

# Where have all the urban forests gone?

BEV SANDALACK AND JIM DEWALD  
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

One of the most well-loved, but perhaps taken for granted, parts of the city is the urban forest.

This term refers to all of the planted and naturally occurring trees in the city that collectively make up a large, spread-out forest.

Two images may come to mind: Central Park in New York City, a green respite in the middle of highrise Manhattan; or a typical prairie settlement, where the whole town is a leafy green oasis in the middle of the vast and treeless plains.

In most cities, though, the reality is different and more complex.

The city is composed of a built network of streets, squares, and districts, together with a natural network of large and small parks, tree lined streets, riverbanks, cemeteries and schoolgrounds.

Calgary's urban forest came to be through huge effort and vision.

Many, if not most, cities and towns in North America are less than 200 years old — some of them were literally carved out of the frontier.

Forests were often clear cut and a city planted in its place.

However, in the case of Calgary, a

commitment to a vision of a city of trees transformed what was mostly prairie into a forested paradise.

William Pearce — in his multiple roles with the Dominion Land Survey, the Canadian Pacific Railway, the federal department of mines, and City Hall — had a huge role in the development of the prairie west in the early 1900s.

He was responsible for the development of a vision of Calgary where the natural features would be protected and emphasized as part of the urban structure for the benefit of all citizens, and for starting the process of planting public street trees.

William Reader, in his role as Calgary parks superintendent during the early decades of the 20th century, carried forward that vision.

He developed some of the jewels in Calgary's park system, including the gardens at Union Cemetery and Riley Park — although his main achievements were arguably his commitment to extensive boulevard plantings and the development of Calgary's

Central Park, Mewata Park and Prince's Island.

All of this took place during periods of extreme austerity.

William Pearce and William Reader, urban heroes whose names should be familiar to all citizens, were

instrumental in making sure that Calgary's evolving streets included boulevards and street trees.

They advocated planting of species that were hardy in Calgary's fickle climates, and many of the streets in the inner-city neighbourhoods with older white spruce, poplar and elm can be traced back to their influence.

This legacy, while largely respected, has gradually been eroded in some places.

Walk down any avenue in the Beltline from west to east, and it will be easy to see how the quality of the streetscape declines as soon as the street trees disappear.

Pretty much every street and avenue in the neighbourhoods of Connaught and Victoria Park once had boulevards with street trees on each side separating the pedestrian sidewalk from the road.

Over time, due to either the "urban renewal" of the 1960s and 1970s, or because of road widening or the conversion of two-way streets to one-way mini-freeways, the structure of the streets has drastically changed.

This is most evident in the eastern sections, where most of the clearances and most of the redevelopment has occurred.

It is also possible to find photographs of 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th Avenues in downtown Calgary that once had rows of street trees on either side.

These were destroyed to make room for one-way streets and office towers.

Calgary's downtown has still not recovered the high-quality streets it once had.

On residential streets in new suburbs, street trees are much less common than in older neighbourhoods.

Most people highly value trees, which not only perform numerous invaluable ecological functions, but whose presence increases property values.

So why is it that the urban forest seems to be in decline?

Ryan Perry, one of our former students and now a planner in B.C., recently completed an exemplary master's degree project showing how difficult it has become to plant street trees in new neighbourhoods.

The barriers, including a declining amount of space left after driveways and excessive utility ease-



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Trees show their autumn colours downtown near the Calgary Tower.

ments, compete for space with huge houses on small lots, leaving the spoils for meager tree planting.

Unfortunately, trees can't survive on a postage stamp-sized piece of land, so they have frequently been left out of the equation.

Turning our eyes to commercial developments, we see uncharacteristic ornamental plantings in small patches of "green space" — ones dotted within huge parking lots and traffic interchanges that are not even close to being a substitute for the shady civic squares and leafy boulevards of the past.

There are many innovative ways to include street trees and high quality parks and squares in the urban form.

It is simply a matter of choice: do

we want to respect the legacy of Pearce and Reader and other visionaries who saw Calgary as a city of trees, or do we want to see the historic urban forest continue to dwindle and new neighbourhoods emerge as barren concrete islands?

What choice will Calgary make?

BEV SANDALACK, PH.D, IS CO-ORDINATOR OF THE URBAN DESIGN PROGRAM IN THE FACULTY OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY, DIRECTOR OF THE URBAN DESIGN LAB AND DEPUTY CHAIRWOMAN OF THE CALGARY URBAN DESIGN REVIEW PANEL. JIM DEWALD, PH.D, IS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, STRATEGY AND GLOBAL MANAGEMENT AT THE HASKAYNE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY, AND A PARTNER WITH PETERS-DEWALD LAND CO.



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Street trees are much less common in Calgary's new neighbourhoods.

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