

OPINION

# Developers explore cutting edge

## 'Liabilities of newness' are defied

**JIM DEWALD AND BEV SANDALACK**  
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

It is easy to go with the flow, but much harder to create something different and new.

Unfortunately, there is no magic recipe for creating success when trying something new.

Noted scholar and business strategist **Michael Raynor** argues that not only is there no formula for success, when businesses try new approaches to find success, they inevitably invite failure as a real outcome.

Raynor contends that because we can not predict the future, including market trends and technological advances, we have no idea if new or different approaches will yield wild success or drastic failure.

It takes moxie, and maybe some luck, to be successful with something new.

In the community development industry, Garrison Woods was created as a different neighbourhood form for Calgary.

This new community model consisted of higher density development on a modified grid layout, something that urbanists everywhere have been advocating for decades.

The community was created in the face of overwhelming evidence that reliable earnings could essentially be guaranteed in the typical suburban model of front-drive garages, curvilinear streets, single family homes, laneless lots, and isolated cul-de-sacs.

There was no such guarantee for the Garrison Woods model, but even so, developer Canada Lands Co. decided to shift to this urbanist model, introducing a new risk with absolutely no assurance of what side of the random positive or negative outcome would occur.

Development of Garrison Woods commenced in 1998. How does one measure success nine years later?

One way is to look at resale prices.

Interestingly, Canada Lands Co. set a goal of providing affordable housing options for all Calgarians,

mandating that 60 per cent of the housing units in Garrison Woods be multi-family housing (unprecedented at the time).

However, ironically the new concept has been so popular that it has become one of the most expensive districts in Calgary, notwithstanding the smaller, more modest forms of housing in a much higher density.

Garrison Woods has in fact proven successful in more ways than originally expected.

Some will argue that the success of Garrison Woods is due strictly to its location.

Location is always a factor in real estate development, but there are many other variables here — and the bottom line is that Garrison Woods was different, it was gutsy, it was against the odds, and a very risky approach when the tried and true would have virtually guaranteed some level of success.

In the 1960s, institutional theorist **Arthur Stinchcombe** coined the phrase "liabilities of newness" to describe the risks associated with trying something new when the tried and true is working fine.

The term says it all — there is considerable liability associated with being new and different.

Knowing well the pitfalls of the liabilities of newness, it is understandable that most developers have resisted new approaches to community design.

However, with many recent successes, including Garrison Woods, the Bridges in Bridgeland, and many similar projects in other cities in Colorado, South Carolina, California and Virginia, the liabilities associated with newness are disappearing.

We are now reaching a period where the opportunity for new thinking and bold new community designs are finally (we hope) taking hold.

This is also coming at a time when discussions about urban form and quality are much more common, and when there is a growing expectation that new developments contribute to a better overall urban form, rather than just be isolated private enclaves.

A few Calgary-area developers



Photos, Calgary Herald Archive

Garrison Woods was created on the site of a military base as a different kind of neighbourhood for Calgary.

have taken an important first step by proposing community designs that suggest something new and innovative.

We salute their moxie and encourage them to push the edges as much as possible in an all-out effort to reject the decades-old model for Calgary's suburbs — which has produced a low-density and homogeneous built landscape, and one that is heavily implicated in the traffic problems, sustainability issues, and decline of sense of place.

In addition to proposing smaller centres with mixed uses, a main focus of Genstar's Villages of Walden is L.I.D., or low impact development.

L.I.D. refers to maintaining natural areas and utilizing stormwater design techniques that recharge the groundwater, rather than diverting and concentrating large flows into huge underground sewers.

We applaud the efforts of Genstar in pursuing this innovative design approach.

We also suggest combining this important initiative with a greater emphasis on local food production, employment, and other activities in order to further lessen the ecological footprint by reducing transportation demand.

Hopewell's Mahogany community plan is focused on bringing a mixed-use, higher density "urban" development model to the suburban district outside of

the ring road.

This is important because it could establish a new model for the next layer of development beyond the ring road.

Our only suggestion would be that the City of Calgary's administration and Hopewell must take this opportunity to shift the C-Train line from the sterile isolation of a major road right-of-way, and develop a truly transit-oriented development.

For example, the LRT station should be relocated to the centre of the proposed town centre, perhaps as an underground station. It's much easier to go underground now.

In a more rural setting, Bordeaux Properties is proposing a mixed-use community in Springbank called Harmony.

This new concept features a large lake/amenity area, retail, office, and recreation facilities.

The new homes and businesses within Harmony will cover an area of 680 hectares (1,700 acres), which seems large, but if it were to be structured as the typical 0.8-hectare (two-acre) country residential development, it would cover some 3,000 hectares (7,500 acres).

So, good on the council of the MD of Rocky View and Bordeaux for being visionary and responsible with our important rural land supply.

We must, however, comment that

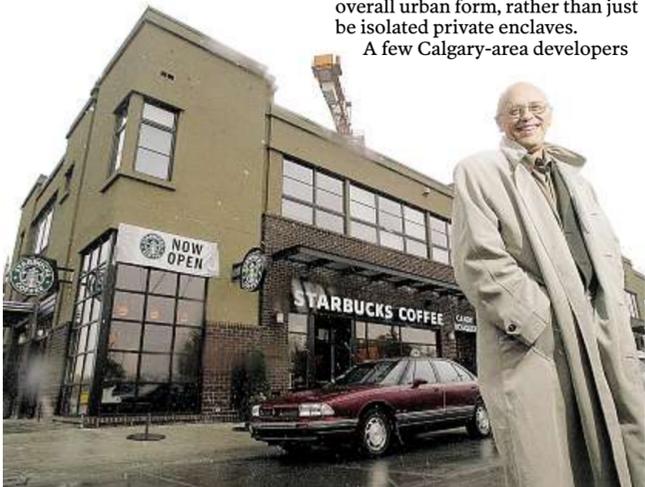
A few Calgary-area developers have taken an important first step by proposing community designs that suggest something new and innovative



Jim Dewald



Bev Sandalack



Architect Dan Jenkins in front of the Piazza on The Bridges.

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