

MORPHOLOGY IS DESTINY*: CALGARY'S DOWNTOWN (RE)EVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

Calgary, Alberta, Canada was established in 1883 and the downtown developed as a compact gridblock commercial core surrounded by mixed use and residential areas. In 1966 a master plan was prepared to guide Calgary through one of its massive growth periods. Influenced by urban renewal, the planning tool of choice at the time, a rationalization plan for clearing out the old and making way for the new razed scores of buildings and entire neighbourhoods. The mixed uses were replaced by single use commercial or institutional blocks and consisted mostly of large buildings occupying whole blocks or set back from the street and with a poor quality public realm. With the 1970s/80s oil boom, more of the urban fabric was speculatively cleared out; some rebuilt as signature towers for banks and oil companies, some as places of spectacle to support Calgary's 1988 Winter Olympics, and some as surface parking. Decades later, the downtown struggles, with high office vacancy rates, few residents, and a preponderance of people living on the margins, attracted by the nearby homeless shelters and social services. Improving the downtown will require radical strategies to repair the morphological pathologies that have occurred and recover the urban vitality. Keywords: urban morphology, downtown evolution, Calgary, urban renewal, urban design.

** title inspired by Brenda Scheer's 1997 Birmingham ISUF paper "Morphology AS Destiny: the Case of Over-The Rhine". The phrase stuck with me, eventually revised to Morphology IS Destiny.*

BACKGROUND

Calgary was established in 1883. The intersection of the Bow and Elbow rivers, the Canada Land Survey grid, the railway line, and the railway street grid determined early town form. The downtown incrementally developed as a compact commercial core surrounded by mixed use and residential areas - ordinary and unremarkable urbanism scaled to the human being and accommodating the monuments and spaces of the city.

Over time, a series of planning and design initiatives changed the form and function of the downtown so that it eventually lost its human scale, residential population, vitality, sense of safety, and sense of place. The decline of the east part of downtown has long been a topic of concern, and the City of Calgary has undertaken numerous planning exercises and produced several conceptual plans for revitalizing the area. None of these plans have been undertaken to date. Perhaps this is fortuitous, as the plans have not yet addressed the real issues of urban form and structure.

The most recent initiative is the Nine Block Project whose aim is "to pilot quick solutions in the nine blocks that surround City Hall that are aimed at improving safety in this important area of the downtown, supporting the neighbourhood's business, and finding low-cost, impactful solutions" (City of Calgary 2020). As well-meaning as this may be, it is unlikely that quick fixes will address the problems, which are deep-seated and morphological in nature, and have resulted in environmental, social, economic and aesthetic dysfunctions that need to be well understood in order to be repaired. The deterioration of the institutional area of Calgary's downtown has come about through a combination of planning and architectural decisions that were ultimately pathological to the city; they should be understood in order to be able to propose viable solutions.

METHODOLOGY

The methods for this research include historic evolution analysis, using air photos, city plans and fire insurance maps; documentation and analysis of the block structure, lot subdivision, building coverage and building types through plan analysis, figure-ground maps and three dimensional modeling; review of built form, program, and demographic information; and an audit of various qualities of the centre city built form (Alaniz Uribe and Sandalack 2015). This is synthesized into a story line linking planning

and design processes with built form and includes observations about quality of life and quality of urban form.

FINDINGS

During the 1950s and 60s, as Calgary underwent the massive post-war suburban expansion that would distinguish its growth for many decades, the downtown became a modern office and commercial core surrounded by working class neighbourhoods. These higher-density mixed use neighbourhoods (twelve units per acre) were compared unfavourably with the post-war suburbs (six-to-seven units per acre). Eventually, these neighbourhoods started to gain a negative reputation, and between 1955 and 1965 the downtown population dropped by more than 30 percent, opening the door to re-planning (City of Calgary 1966).

In 1965, an urban renewal scheme was prepared for the thirty-one blocks of Churchill Park east of the downtown core (today's East Village). Aside from three buildings with historic or cultural value, the area was slated for complete redevelopment, and the stage was set for the 1966 Downtown Master Plan. This plan recognized the central role of the downtown, and it set out strategies to improve accessibility and simplify the structure, including plans to address "blight" in the east end.

