

# Great city? Not even close, critic says

By Nick Martin  
of The Free Press

London has spent so long destroying its character through feelings of inferiority, neglect and bad planning that the city is all but doomed to be "a faceless, anonymous, bland community of boring suburbs surrounding a dead heart," journalist Peter Desbarats charged Monday night.

"You can tell that something is wrong just by looking at the city. Frankly, it's a mess," Desbarats told the Ad and Sales Club's monthly meeting. His wife's reaction when she saw downtown London, Desbarats recalled, was: "It's wall-to-wall Woolworth's."

Members of the club first laughed, then squirmed in silence and occasionally grumbled as the dean of journalism at the University of Western Ontario unleashed a stinging tirade at virtually every major building and institution in

downtown London. But they concluded by applauding when club officials acknowledged, in thanking the speaker, that Desbarats might have a point.

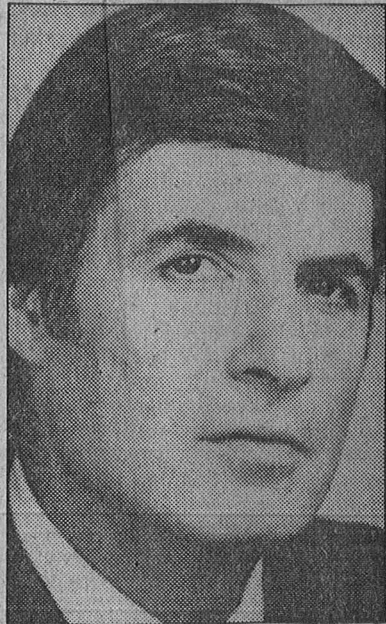
Desbarats, who said he still considers himself a Quebecer, felt he had stepped through a time warp when he came to London in 1980. He has frequently criticized the city in his column in London Magazine and the lack of public outrage at those attacks only shows that Londoners are unhappy with their city and ready to accept second best, he said.

The problem starts with city hall, whose architecture Desbarats dismissed as "post-war nondescript." Instead of using land occupied by some of the commercial buildings that "deface" the downtown for a new city hall, city council chose to demolish distinctive old houses and build "an unimaginative building and to link it to an embarrassingly inadequate concert hall by an expensive plaza

that serves absolutely no purpose."

Desbarats could not imagine any other city that would build an art gallery with virtually no parking and cut it off from pedestrian traffic by placing it on an island amid major thoroughfares. "When you see mistakes like that, you have to conclude that there's something wrong at the top."

Much of downtown is second-rate and outmoded, full of ideas that would not be accepted anywhere else in Canada, Desbarats said. No other municipal council would allow developers to walk over it as London's politicians do, he said. The proposed \$250-million redevelopment on Talbot Street would destroy "perhaps the finest Victorian streetfront in Southwestern Ontario, to be replaced by an office-hotel complex of, judging from the photographs



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released by the developer, outstanding sterility."

Saving the architecture of Talbot Street is a test case for saving the character of the city, Desbarats urged his audience.

Venturing beyond the downtown, he slammed the new Masonville Place shopping centre: "Cramped on the inside, looking on the outside like a warehouse surrounded by asphalt, appears to be an economy model ordered from the architectural equivalent of the Consumers Distributing catalogue. . . . No one said, 'Come on, we're a wealthy community, we've got a little class, we deserve better than this.'"

Desbarats also rapped council for allowing developers to tear down fine old houses in the core area; city restaurants for bad food and service; the lack of anything worthwhile to do in London during the summer and blue lights inside London Transit Commission buses, "blue lights you can't read by and make everyone in the bus look like the walking dead."

After his speech in the Holiday Inn, Desbarats added: "The fact there is not one first-class hotel (in London) is just unbelievable."

He said he had always been led to believe that London was a prosperous community, but the downtown belies that reputation. The core is piecemeal, filled with parking lots where there should be attractive buildings: "It gives the impression of a lack of planning."

Other communities such as Vancouver, Halifax and Toronto have revitalized their downtowns so that people live and congregate in the core areas, he said. In many cities, markets are the hub of the downtown, yet London has done little to enhance Covent Garden Market.

The city has shortchanged its cultural institutions, another example of piecemeal planning, Desbarats said. The Grand Theatre, "because it's not part of a bigger picture, falls flat. London has to have some kind of coherent cultural policy."

Saving the unique architectural features on Talbot Street could be a turning point, but there is little time left, he said.