

On Tour With Bob Stapells

Neither time nor place will stop this Halifax developer

By Stephen Kimber

The Bob Stapells Tour of the Port of Halifax pauses for a moment across from a prime chunk of waterside real estate now doing double duty as a downtown parking lot. "National Sea begged and pleaded with the city to leave this land outside the Citadel viewplanes," he impatiently tells his audience of one. "National Sea Products, the only multi-national company with its head office right here in Halifax, wanted to build their new head office building down by the water. So what does the city do? They ignore them. And now we have a parking lot. A bloody parking lot. Pretty, isn't it?" Stapells doesn't wait for an answer. He guides his big green Mercedes south along Water Street to the Nova Scotia Power Corporation Generating Plant and makes a left turn past the for-sale Hotel Nova Scotian then turns right again into the real heart of Halifax's working waterfront. "Halifax's ties with the harbor," he mocks. "This is what they want to preserve." He drives past half-filled parking lots, silent piers and a seemingly vacant union hiring hall. Finally, he swings the Mercedes distractedly up a ramp and into the darkened bowels of Shed 27, a cavernous 70,000 square foot cargo warehouse that is supposed to be one of the two principal non-container storage depots in the port. There isn't a single piece of cargo in the whole echoey, empty structure. Stapells stops the car, hops out, and strides purposefully toward the centre of the shed. "This," he shouts at no one in particular, "is the f---ing Port of Halifax. It's dead!" A flock of sleeping pigeons, startled by the unseemly noise, flutter off in search of more tranquil surroundings.

It is the morning of the day on which Halifax City Council is to vote on his proposal to build an office tower on Brunswick Street at the foot of Citadel Hill and across from the Town Clock and Stapells knows already — a good ten hours before Mayor Edmund Morris solemnly invites the aldermen to raise their right hands if they are in favor of the motion — that he has lost. His mood is careening like a car out of control. At one moment, he is eerily euphoric at the realization that the whole messy and controversial affair is about to reach its inevitable conclusion. In the next instant, he is vowing hole vengeance on environmentalists, history buffs and little old ladies who recite poetry in public.

Time Square, the ambitious project City Council is about to turn down, is more than just another building to Stapells. The three-storey brick podium of trendy shops



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topped by an 11-storey reflective glass office tower and crowned with a roof of astro-turf and trees was intended to offer irrefutable evidence to the world that Bob Stapells had arrived as a developer. He had already come a far distance from the days back in the late 60s when he was hustling one minute advertising spots for a local radio station and, on the side, wheedling \$5,000 out of the bank so he could slap together some tacky bungalows in Spryfield. In 1977, he had been named developer of the year by Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia for his work in refurbishing a down-at-the-heels office building at the corner of Prince and Barrington Streets in downtown Halifax. The next year, he won a similar accolade in St. John's for his work there in bringing another rotting bit of real estate back to useful life.

But what Stapells really wanted was a building that was his from the beginning, something he could shape and mould from the first load of concrete to the last wash-room fixture, something that would ultimately — in some crazy, romantic way that he couldn't really articulate — outlast him. There were, of course, more prosaic reasons for wanting to build Time Square. He was 35. In 30 years when the mortgage was paid off the building would enable him to bugger off to whatever exotic place he wanted and watch the cheques roll in. He could even leave it as a tangible legacy to his son and daughter. The building that dad built.

But now, Time Square will never be anything more than an eight-by-ten artist's conception yellowing in some back filing drawer and Bob Stapells is bitter.

He put three years of his life into a building that would not be built. He very carefully and very quietly had assembled a block of developable land in a downtown area that was sadly short of useful real estate. He had put his lawyer, Ted Wickwire, to work dredging through the minutiae of municipal law to make sure every ordinance and regulation and policy city council had dreamed up would be met. He hired Andy Lynch, the best architect he could find, to come up with a design for his building and then tossed the first five proposals Lynch made into the waste paper basket before finally giving his okay to a sixth. By the time he had a slide show of his proposal ready to show City Council this summer, Stapells was convinced his office tower would be as fine a piece of work as money and imagination could create. The city would thank him.

