

CITY SUPER SYMBOLS

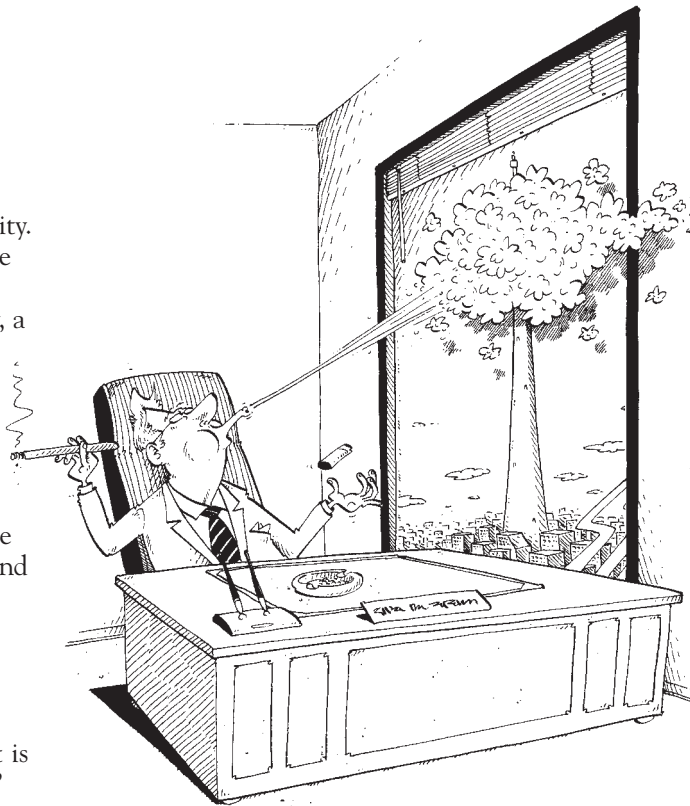
by Fred Stenson

Ah, the modern city. Let us behold her. Or to the point, let us behold him.

At the centre of the city, a core of high-rise office towers: a concrete orogeny as if the concentric bands of city beyond the centre were exerting enormous inward pressure, making the concrete rise; making it stand on its head.

In many cities, Calgary among them, the core features one immense, usually cylindrical thing which is not a building. It is the city's "Super Symbol," and at least in part its job is to be taller than all the other concrete appurtenances composing the city skyline.

In Calgary, the thing, the Super Symbol, used to be called the Husky Tower, after an oil company rather than a dog. Later it would become the plain old Calgary Tower (and for the record, it is no longer the tallest thing downtown). In his novel *The Vanishing Point*, W.O. Mitchell called it the Devonian Tower and



thus executed a rare double pun. In geological terms, Devonian age rocks are the ones from which most of Alberta's oil wealth doth spew. In mythical terms, Devonian refers to, well, a race of giants.

And, lest I seem vague, the tower relates not just to a race of giants but to the male half of that race, and not to the whole male giant but to just one of his parts. That part has many names and to make my

point I'd better choose one. How about one of the British favourites: to wit, the *willy*.

Of course this is nothing new, erecting big willies in the heart of town. On the Island of Delos thousands of years ago, the rich folk of Ancient Greece used to cache their wealth. Delos was the Switzerland of the Ancient World, as it were. On Delos, one finds whole rows of big willies or *phalli*. Pick up any respectable illustrated history of art and you'll find dozens more, all down through the ages. The history of

the modern ones is no mystery, in other words, but that doesn't stop them being confusing. In a world where lots of people get in regular flaps over nudity and the suggestiveness of modern art, while others work to rid the place of the more obvious cases of male-centric and male-favoured institutions, you'd think just a few people would find the giant willies offensive.

But they don't. They drive around them and they work around them with apparent unconcern. On weekends they take their children to the top of them to play arcade games. On special birthdays and anniversaries, they go up them for meals and cakes with sparklers in the revolving restaurants on top.

I find myself asking: Does this really mean that they don't object, or does it mean that they don't notice?

In Calgary's case, not noticing would be especially difficult because the Calgary Tower is not so much a giant symbol as a giant exact replica. Fashioned from concrete with loving dedication to detail, it is as faithful to its original as, say, Mt. Rushmore or Vegreville's giant Easter Egg. As for Toronto's, they made theirs less of a replica and more of a symbol by putting a giant needle on top. It's a symbol alright, and next time you visit Toronto, you might want to consider the question: "Symbol of what?"

Far fetched as it seems, I think the right answer to all this is that people don't notice, or that, if they do notice, they have agreed by one of those amazing, silent, all-embracing contracts they can occasionally pull off *not to mention it*. Maybe this is common sense. I mean, there it stands, doesn't it? In a lengthy moment of civic hubris, the City built it. Our tourist brochures all feature it. Civic pride says we should take our visitors up it. We can't very well get rid of it after all that, or put giant metal petals around the top and declare it a flower. The best option, given its presence, prominence and tumescence, may indeed be to ignore it, or if necessary to deny that it looks like a giant willy at all.

"I always thought it looked like a giant baseball bat."

"Really? It reminds me of a dandelion."

"Definitely a candle. That's why we light it on fire on major civic occasions."

Thank you. I was certainly wondering, given its appearance, why we lit it on fire on major civic occasions.

A very long time ago I was asked to write a satire of Edmonton for a big Toronto magazine. The whole issue was devoted to Edmonton and the satire was to be a bit of irreverence in an otherwise solid slab of praise. I was chosen to write it because it was assumed I, as a Calgarian, would have cutting things to say about the old rival to the north. So I charged in. Edmonton's weather was so bad, I said, that Edmontonians had taken to doing more and more things underground. I singled out their warren of "minus 15s" by which people get around downtown in the eight months of winter. In keeping with this subterranean theme, I proceeded to unveil the "Edmonton Tower." I claimed that Edmonton had been bothered by its lack of a city Super Symbol and the Edmonton Tower was their timely response.

At 310 feet, the Edmonton Tower will be the tallest buried structure in the world. The revolving bingo hall at its base is another world first.

A week or two later the Toronto magazine's fact checker called to ask me if it was true.

"Is what true?"

"The Edmonton Tower. Are there really plans in the works for a 310 foot buried tower in Edmonton?"

I feel terrible in hindsight that I answered truthfully.

Meanwhile, though I certainly wasn't trying to solve the big willy problem at the time, I think the Edmonton Tower idea has merit. If all the big willies were built underground, no one would know what shape they were. Civilization would be free to advance. 🍷

*In 20 years of writing, Fred Stenson has published eight books and has written over 130 films and videos, including *The Great March*, *Land of Hope* and *Great Centennial Cattle Drive*, which earned him his second AMPIA award.*