

OPINION

Is there a planning doctor in the house?

Municipal officials keep tight grip on power base

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There is a common misconception that the city is being built by a bunch of big, bad developers.

Curiously, the term "development" actually refers to the "improvement" of land, which by definition indicates a positive contribution.

Why then is it that these "improvers" of land have such a bad rap? Some history may help.

Calgary's early neighbourhoods were the result of lot by lot, block by block, building of houses for the newcomers.

Occasionally, someone had the resources to acquire large pieces of land to build houses on.

Freddie Lowes, who made and lost a fortune before the First World War, is one of those colourful characters.

He was responsible for the development of Roxboro, what is now an inner-city community near the Elbow River.

To make the land "developable," over the course of several weeks he washed away the south face of Mission Hill, leveling the land and raising it above the flood level.

Ironically, this is a neighbourhood that has some of the highest environmental quality, even though this kind of big move would not get past environmental approvals today!

Another anomaly was Mount Royal, developed on a large piece of land that was owned by the CPR. It was laid out for a much higher income group, and in a street pattern that followed the curves of the land.

However, for the most part, Calgary developed incrementally during the early years according to a grid, or modified grid, pattern.

Following the Second World War, Calgary was like most North American cities trying to cope with the population boom, increasing prosperity, and the availability of private cars.

Suburbs sprang up in a broad ring around the city, this time developed by larger corporations.

Almost all of these were planned according to the "neighbourhood unit" — essentially the geographical area served by an elementary school.

Examples are found in all quadrants of Calgary — Glamorgan, Brentwood, Fairview and Mayland Heights are some of these.

They marked a ne-

cessity met with practicality, with a few large development companies, including Kelwood, Carma, and Qualico, being responsible for building these relatively larger tracts of housing.

Such neighbourhoods are where many of us grew up or are living now.

Over time, land was eventually assembled and developed in more expansive parcels, including the ranches of some of Calgary's founding families.

Sector plans became more common and resulted in vast areas being planned at one time.

Examples include the cluster of Oakridge, Braeside Cedarbrae and Palliser in the southwest, and Temple, Whitehorn, Rundle and Pineridge in the northeast.

It was usually easier to apply common standards and designs to these larger areas, so the city started to have a much more homogeneous appearance.

Because this also coincided with the adoption of certain practices in street layout — such as curvilinear road hierarchies — and in the perpetuation of single-use land zoning, Calgary soon developed much coarser grain and a growing dependence on automobile use. Expressions like "cookie cutter" started to enter the vocabulary.

Although most Calgary residents lived in one of these neighbourhoods, these new suburbs have more recently acquired a negative connotation, linked to problems of sprawl, sameness and isolation. These patterns of development prevailed through the high-growth period of the 1970s and 1980s.

In the 1990s, some antidotes to this were proposed. Calgary's first answers came in the form of McKenzie Towne.

By all accounts, the political and administrative branches of city hall were fully onboard for something new. Approvals came fast for this concept that challenged every engineering and park standard in the book.

A few years later, Garrison Woods solidified many of these concepts and took them forward. Interestingly, the "developer" in this case is

Canada Lands Co., the real estate arm of the federal government.

Most recently, The Bridges — on the site of the demolished Calgary General Hospital in Bridgeland near the



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Photos, Calgary Herald Archive

McKenzie Towne's neo-traditional design takes shape during construction in 1995.

zoo — has emerged as Calgary's newest big-city, mixed-use area.

One would expect there would be perfect harmony between the developers and city hall in this grand project of providing housing for Calgary's growing numbers.

However — and this is surprising — city hall is often the main impediment to getting good design built because the accountants, engineers, and maintenance technicians have reaffirmed their power-base and grip on the character of our future.

How can this turnabout have happened?

The City of Calgary is on record as promoting sustainable development through its adoption of the Calgary Transportation Plan, the Sustainable Suburbs Study, Transit Friendly Design Guidelines, the Calgary Plan, and more recently the Transit Oriented Development Guidelines.

Still, getting the details right in order to make innovative neighbourhoods possible takes much effort in getting past certain city practices.

The main impediments and delays in getting Garrison Woods, Garrison Green and Currie Barracks built were issues with city street standards.

Narrower streets and deviations from the today's norms (even while at times matching older Calgary standards) took inordinate amounts of time to get sorted out.

But the result is a success by anyone's measure.

In many other new plans, the intent of having a finer grain of open spaces, a mix of uses and a variety of development types is impeded by economic operational arguments.

For example, city administrators prefer to have the open space requirement of a neighbourhood be satisfied by one huge playing field with continuous turfgrass and a minimum of trees — rather than a variety of smaller open spaces with a variety of shade trees and surfaces — to serve a variety of people and uses.

It is claimed that one large space is easier to mow and maintain. But why should maintenance issues compromise the quality of life and the quality of urban form?

And so, finally, this evolutionary path has resulted in a trade-off of perceived economies at the cost of traditional and proven patterns of community development (i.e. actual "improvement").

Is there a doctor in the house?

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A streetscape of row housing on Somme Avenue in Garrison Woods.

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