And then he walked smack into reality. At the public hearing to discuss Time Square, 400 people showed up to tell him in no uncertain terms he had made a dreadful mistake. You simply do not put a gaudy, gawky office tower next to Citadel Hill, the crucial piece of historic real estate in the city. And you even more emphatically do not try to capitalize on a venerable landmark like the Old Town Clock with a tricky, showy display of reflective glass. They countered his slick slide show with homey

poetry readings. They matched his invocation of the Municipal Development Plan's call for economic development in the downtown core with an equally compelling admonition from the same document to preserve the city's heritage. They answered his argument that the 14-storey building would be compatible with the city's viewplane legislation with the contrary position that it would not be compatible with the rest of the low-slung street line of Brunswick Street. Whatever Stapells said, his opponents had an answer.

Though he was convinced his critics had misread his intentions — “I never wanted to do anything that would distract from the Citadel or the Clock,” he protested after the hearing. “I put a lot of time and effort into trying to make my building fit in with its surroundings. I want to build the best building, the most prestigious building, I can afford” — Stapells realized, after being at the receiving end of what amounted to a four hour lecture from irate citizens his whole project was in jeopardy. The morning after the hearing, he was on the phone to aldermen.

“See that block of land. Graham Dennis (publisher of the Halifax *Chronicle-Herald*) owns that.” Stapells Tour — his own personal, final answer to his critics — has reached the corner of Brunswick and Sackville Streets and Stapells, between gulps of a coffee he bought along the way, is agitatedly pointing out the half-dozen tracts of land that lie outside the viewplanes and that still are available for high rise development. “You know what they did to him? They told him he couldn't tear down that building on the corner of the block because it was a heritage building. So what's he supposed to do with his land? It's like that everywhere downtown. If you can find a piece of land outside the viewplanes where you could put up a building, there's a heritage building right in the centre of the block that can't be touched.”

Stapells has given this same tour at least eight times in the past week for individual aldermen. (He didn't invite Brenda Shannon or Doris Maley because he believed their “non-development position” was too rigid to be swayed by any arguments he might make.) The point of the exercise is to demonstrate his thesis that Halifax is not the busy port of romantic mythology anymore and the real Halifax, “the capital of Atlantic Canada, is now a meeting place for business and commerce and industry, a city where people live in office buildings and get together to make deals with each other.” What that means, in his view, is that the city has to encourage new growth in the central business district so more businessmen will make more deals in more new buildings and the city will continue to grow. In other words, he told the aldermen, they should say ‘yes’ to Time Square so other developers would get the message that downtown Halifax is still a good place in which to invest. The argument didn't wash and now, on the morning of the vote, Stapells is up against the fact that he is not only out-of-pocket the \$25,000 he spent on his presentation but, far worse, he is also stuck with a block of land that will not be worth anywhere near the \$600,000 he paid for it. For a small developer always hustling to stay even and without the wherewithall of the heavies like Cadillac-Fairview or Halifax Developments the prospect of taking a bath on major \$4.8-million project like Time Square is ominous.

“The heritage people, God bless them, have won a lot

of victories," Stapells says bitterly, "but what they don't understand is that if they succeed in stopping developments like mine, they're just going to end up pulling down the whole table on top of themselves." Not to mention Stapells. Stapells is frustrated and he wears his frustrations like a frayed coat.

Ironically, when he first came to Halifax in 1967, it was to escape from just such frustrations. Born in Toronto and educated at that city's exclusive Upper Canada College, Stapells had jumped directly from school into a job at the Toronto Stock Exchange. Although he became the youngest floor trader in the exchange's history on his 21st birthday, two years later he was burned out and exhausted by the business' nerve-jangling pace and began to look for another career. An industrial psychology test indicated he was gifted musically (he still plays a mean piano) and had remarkable powers of persuasion so a psychologist suggested he find a job combining both those skills. He landed a job selling advertising for CHUM, the Toronto-based rock and roll radio station empire, and they sent him to CJCH, their Halifax outlet, for six months of seasoning. Stapells stayed.

