

OPINION

Peeling away society's building layers

BEV SANDALACK and JIM DEWALD
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

In our inaugural article a few weeks ago, we argued for a commitment to engaging urban design as the methodology to create meaningful places — for example, when describing “home” to others, we refer not only to our place of residence, but also to places in our city, community and neighbourhood.

What is this methodology and how can it be used? The urban design program at the University of Calgary goes into the detail that would give justice to the question, however this article will give a quick overview.

The built environment is composed of several inter-related “layers,” as illustrated in the diagram. Each layer represents a degree of permanence.

• Layer 1: The land, and landscape character, are the most permanent aspects of the built environment, with the greatest potential to contribute to a sense of place. Calgary is situated in the midst of productive agricultural land and some of the most breathtakingly beautiful amenity land in the world. Its sense of place is derived from that land. At the scale of the city, sprawl and low-density suburbs are just not sustainable in that context. Urban design can be one of the best ways to express good conservation practices, and to create places that have a relationship to the landscape. At the scale of the neighbourhood, careful attention to the topography, the natural features, the view and the connections can help to create memorable places with a strong foundation in the landscape. Good urbanism is good environmentalism.

• Layer 2: Most of our everyday urban experience occurs within the shared city space made up of the streets, sidewalks, parks, squares and plazas. Collectively this is known as the public realm — the city space where all citizens can be by right. It constitutes the next most permanent component of the built landscape.

The street, most agree, symbolizes public life. In Calgary we have been developing high quality private realm, but the infrastructure — more important than roads — of the public realm, has been neglected. The street has become primarily a structure for moving traffic, rather than the multi-purpose instrument that it used to be and still is in the best cities. All neighbourhood streets should be places of quality, and deliberately designed parts of the public realm. We need to have more than just a handful of great streets, such as 17th Avenue, 4th Street and Kensington. It is mostly from the pedestrian space that we experience the city. How many of us have explored Rome, New York, London, Paris or Quebec City by car? Urban experience is necessarily pedestrian.

• Layer 3: Buildings are the most visible part of the urban environment, but they sit within the infrastructure of the public realm. Several generations of built form will come and go within the life cycle of the urban structure. However, if the infrastructure of the public realm is intact, then the built form has a sense of continuity and meaning over time. Curiously, architects do not design most of the buildings in the city — perhaps this is a missed opportunity for architects to develop a physical response to the landscape, culture and climate of Calgary. We wonder: “What would suburbs look like if architects designed the housing?”

• Layer 4: Each individual building, if it has a resiliency of form, may be used for various activities or programs. The robustness of built form contributes further to the establishment of a sense of place through continuity of form. The North American model of suburbia is based largely on segregating activities so we must drive to virtually everything that we do (arts, work, after-school activities, recreation, shopping, etc.). Is it safe for young teens to ride their bicycles to the store for an icecream, or do they have to cross a four-lane divided major road? Urban design considers these programming needs from a position of integration over segregation.

• Layer 5: The least permanent aspects of the built environment, and of design activity, are the transient and ephemeral trends and fashions. While these frequently add the qualities of delight and contemporaries to the built environment, there is normally a built-in obsolescence to them and they should be understood as the least permanent, although not necessarily the least important, aspects of urban design. Like the inside of your home, the public realm also benefits from changing trends and fashion, including seasonal changes to celebrate the Stampede, or the triumphs of the Flames or Stamps.



BEV SANDALACK



JIM DEWALD

When we view our city through the lens of this urban design framework, we find that more design intent is applied to individual buildings, to programming, and especially to trends and fashions than to the most permanent elements — the public realm and the landscape. The less permanent elements come and go, but the public infrastructure — the integrated system of public spaces — persists and can give a sense of continuity and quality to a place. What has been neglected has been design at the city scale, and the public realm has fallen between the cracks.

Good urbanism requires a certain density and intensity and it also requires the mix of uses that urbanists everywhere advocate, but which is so difficult to build. We are using outdated land development and planning practices. The practice of land-use zoning was developed to remedy some Victorian urban conditions. It has given way to an oversimplification of land use and an almost obsessive desire to regulate uses of land. Land uses are described as commercial, residential or industrial (and there are myriad categories within those designations). But that isn't how one could describe any of the really good urban places. In North America, in Calgary, this way of planning and developing cities has normalized some very unusual urban forms — suburbs, commercial strips — and made almost impossible the development of a high quality public realm.

A city is built brick-by-brick. That does not mean that city building is about individual buildings: it is about fabric, structure and the city as a whole. It is important to key on the environmental setting that makes a place so wonderful, on the historic patterns and ways of building, and on the civic landmarks and monuments as the important punctuation in the structure.

In Calgary especially, most neighbourhoods are too new to have developed a strong sense of community, and one of the defining characteristics of cities like Calgary is the mobility of homeowners. “Starter homes” and “buying-up” are cross terms for the tendency to view homes and neighbourhoods as commodities first, and places to live second. But this doesn't encourage community building.

