

OPINION

Hot urban topics revisited

From density to design, columnists mark year of issues

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

Time flies when you are having fun. Surprising to us, we are celebrating our first anniversary of the urban design column in the Calgary Herald Homes Section. Thank you to those who have sent us comments on our articles. The feedback has been constructive and encouraging.

Here is a review of some of the items we covered in our first year.

More than any topic, we received notes of support on our recent article about decoding density.

Density is clearly a topic that gets right to the heart of good urban design, probably because the concept is simple: more people within walking distance of shops, recreation, festivals/events, schools, views, etc. means more vitality and life.

However, density is not, by itself, a 'magic bullet.'

Although, the math may be simple, getting to the qualities of good urban form is more complex.

We need to design new communities from a sound methodological foundation — the urban design framework.

An urban design methodology recognizes that our communities are composed of several inter-related layers, from the more permanent geographic nature of the land, through to the public realm (people places like parks, streets, paths, etc.), the built form (buildings), to the less permanent layers of programming (work, recreation, arts, shopping, home) and finally colour through a trends/fashions layer (seasonal changes, festivals, events, etc.).

Urban sprawl is a direct result of abandoning urban design principles in favour of (1) auto-dependent development patterns and (2) segregation of land uses.

These two factors drive the low-density character of our new suburban communities.

From a behavioural perspective, once you get into your car, it makes little difference where you stop and park for your activities, setting a battleground between those who favour a more compact city and those who support the freeway-based city of sprawl.

The community benefits of our daily activities are replaced with a selfish focus on opportunity maximization.

For instance, once in the car, there is a tendency to go right by the community park and instead head for the more significant regional park.

Once you are in your car, why stop at the local community shops when a few more minutes of driving will

land you at the regional center with more variety and possibly some cost savings.

The 'rat race' mentality is replacing the community-based notion of local economic and social supports, along with the spontaneity of accidental meetings with neighbours.

Do we really want to replace the best of our home environment with the worst of our work-place environment?

Unfortunately, the patterns of suburban spread seem to be just as firmly entrenched now as they were a year ago, despite a litany of city policy documents and political speeches supporting compact growth, and the phenomenal success of Calgary's



Jim Dewald

most innovative and progressive neighbourhood, Garrison Woods.

But beyond the community, creating place is also a function of regional patterns of growth. Scientific studies have confirmed Jane Jacob's intuitive sense that more roads only create more traffic — not the reverse logic typically applied by traffic engineers.

The concept of 'induced traffic' basically proves that the more we spend on freeways, the more we damage the social fabric of



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our communities, and the more we encourage sprawl patterns of growth. The good news is this is very easy to fix with a guaranteed cost-saving.

Just say no to more freeway expansions, and look for places where freeways can be eliminated from our regional growth patterns.

Yet again, one year later, we see more, not less, road infrastructure projects on the go, doubly frustrating drivers.

We started our series by highlighting the importance of a sense of home in our communities.

When you travel abroad, how do you describe your 'home' community to others?

If you can't readily talk about a particularly compelling sense of place, you will realize that we have lost something important in our new neighbourhoods.

Like most Calgarians, we think of the rivers, the path system, the handful of good pedestrian streets, and the handful of other special places as the elements that really express the image of the city, but shouldn't all Calgary neighbourhoods have those qualities too?

ning and design. We have enjoyed writing these articles over this past year, and we really appreciate the feedback we receive. Please continue to send your thoughts and ideas, and we'll continue to learn and share what we learn.

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INA WORD

University of Calgary professor Bev Sandalack and Andrei Nicolai have teamed up to write a book about Calgary's urban history and the challenges for the future.

The Calgary Project, Urban Form/Urban Life is available at the U of C bookstore and through www.amazon.ca. It will later be sold at Chapters and McNally Robinson Booksellers.

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