"I loved the lifestyle and I loved the sea and I felt a real kinship with the place," says Stapells, whose grandparents spent a short time in Halifax after emigrating from Canterbury, England, in the last century. "The only thing I didn't like was that I couldn't find a place here

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where I could live in the style to which I was accustomed. There simply wasn't any first class, affordable accommodation in the city."

To solve that problem, Stapells quickly bought a half-finished, nine-unit apartment building in Spryfield. After completing the project and installing himself in a personally designed bachelor suite (barnboard walls, built-in color television set and living room bar), Stapells bought the adjoining property and erected another four-unit apartment complex. Soon, he was putting up bungalows all over Spryfield and, after only a year, gave up radio for full-time real estate.

In 1969, after noticing that Halifax's once-bustling downtown was stagnating as new suburban shopping centres lured retail customers away from the central business district, Stapells sold all his Spryfield holdings and began investing in real estate on Barrington and Granville Streets. "I looked at what was coming," Stapells remembers. "There was Maritime Centre and the bank towers and I knew that if I could get some of those beautiful old downtown buildings for the right price and fix them up, I could find someone willing to rent them." Stapells became obsessed with downtown Halifax. "Back in the office, I have a file on every property in the area between the Citadel and the harbor and Scotia Square and Spring Garden Road," he says proudly. "I can tell you who owns it and approximately

how much they paid for it and even how the use of the building has changed in the past five years." That kind of diligence paid off as Stapells moved from smart investment (the old Wrathall Insurance Building on Granville Street across from the Nova Scotia Legislature which he renovated and expanded) to smart investment (the former Koolex Cleaners Building at the corner of Prince and Barrington for which he won his recognition from Heritage Trust) to smart investment (the former Bank of Commerce building on Granville Street that he is restoring).

But for all his success at refurbishing old buildings and making them pay, it was clear Stapells' lusty ambitions could not be satisfied for long merely tinkering with someone else's building. He realized if he was to make his mark as a developer — something he desperately wanted to do — he would have to start from scratch and put together his own downtown project. That was the genesis of the idea for Time Square, his only major reverse in ten years as a builder.

It is Labor Day, five days after a red-faced, silent Stapells stalked out of City Council chambers after watching the aldermen vote seven to three to turn down even his last minute concession to lop two storeys off the top of Time Square. Sitting in the living room of his 150-year-old home overlooking the Northwest Arm, Stapells is philosophical about his defeat. "If the city really doesn't want my building, if the Council vote was reflective of what the people of Halifax want, then fine. I'm not going to shove my building down anyone's throat." As he talks, however, it becomes clear Stapells is not convinced the vote really mirrors the views of Haligonians. "I predict that in the 1980 civic elections, you're going to see a type of Proposition 13 battle over the municipal tax rate," he argues. "People are going to realize that unless we get some new developments downtown, they're going to end up paying more and more residential taxes. There is going to come a point when they are going to stand up and say 'enough is enough'."

While he waits for that to happen, Stapells, like other developers, will begin to shift his projects outside the city. Already, he has inventoried some real estate near the approaches to the Angus L. MacDonald Bridge on the Dartmouth side of the harbor and is considering a project there. "There are a lot of cities that are begging for development," he says matter-of-factly. "Ralph Medjuck is doing projects out in Calgary now and, on the same day that city council turned me down, a delegation from St. John, New Brunswick, was in Halifax to invite a local developer to go there and do a project. So there's no shortage of places to go."

Stapells — need it be said — has bounced back from the debacle of Time Square. There are still deals to be made and buildings to be built. The cocky confidence of the hustler that has carried him from the suburban sprawl of Spryfield to the hallowed high rises of downtown Halifax is back. "You know, when I do outside consulting work, I charge an hourly rate of \$267.09 an hour," he confides to his visitor. "You know why I do that? I worked it all out — on the basis that I work 72 hours a week 52 weeks a year — and if you multiply \$267.09 by that many hours, you come up with a million dollars. I figure I'm worth that."

The last has not been heard from Bob Stapells.