

OPINION

Happiness means being truer to form

'Urban form' affects quality of life

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

What is the level of health of our city? One recent measure was a survey of cities of various sizes by University of British Columbia economist John Helliwell.

It found Calgarians to be surprisingly wanting, and, in fact, tied second last in Helliwell's "happiness" measure.

This finding shocked some Calgarians, because, frankly, our city is full of riches.

However, Helliwell says that "people do systematically overestimate the amount of happiness they'll get from material things and underestimate the amount they'll get from human contact, and from being embedded in supportive communities."

Assuming that happiness is a worthy pursuit, Helliwell's research (which is extensive, not simply this one survey) makes the argument that how our cities are planned and developed has a direct influence on our level of happiness.

In short, patterns of growth should encourage more, and higher-quality, human contact.

Our view is that Calgary is well overdue in adopting new ways to cope with growth in a socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable manner — in a way that supports happiness.

This has been our line for years.

But the time may now be opportune to actually see meaningful changes, because the forces behind change are now fortified with leadership from

mayor Dave Bronconnier, who is chief among those calling for a better approach in the way Calgary grows.

When we consider how development has occurred during the past 30 to 40 years, the closest definition of Calgary's pattern of growth is "sprawl."

Sprawl is defined as development patterns that include segregated land uses, low densities, and auto-dependent.

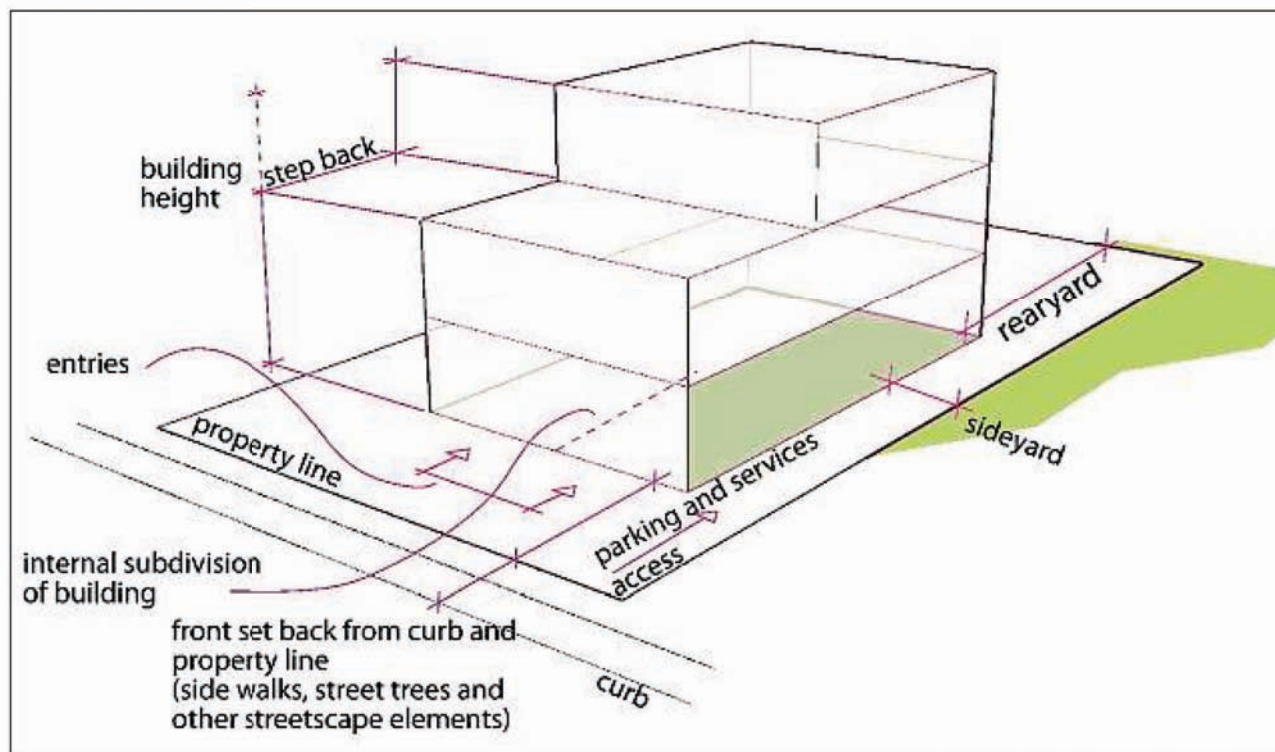
In 1977, Christopher Alexander, a Berkeley, Calif. professor, architect, and builder, published *A Pattern Language*, one of the definitive urban design texts.