The \$21 million plan attempted to spatially segregate different land uses and referred to "negative heterogeneous land uses." The West End, Eau Claire, and Churchill Park were identified as substandard, with "overcrowded homes, inadequate schools, parks and playgrounds, worn-out buildings, inadequate water and sewer services, traffic congestion, a poor visual environment, and use of land that is unreasonable within the overall framework of Downtown." Clearance began, and perceptions were further sealed as the areas were dismantled.

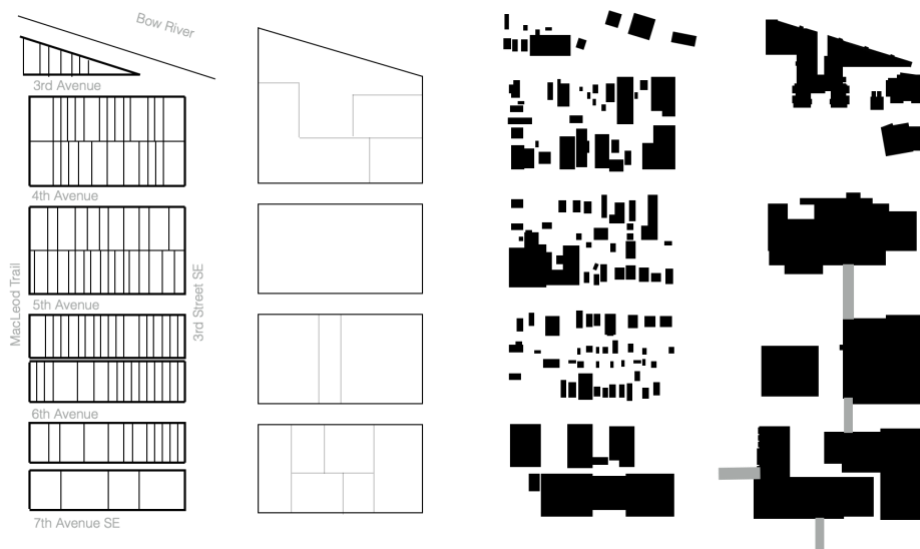


Figure 1 Land subdivision and figure ground maps of one block in East Downtown between 7th Avenue and 2nd Avenue SE 1961 (left) and 2020 (right), pre- and post-urban renewal. Drawings B. Sandalack 2020.

"Urban renewal" was one of the preferred planning strategies of the 1950s and 1960s; the plan destroyed huge pieces of the downtown, without renewing much of it. It was a rationalization plan for clearing out the old and making way for the new, and scores of buildings and entire neighbourhoods were razed in preparation for major institutional and commercial projects. Lost were many of the amenities and services that supported a residential population, including grocery stores, corner stores, and small retail businesses. Rather than encouraging revitalization, destroying huge swaths of the downtown created the closest thing to a slum that this rich city would ever have.

With the oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s, more of the urban fabric was speculatively cleared out; some rebuilt as signature towers for banks and oil companies, one block re-developed as Olympic

Plaza to support Calgary's 1988 Winter Olympics, and others as surface parking. Several major projects resulted in the emergence of an institutional district (Glenbow Museum, Convention Centre, Education Board buildings, Library, Performing Arts Centre, Municipal Building, and Federal Government Building). Most were large buildings set back from the street or occupying whole blocks, replacing the former small lot subdivision pattern by a much coarser grain, and, when combined with the emphasis on automobile travel rather than the pedestrian environment, resulting in a poor quality public realm. This district now forms a functional and visual barrier between the river and the downtown, and between the west and east parts of the core.

Construction of the city's light rail transit line, coupled with the closure of 8th Avenue in the early 1980s to make way for the massive Municipal Building, resulted in East Village being walled off from the rest of the downtown. The area languished for decades, as neither the economy nor the zeitgeist were yet ready for the massive redevelopment required for its renewal, and there was no urban design guidance. Two relatively high quality homeless shelters were constructed in 2001 and three high rise apartment buildings were constructed for seniors. While serving important social service functions, in the absence of other balancing residential and commercial developments, the east downtown was soon perceived as a backwater for criminal and marginal activities. Two residential buildings were constructed in 2002, but other remaining buildings were progressively demolished. The downtown became an area with few functions, unpleasant and dead outside of office hours.



Figure 2 Massive concrete buildings with large setbacks and poor quality public realm such as one of the Board of Education buildings, constructed in 1978, were typical of the urban renewal efforts. The Municipal Building, constructed in 1985, walled off the East Village from the rest of the downtown, and despite the attention to the geometry of the building, has four dysfunctional edges at the ground level. Photos B. Sandalack.

