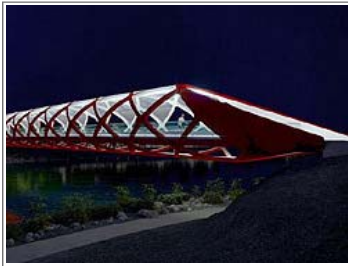


Probe to be launched into bridge financing

By RICK BELL

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The bridge the city has commissioned from architect Santiago Calatrava has raised many eyebrows in the city. (Sun Media File Photo)

Just knew this designer bridge couldn't stay out of the news for long.

A probe is getting underway led by Tracy McTaggart, guardian of the public purse in the city's big blue playpen.

Tracy is doing the Sherlock Holmes on how we ended up with a closed-door decision by a bigshot paper-shuffler to give a contract for a footbridge to Santiago Calatrava and his fat wallet.

You know Santiago.

He is the name-brand architect who cranks out bridges and other swanky artistic statements with the regularity of Big Macs for cities where the self-styled smart set nurse an inferiority complex about their lack of cultural coolness.

The Calatrava contract is one where no one competed for the cheque to create.

The dough was handed to the supposed genius like the wealthy patrons of centuries past handed over work to their pet artists, except, in this case, no one was asked before their pocket was picked.

"We're trying to understand everything from the concept point forward," says Tracy, who expects to finish up right after Christmas and wants to find out whether the city followed its rules and whether those rules are "consistent with good government practice."

"Once we understand, we'll decide whether we like it."

Tracy sounds committed to getting to the bottom of this barrel with the strange smell but her position is still too close to city council, who have elevated butt-covering to an artform. She reports to council and a gaggle of aldermen and public members who wouldn't know how to rock a boat in a hurricane.

Tracy says this story is a "biggie" and looking at stuff like this is "always sensitive because you're spending taxpayer dollars and lots of them."

Talking of spending lots of taxpayer dollars, the bridge is already more than a couple million bucks over budget. Seems Santiago isn't so good with the numbers.

Then again, the mathematically-challenged scribbler of napkins is known around the globe as the undisputed champ of cost overruns.

The city project will be scaled back. They may have to replace granite with concrete for the pedestrian surface. Oh no, but granite is so in. Granite is all the rage and concrete is, well, concrete and not fashionable at all.

Ah, but it is expected to be high-grade concrete.

"There is no more money. End of story," says Mayor Bronco, who would like an end to this story.

"It will still be a nice bridge," he adds, assuring culture vultures he will not trifle too much with their pricey bling.

But please, you can hear the voices say, will the great man's artistic vision be altered by something as mundane as money? Will the bridge be Calatrava Lite? What of the tourists who are supposed to flock to see this fancy footbridge? What of the world-class designation this bridge supposedly brings?

Will the Michelin guide drop the city down a star when Calgary only has two? Will the footbridge now be iconic with only a small i and not a Big I?

Does anyone fool around with a pair of Manolo Blahniks? Does anyone dare touch a Louis Vuitton bag?

How they will titter in cosmopolitan Toronto. Concrete, how gauche. And to think we've gotten a huge Holt Renfrew.

"This is normal," says Ald. Druh Farrell, the latte-lifting Queen of Kensington, speaking of the overrun.

Sadly, Druh doesn't share the same dictionary or even the same solar system with many of us when it comes to what normal means.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart gets her say today. She's on the audit group and, when running in the recent byelection, heard all about Calatrava.

"You can Google Calatrava and then Google cost overruns but don't waste your time. They're one and the same," says Big Red, who is plenty peeved this bridge was brought in "by someone in administration on a whim with no tendering." Someone who is retiring soon.

As for the second bridge, there is no firm budget for the East Village creation just yet but, says project head honcho Chris Ollenberger, it should be around \$25 million "give or take a few million."

Chris says it won't be double the budget or even \$40 million. Small mercies.

Bronco is not ready to get down to brass tacks. A second bridge design isn't picked. No company is near winning a contract to build it.

"That will be next year," says the mayor.

Can't wait.

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