We have been good for the most part at creating good private places, but not without environmental and civic cost. The prevalence of the terms NIMBY (not in my back yard), BANANA (build almost nothing anywhere near anything) and NOPE (not on planet earth) indicate that most people are generally not happy with the quality of new development. But if we emphasized the relationship of the landscape, the public realm and buildings, the good places that result would be welcomed.

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Booming city changes focus



RICHARD WHITE

At the end of every year, we all look back and see what we have accomplished and look ahead to see what we'd like to accomplish next year.

This year, I thought I might look back a little further to put things into perspective. To properly evaluate how we are doing, we need to see the big picture: Cities are built over centuries and decades, not years.

I arrived right at the end of the 1970s boom, but I still remember the incredible energy in the city, the unbridled optimism, when everyone was buying or building something.

From a city centre perspective, the 1970 to 1980 boom was primarily an office one. In 1977-78, there was more office construction in downtown Calgary than in Manhattan, New York. Consequently, Calgary was nicknamed The Manhattan of the North.

Some of the signature office buildings built during those 10 years were Bow Valley Square (72, '75, '79), Home and Dome Towers in 1976, Scotia Tower ('77) and Gulf Canada Square ('79). Towers like Nexen, PetroCanada and Western Canadian Place were all conceived in the '70s boom, but not completed until after it was over in the early '80s.

From a retail perspective, the only major development in the '70s was the TD Square-Scotia Centre link to The Bay.

This resulted in an exodus of retailers from Stephen Avenue and 7th Avenue to the new indoor retail shopping mall. Stephen Avenue struggled for the next 20 years as the pedestrian mall concept was a failure in the evenings and weekends, and most of the good retailers left or closed. Mount Royal Village came on just at the end of the boom and, in trying to imitate Hazleton Lanes in Toronto's Yorkville, never really worked. Toronto gallery owners like Walter Moos and Mira Goddard opened up shop for a brief period along 17th Avenue but soon left town.

The retail development in the city centre this time around has been much more focused on the street level developments, than on the indoor shopping malls.

For foodies, we now have places like the Cookbook Company, Mercato, Janice Beaton, Charlie's Bakery, Eiffel Tower Bakery and Bernard Callebaut.

For fashionistas, we have Purr, Ooh La La, Lululemon, Henry, Naked, Winners, O'Connors and numerous other funky fashion boutiques for women and men.

For gallery browsers, there are several new hot spots — Art Central, The World of Art, the new Masters Gallery, Skew and the Art Gallery of Calgary.

We also have spas like Stillwater at the Hyatt or Institut de Santé, and niche market retail like Vespa Calgary — a funky scooter dealership — and the McNally Robinson book store.

And with wonderful selections of wine and spirit stores throughout the city centre, I don't think anybody misses the old Alberta Liquor Control Board (ALCB) stores of the '70s.

From a public improvements perspective, the '70s saw the creation of Devonian Gardens. There were also major urban renewal projects in downtown's East End — the best examples would be the Convention Centre, Marriott Hotel and Glenbow block development in the mid-'70s. They were part of a major urban renewal project (we now call them revitalization



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Nexen Tower was one of many office buildings constructed in the 1970s.

projects) that was supposed to transform that block and the east end of Downtown into a thriving pedestrian area.

But it didn't work out that way. The project backed onto Stephen Avenue, the buildings' designs were boxy, the materials were cold, dull and ugly concrete, and there were no welcoming, grand public entrances.

Rather than being a catalyst for development, the project was a barrier.

Twenty-five years later, with several renovations, the Stephen Avenue façade has been improved with a new entrance to the Glenbow and the convention centre, and the new Milestones restaurant with windows onto The Walk. It has been improved, but that area still struggles to have the vitality that the blocks further west have on Stephen Avenue.

In the Beltline, the Memorial Park Library and the Muttart Art Gallery (now the Art Gallery of Calgary) opened in the renovated Carnegie Library building. If we broaden our perspective just a bit, there was also the opening of the Calgary Tower in 1968 and the Science Centre in 1969.

From 1995 to 2005 we saw the creation of numerous new public spaces and attractions: Shaw Millennium Park, Prince's Island improvements, Eau Claire Promenade, Vertigo Theatre space.

We also saw the expansion of the convention centre and the new Hyatt Hotel, as well as the Roundup Centre. There was not much historical preservation in the '70s but, over the past 10 years, we have seen Stephen Avenue become a national historic district as a result of the Façade Improvement Program and Atlantic Avenue in Inglewood transformed into a wonderful pedestrian area as a result of the Main Street Program.

Fort Calgary has also undergone significant improvements. And, in 2005 alone, we have the renovation of the Lougheed Building, Grand Theatre and the two historic AGT buildings on 6th Avenue.

In the '70s, if you wanted to buy any furniture or home décor, you had to shop at Eaton's or The Bay. Who would have thought, in 1980, that Electric Avenue would morph into the Design District with more than a dozen great furniture and home décor shops and galleries?

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