A crucial turning point in Calgary's urban evolution was the 1994 completion of the river path system through the Calgary Urban Parks Master Plan. It reintroduced Calgarians to their rivers, allowed people to walk and bike through the city, and made previously invisible parts of the city accessible. Importantly, it illustrated what a bold idea focusing on the public realm could do, and it was a catalyst for Calgary's urban evolution and a change in planning paradigms. However, the path system functions linearly, with poor connections into the downtown.

The East Village is finally being renewed, after fifty years of languishing, due to an ambitious and aggressive twenty year masterplan vision that includes a strong re-brand, a focus on the public realm, multiple residential projects, public realm developments, accommodation of the homeless and seniors populations in the area, and an architectural emphasis on active edges of all buildings. Construction began in 2007 with infrastructure improvements including raising the roads above the flood line and development of a high quality public realm in advance of residential development. Notably, the river walk included a broad pedestrian and cycle path and plaza, public washrooms, and other amenities, and the message was communicated that the public, and high quality new development, was welcome.

Several residential developments with at-grade commercial uses were soon constructed and are now inhabited, and the area has a new cachet - the "newest, oldest, hottest, coolest" neighbourhood in Calgary. The East Village population reached 3234 according to the 2016 Calgary municipal census,

a 14.2% increase from 2015, and a drastic increase from decades earlier. This population is very mixed, with a proportion living in homeless shelters or seniors' housing, however the overall trend is towards the estimated ultimate population of 11,500 that includes both home-owners and renters. Concurrently, construction of several key projects that emphasized quality of architectural design (although with a disappointing public realm), including the National Music Centre and the new Central Public Library, have also helped to bring people into the area and change the perception of the neighbourhood, and historic buildings such as the Simmons Building have been treated with care and redeveloped as popular cafes and restaurants.

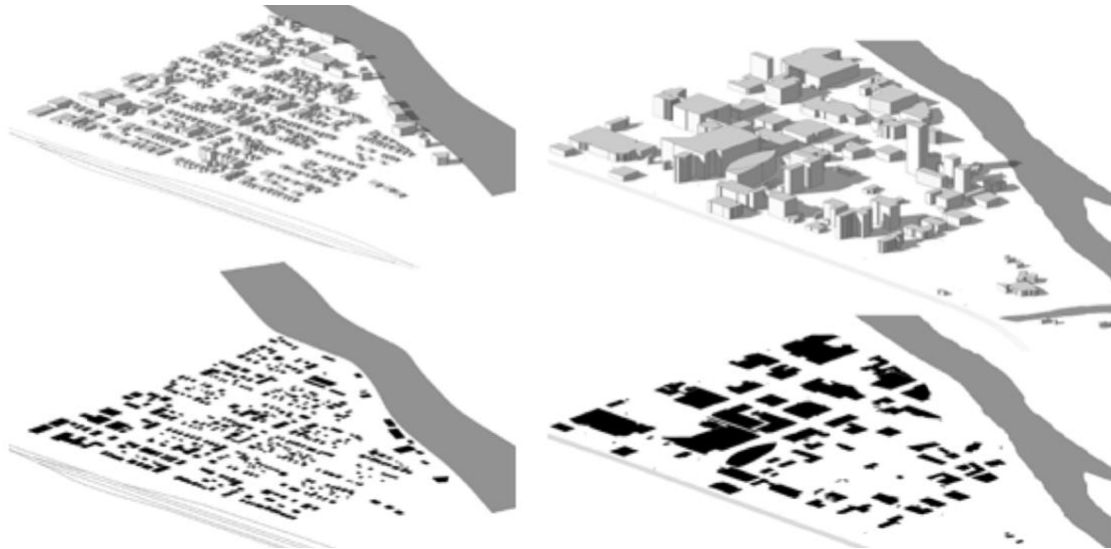


Figure 3 East downtown and East Village figure ground and axonometric model 1922 (left) and 2019 (right) show how the grain, scale, and land coverage changed. Drawings R. UI Momin 2020.

