1990s. Their arena has become a catalyst for an urban renaissance.

Ottawa chose the suburbs, which is what cities were doing in the 1970s. Their arena has become a catalyst for a highway interchange.

As an instrument of renewal -- or building a better city -- Scotiabank Place has been a failure. By that measure, the decision to build it in Kanata was foolish. It is less about public good than private gain, abetted by governments that prefer roads to rail.

Now, along comes Eugene Melnyk, the wealthy entrepreneur who wants to bring a professional soccer team to Ottawa and build it a new stadium. Next to Scotiabank Place, of course.

That would be there in the field, by the highway, which is still 28 kilometres from downtown and still unserved even by the city's proposed mass transit system.

You have to wonder about this thinking. But then again, you really don't. This is the kind of leadership that has produced a city without imagination, which is why it lags way behind cities of comparable size in Europe and North America in energy conservation, the environment and municipal cultural institutions.

Ottawa is a major city with a harsh climate without a mass transit system long after others in Canada built them. It is a city with a central core, beyond the parliamentary precinct, distinguished by insipid architecture.

It is a city that allows the embassies of dictatorships such as Saudi Arabia on its ceremonial mile and approves an ugly, high-priced condominium across from the national war memorial.

It is a city with thoroughfares like King Edward Avenue turned over to trucks and cars as a new expressway, a shadow of its grace and beauty of a generation ago.

Criticize this, as philosopher John Ralston Saul does in *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*, his trenchant new book, and you are accused of "Ottawa-bashing." Mr. Saul boldly imagines a better Ottawa -- and Canada -- that we don't want to hear about.

Mr. Saul's book hits many of Canada's mythologies and home truths, but let's save those for another day. For now, consider his view that Ottawa, like Canada, is led by a weak, unimaginative elite, which doesn't know -- or doesn't care -- about the public interest.

There will always be sensible people, such as architect Barry Padolsky, who will warn us that building out-of-the-way sports palaces like this simply defies good urban planning. But our politicians cannot think more broadly, which is why they cannot address the failure of the Sparks Street Mall or Rideau Street, build a new central library or adopt true civic bilingualism.

This isn't just about the city. It is about the federal government, which cancels institutions from the history museum to the national portrait gallery.

It is about an enduring indifference to the national capital -- if not an outright hostility - - that didn't start with the Conservatives.

This is a lot bigger than soccer and sports and stadiums and circuses. It is about us.

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