In this readable book, Alexander described the patterns that contribute to good urban form.

It will come as no surprise that the patterns that contribute to sprawl — such as single land uses, low densities, curvilinear street patterns, and blocks dominated by two- and three-car garages — don't figure prominently among the patterns that produce livable and sustainable places (we'll come back to Alexander's pattern language in future columns.)

What does stand out as better patterns are the tried and true formulas for good urbanism: a mix of uses, higher densities and intensities, and a focus on the public realm of streets, sidewalks, squares, plazas and parks.

So, if Calgary is going to improve its happiness quotient, it should be following patterns that support more, and higher quality, human contact — which is a higher quality public realm, rather than the patterns that endlessly replicate sub-



Courtesy, Bev Sandalack and Jim Dewald

A diagram illustrating such potential factors of form-based zoning as a building's placement on a lot.

urbia. In order to do this, different processes are required.

Sprawl was the inevitable consequence of zoning, whereby different land uses (such as low-density residential, medium-density residential, high-density residential, commercial, industrial, and so on) were relegated to segregated pods.

We all know the story that resulted.

It's necessary to drive to work, recreation or shopping from where we live. Unless a Calgarian happens live in one of the inner-city neighbourhoods with a grid street pattern, it is almost impossible to walk anywhere.

For the past 27 years, the city land use bylaw (lovingly referred to as 2P80) has reinforced, indeed legislated segregated land use patterns by limiting specific uses that could occur within each individual land use district.

Under 2P80, it was actually illegal under the preset districts to build the kinds of mixed-use commercial streets that define urban quality in Calgary, such as 17th Avenue and Kensington.

The city recently passed a new land-use bylaw that reflects a renewed way of thinking about city form and function that has the potential of making higher-quality places.

This bylaw makes it possible to have a mix of uses and higher densities, patterns that contribute to good places.

This is a very positive step forward, but not enough. More is needed, and one such way is to shift to form-based zoning.

This is a planning tool that specifies what should happen on a piece of land in terms of the physical form that is desired, rather than the land uses that are allowed to occur on it.

Form-based zoning acknowledges that although uses may change over time in any given building, the physical form persists for much longer, and is what gives the public realm its quality. The variables that might be specified in form-based zoning include:

- Building placement on the lot (this influences setbacks and sideyard).
- Building massing, number of stories, and architectural relationships.
- Frontage conditions (relationship to the street through points of entry, windows, building facade details, etc.)
- Entries and access to the lot and to the buildings.
- Parking.
- Streetscape and landscape on the lot.

These are the variables, or the patterns, that really influence the quality of the urban form, and that have the greatest potential to influence the happiness quotient.

From an industry standpoint, this is a far less intrusive form of regulation, allowing the marketplace, and not the planning department, to determine who buys or leases their real estate.

In the past, we have emphasized the need for "urban design" as the methodology for good city making.

Form-based planning reinforces this. We encourage the city to continue on its transition to the new land use bylaw, and to emphasize the physical form aspects even more.

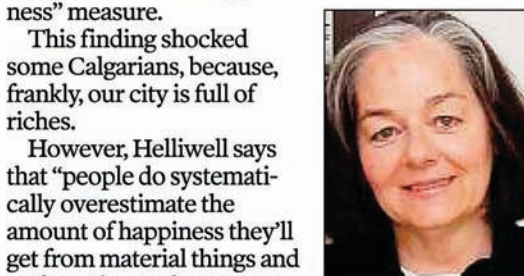
We only have one chance to get the block patterns right and it is only once every generation or so that buildings are built or re-built.

These are two of the most permanent elements of the city form, so rather than concentrate on regulating

land uses (an element of city form that should actually be left to the marketplace), we advocate concentrating on the aspects of the urban form that are the most permanent — the block structure and the building form.

This may take us further in making places to which we can all relate and develop attachments to, and maybe we can get that "A" grade on the next happiness survey.

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A typical Calgary suburb in one of the newer areas of the city.

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