

OPINION

# Ho-hum street has untapped potential

This column is the first of an ongoing exploration of design options for various Calgary places with potential.

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

How do you make a good street out of one that is not so good?

Calgary, despite hitting that magic one million mark, still only has a handful of high quality pedestrian shopping streets — the kind of streets that define a place.

Think of the cities and towns you have visited. What usually comes to mind are not the suburbs, or shopping centres, but the special places — the museums, parks and plazas — and also the good streets — the places where you can walk, shop and see people.

Calgary is arguably one of the richest cities on the planet, so what would happen if we devoted more of that wealth into making good streets?

Just as a hypothetical exercise, we thought it might be interesting to speculate what would be required to make a ho-hum street into a great one.

For this experiment, let's look at 26th Avenue S.W.

Where, you ask? OK, it's not much right now, but it is a street that we think has tremendous potential, especially the stretch between Crowchild Trail and 37th Street.

The avenue runs through Killarney-Glengarry, a neighbourhood currently undergoing plenty of change as people discover its locational advantages (it is close to downtown and beside the west LRT extension), its relative affordability, and its walkable grid street pattern.

There are several commercial nodes strung out along 26th Avenue, but not much in the way of urban quality.

This collection of nodes is actually an encyclopedia of small scale commercial developments:

■ First to come along were some "main street" types of buildings just west of 29th Street.

Originally built in the 1930s, and recently renovated, they consist of two story mixed use commercial/office/residential buildings

fronting right onto the public sidewalk, with narrow internal subdivision and entries at the front.

Although they are a good type of commercial building, they have not been enough on their own to make a shopping hub.

■ Next in the evolution is one of Calgary's earliest strip developments, built in the 1950s between 33rd and 34th Streets.

It is made up of one story single use buildings in a strip, with a parking lot in front. It has had a good mix of businesses over the years, including pizza joints and grocery stores — the kinds of shops that every neighbourhood needs within walking distance.

■ A chain convenience store came along in the 1970s along part of the street, taking advantage of the commercial zoning.

It is a completely different type of development from the main street buildings on the other side of the street.

It has a large parking lot in front that converts the public sidewalk (a vital component of the public street) into an isolated tightrope that creates a less than friendly pedestrian environment that's open to vehicle traffic from all sides.

This also usually spells financial trouble for local stores unable to compete with the abundant parking — and generic corporate goods bought in bulk for chain distribution.

■ In the 1980s, another commercial strip was built on the east side of 33rd Street. It was typical of its time, with bland larger units, a parking lot in front, and not much in the way of pedestrian appeal.

The largest development of all along 26th Avenue is a neighbourhood shopping centre on the west side of 37th Street.

It consists of a large anchor, with a cluster of smaller businesses, dominated by a surface parking lot. It was first built in the late 1950s and has undergone several renovations since then.

All of these places are easy to get to because the block pattern of Killarney-Glengarry is a walkable grid. However, there is not much to

make these commercial nodes destinations within the neighbourhood because once you get there, the environment just doesn't make you want to stay, even though there is an interesting range of shops and services.

So, if we wanted to improve the street, what could we do? What should the form of any new developments take?

The first step is to design for the public realm, and not the car, which means putting the parking anywhere except in lots right in front of the stores.

The tried and true formula for good streets includes retail at the ground floor, with office and/or residential above. The buildings have to front onto the street, and have little or no setback to the public sidewalk.

Entries need to be on the street and the internal subdivision of the building should accommodate many smaller businesses, rather than one large big box unit.

Where possible, businesses should spill out onto the public sidewalk in the form of outdoor seating and displays.

Parking can easily be provided behind the buildings, and on the street, parallel to the travel lanes, but this street runs through a fairly dense residential area, so much of the clientele is within walking distance.

At intersections, the curb and sidewalk should "bulb" out from the parking lane so as to minimize the walking distance for pedestrians wanting to shop on both sides of the street (let's at least give pedestrians a chance).

Sun and wind are two of the most important environmental factors in human comfort.

If you can provide sunny places that are out of the wind, it is possible to enjoy being on the street pretty much any time of the year.

Because 26th Avenue has all of its commercial development on the north-facing side of the street, either some re-zoning would have to take place so that the south-facing side could develop to commercial uses, or the existing places would have to take better advantage of the limited sun they do get, and provide better shelter for pedestrians.

Trees are also a good thing to add to any street to get positive impact.

In addition to their many ecological functions, they add esthetic appeal, provide shade and shelter, and help to define spaces and make them



Photos courtesy, Jim Dewald and Bev Sandalack

Commercial developments line 26th Avenue S.W. in Calgary.

seem more human in scale.

If it is possible to add centre boulevards and street tree plantings along the sides of 16th Avenue North, it is also possible to find a way to introduce trees on 26th Avenue.

Another influence on the success of commercial streets is the density of the residential population that surrounds it.

If you look at Calgary's "good" pedestrian streets, such as 17th Avenue, 10th Street, Kensington, Inglewood, it's clear that a somewhat higher residential density is located in the adjacent blocks.

In a redeveloping neighbourhood like Killarney-Glengarry, some guidance should be given so that the higher densities occur near 26th Avenue, 17th Avenue and 37th Street.

This will keep a high quality residential character within the neighbourhood, but still allow some intensification where it is appropriate.

All of this makes for a good pedestrian experience. This exercise has shown that a street cannot be considered independent from its surroundings.

The quality of a street is strongly related to the land uses, the building types, the orientation to the sun, the connectivity, and the density that surrounds it.

All of those factors can be manipulated to create better neighbourhoods and streets, but they need to happen through a thoughtful planning process.



Buildings should front on the street and have little setback.

At the moment, Killarney-Glengarry is one of those neighbourhoods that doesn't have an up-to-date plan.

Calgary's recent rapid growth has meant that more attention has been paid to the evolving edge and to the redeveloping inner city, but perhaps it is time to focus attention on the other neighbourhoods, and their streets.

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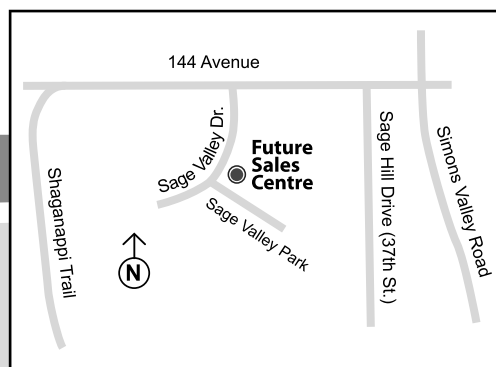
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