But while the East Village is undergoing an urban renaissance, the area around the Municipal Building has become even more of a dead zone, much to the consternation of city politicians and administration. Although Olympic Plaza may attract tourists and others through aggressive programming during the day, most of the area is populated by people living on the margins, attracted to the social supports such as homeless shelters that are clustered here. The activities that might be expected to bring people to the area, such as Bow Valley College, with a downtown student population of around 15,000, and the Municipal Library that attracts over 100,000 visitors per year, do not have the supporting public realm that could lead to a people-on-the-street kind of place, despite the attention to the exterior architecture. There are few places nearby to go, so students stay within their building, rather than contributing any liveliness or commercial impact, and library users have few other options so confine their visit to the building.

Over time, the development of single use institutional blocks (some now abandoned with no prospects for re-use), construction of buildings with a poor quality interface with the street (exemplified by the Municipal Building where all four edges are problematic), elimination of most of the residential uses, emphasis on one-way streets that cater to commuter traffic, overall poor quality public realm, and concentration of social services as one of the dominant land uses have all worked together to discourage many people from coming to this part of the downtown. The morphology has ensured the destiny of the downtown.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A radical, morphological, approach is necessary to repair the urban structure, address problems with the building typologies, increase the residential population, and improve the public realm - more than just quick fixes or superficial projects are required. People, living in the area and visiting, are necessary to inhabit the spaces and make businesses and services viable, and to communicate to all that this part of the city is safe, interesting and welcoming. A high quality public realm is essential so

that people want to be here. For now, the experience of walking in the area is unpleasant (there are too many blank walls or surface parking lots), it is perceived to be unsafe, and there is literally nowhere to go. Most of the few residential buildings are for transitional housing, rehabilitation, or for the homeless. Although they are important social services, by themselves they do not make a neighbourhood. Restaurants and small businesses in the area have difficulty thriving, with only a day-time clientele of office workers. Unless the main morphological issues are addressed, it is unlikely that the social or economic health of the area will change.

A comprehensive strategy should include:

- redevelopment to reflect the smaller lot subdivisions that encouraged a mix of businesses and uses and ensured multiple entries onto the street, rather than whole block single lots
- introduction of appropriately scaled residential development, consisting of medium-rise buildings, rather than high-rises, with more entries onto the street and more possibility of interaction between the units and the streets. Priority areas are the many surface parking lots. More residential development could improve the viability of educational institutions such as Bow Valley College, as their students could also live in the neighbourhood.
- complete re-evaluation of the ground floor street interface of all buildings in the area, and redevelopment to provide commercial spaces and a high quality public realm, starting with the high profile Municipal Building and its four dysfunctional edges.
- comprehensive public realm improvements to provide continuous sidewalks of appropriate width, street trees, benches and other furniture. Connections to adjacent areas where people are, such as the Bow River Path and the emerging East Village, should be emphasized.

Public realm improvements are important even before a renewed population takes root. This area of the downtown is currently a gathering place for people on the margins - homeless people, vagrants, transients, drug users and dealers. Downtown Calgary has only two (limited access) public washrooms and one (temporary) public water fountain (Alaniz and Sandalack 2015). The lack of public services affects everyone, but particularly the homeless and transient populations; access to facilities for basic biological functions, hand washing, or drinking water, activities taken for granted by most citizens, is restricted or non-existent for others. The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized this issue. How do people who are without a home or are transient satisfy hygiene requirements that help prevent the spread of this virus and other diseases? Positive public health outcomes and community benefits could be achieved by improving the standard of living for all, especially the most vulnerable.

CONCLUSIONS

The best parts of cities are where there is a mix of activities, housing types and people, something that can only come about *by design*. Previous planning and development practices made huge impacts on the health, vibrancy, and quality of life in Calgary's east downtown – they were morphological in nature, and require a morphological approach to address - quick fixes will not work.

Calgary's downtown core contains civic buildings, public institutions, cultural facilities, and public spaces within a small radius. Basing the urban structure on those key relationships will only be successful, if they address the underlying morphological issues – lot subdivision, the building types, the building/street interface, the inclusion of residential buildings, the connection to the river path system, and the quality of the public realm.

If the downtown is still believed to be important as a commercial and symbolic centre, then planning policies and economic practices need to be changed to address the extreme damage that was done through previous paradigms. If not, then another option may be to seriously reconsider the role that the downtown plays in the city, and to re-imagine it as a different kind of precinct. Otherwise, the longer-term, and expensive, commitment to fixing the morphological dysfunctions of the downtown is the best course to follow.

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