

## BUILDING A MORE VIBRANT CITY



*Edmonton architect Barry Johns explains why our downtown will remain devoid of excitement until we embrace the philosophy that density is the secret to lively streets*

# The magic of crowds

It is difficult to prescribe what makes a downtown vibrant, livable and attractive — and even more challenging to define what makes a great city. Two factors — the overall geographic setting and the places between buildings at least in the public eye — come to mind. Great cities are about streets and squares, parks and esplanades — places for gathering and for celebration as a community. London, Paris, Lisbon and Barcelona are all known for these attributes. Vancouver, Hong Kong and Sydney, on the other hand, are generally seen as great cities because of their magical settings.

As an observer, however, I have always believed that a great city is more about the quality of life on the street — where people interact — than any other single characteristic. It is vibrant street life that makes the city livable and exciting, engaging the neighbourhood in day-to-day living or gathering people together in the act of celebration.

So what makes a lively street and what creates livability in the city? The answer is incredibly simple — people. Provide for people and the city comes alive at all hours of day or night.

It is possible to find the quintessential lively, urban street in just about any city in North America that boasts an ethnic area we traditionally refer to as "Chinatown." Here, we find markets, vendors, restaurants, artisans, musicians — all possible forms of a mercantile industry engorged with people, sounds, smells and even traffic — energizing the street from morning through night. Shops on the ground and places to live or to work upstairs, in addition to resting areas like the park and performance spaces like the public square — all of city life co-existing and compressed into a concentrated area.

If "Chinatown" is an example of vibrant urban living, it is for one overriding reason. It results from North American cities relaxing their rigid planning bylaws that dictate where we should live and where we should work and where we can play. Concentrated areas of mixed use are centuries-old Asian and European planning paradigms. There is still a big lesson here.

### Edmonton at its best

When is Edmonton at its best as a livable and vibrant city? I suggest we show signs of a great city during our festivals — when we at least temporarily suspend the bylaws and allow the Fringe to take over the streets of Old Strathcona or consume the river valley slopes for the Folk Festival. It is our best time for "community" and celebration and it works in our relatively small city because these events involve a large concentration of people in a small geographic area.

If we can experience Edmonton as a livable and vibrant city some of the time, why then is our downtown, traditionally the heart of any city, so devoid of excitement?

Edmonton set its stage for mediocre downtown development a long time ago. As with most Prairie cities, we have a lot of unencumbered land and an almost limitless amount of space to grow (unlike Vancouver, which is confined by the water and the mountains).

In creating suburban enclaves, the land-development and house-building industry expand the functional boundaries of the city well beyond what our critical mass of around 800,000 really needs to absorb. With every new subdivision, we need to build and maintain more expensive roads, schools, shopping centres and utility infrastructure to service the same people who commute into the

city to work, but not necessarily to play.

Had we earlier agreed that "holding the edges" of the city was a priority and had we placed a higher long-term value on sustaining the green spaces around the city boundaries, we would have been more likely to develop a compact urban plan, cost-effective public transit and, almost certainly, a more concentrated downtown core. Instead, our downtown evolved into little more than a workplace, emptied at the end of the day by the suburbs where the majority of "living" and "community" takes place.

The suburban shopping centre of the 1970s and 1980s exacerbated the issue of daily migration from downtown to the suburbs. The alternative of free parking and the convenience of driving short distances from door to door, home to store (especially in colder climates) proved a model too seductive for most sprawling North American cities to resist.

Ironically, in larger urban areas like Toronto or Montreal where suburban growth is huge, the critical mass of their already established downtown cores would be less affected.

However, in smaller cities like, say, North Bay, Ont., or Yorkton, Sask., this phenomenon had a disastrous effect on downtown.

So, too, in middle-sized cities like Edmonton. In our case, the sheer size of West Edmonton Mall alone changed the retail demographics downtown, pulling just about all viable retail life out of the core (and the corner store), forever mapping a pattern of large-scale suburban shopping districts at the perimeter of the city.

This "mega" shopping culture has now given way to the even worse "power centre" — big-box ghettos that choke traffic and offer no street life, yet still succeed in keeping people away from downtown.

Then, to this, add the spectre of finding parking space and paying for it downtown. This is probably the main reason that too many people do not even get familiar with downtown Edmonton. We either don't realize or don't care that there are thousands of available parking spaces for public use. It is simply not that visible, convenient or free.

All of the above factors militate against an exciting downtown.

We simply must start understanding how inefficient and costly it is to expand the city boundaries. We don't need as much land in Edmonton to support an even larger population; we just need to start filling in the gaps. This is the interesting point about density.

While working on the Grant MacEwan Community College campus from 1989 to 1993, we had to develop four building blocks as part of the city, starting from the mud up. The site was formerly part of the CN Rail lands — uninhabited, open space. To obtain a better understanding of the size of our site, we studied similar four-block tracts of land downtown to comparatively measure density and open space use. We could not find a single contiguous four-block area developed to its full potential. This is still true today, 10 years later.



The jammed streets of Old Strathcona contrast with the uncrowded downtown.



An even more interesting idea about density is the model of West Edmonton Mall itself. It is promoted as a city within our city. But did we really need it there? WEM stretches from 170th to 178th Street, the equivalent distance from the Hotel Macdonald to just beyond Audreys Books on Jasper Avenue. This can also be called the effective "downtown" length of Jasper Avenue, between the Central and Corona LRT stations. To make the point, had the same investment in WEM been instead deployed along Jasper Avenue and its side streets, engaging other mixed uses along its length, can you imagine how much more vigorous and positively vital to the city our downtown would be?

For years, we insisted on building different competing "development" zones in the city, which all chase the same tourist dollars and business investment, and further compromise efforts to attract more activity downtown.

Our city simply does not have the critical mass to support all of these areas. Something had to give and since the mid-1980s, it has been downtown.

### Surging interest in city core

The good news is that we are now once again riding an economic surge. Our economy has grown so significantly in recent years and attracted more population growth such that attention has once again turned to downtown. We are enjoying a "renaissance" in various areas of the core. People are now actually moving downtown by choice, thinking about the merits of an urban community and its alternative lifestyle opportunities. This is, of course, wonderful. The Warehouse District, Railtown and Oliver areas are examples of this pattern.

Unfortunately, so far, all that has really happened (except for a few delightful loft/warehouse renovations) is the beginning of what I would

observe as a reverse trend — that is, an in-migration of the suburban lifestyle and attitude to the downtown. The new housing stock, with few exceptions to date, is a decidedly suburban paradigm comprised of combustible wood frame, low-rise walkups and rather cheap landscaping of small trees, shrubs and bark mulch. Forget parks, esplanades and urban street walls of corner stores, cafés and galleries. This has all been done before, only in Callingwood, Mill Woods and Castledowns!

Now that a few decidedly bland high-rise developments are proposed, there is a groundswell of new residents who do not wish to see higher density in their emerging "downtown" neighbourhood. It seems we are still trying to define what is "urban" culture.

Edmonton's downtown can never reach its potential until and unless we are determined to increase the density of life along its streets, not the reverse. For example, when we examine the low/mid-rise enclaves of the False Creek shoreline in Vancouver (an example many planners in Edmonton like to use) we are looking at densities two to three times that of Railtown. If you look at Concord Pacific lands on False Creek and Yaletown, Vancouver's newest and most pleasant urban precinct, densities are 10 times greater.

### Incentives essential

It is my firm belief we must allow the development community all of the tools and incentives to enable much greater density downtown — if we are serious about making a great and livable city.

We must also put into place a tax structure that enables housing units in particular to be targeted at residential and not commercial rates, in mixed use developments, to enliven the streets, especially after 5 p.m. Without this in place, Churchill Square will remain empty — regardless of how many capital-improvement dollars are injected into the current Churchill Square project, or even how well it is designed.

While I sympathize with everyone who may not be comfortable with their surroundings, it might still be more productive to resist the erosion of urban values before they even get toehold on downtown Edmonton. Better a high-rise development with an active public realm on the main floor than an underutilized parking lot. It would also be wiser to steadfastly resist more suburban big-box chain stores (and casinos) with their acres of undifferentiated surface parking lots, token landscaping and internalized focus.

Great cities everywhere long ago realized that this effectively kills the street. Such projects are not part of an urban experience and they do not belong in the new downtown.

Let us revisit the Fringe as an (extreme) example: This event is more about "taking the city to the street" than any other moment in the year. This is also what really should become a downtown phenomenon. Walk Main or St. Denis in Montreal, spend a sunny afternoon in the Rossio in Lisbon or stroll the Ramblas in Barcelona — and one instantly captures the "feeling" of city and community we miss in downtown Edmonton.

Don't you agree our culture and our definition of downtown life has a long way to go? Isn't it exciting to ponder the alternatives?

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