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EDMONTON'S DOWNTOWN RENAISSANCE

By Ian Madsen

- Edmonton's downtown was dying until the city adopted a strategy to accommodate residential and commercial activity in the area. It involves no simple quick fixes, but a series of complementary policies that make the area more attractive.
- Educational institutions, both private and public have capitalized on the area's unique attractiveness to young people by locating there.
- Zoning rules accommodate (i.e. do not impede) redevelopment of heritage structures.
- High-rise office buildings are being converted into residential apartments using tax abatements and small conversion subsidies.
- The absence of rent control – abolished 20 years ago – has been a critical factor. Many new and refurbished residential buildings are rentals; they would not have been built as, or converted to, condominiums --- or would never have existed at all had rent controls been retained.
- The City reversed its former policy of trying to make it as easy as possible to get to and through downtown, which only encouraged people to race through without staying. Many one-way streets and avenues have been made two-way again, and there is free-after-six metered parking once more.

Edmonton, like other cities in Canada is addicted to the automobile. The Alberta capital maintains over 4,500 miles of urban roads, as opposed to fewer than 3,000 in Winnipeg. Rather than walking, cycling or relying on public transportation, over 88% of the city's population travels to work or school by car - the highest ratio in Canada. The newer parts of town are well served by roads, the centre less so.

Though possessing the North Saskatchewan River Valley Capital City Region Park, the largest of its kind in the world, and renowned cultural institutions like the acoustically superb Winspear Centre for Music, Edmonton's downtown was, until recently, dying. The decline was visible even during the oil boom, and few high-rises have been constructed since that bracing time. Head offices left for Calgary, Vancouver, Toronto and elsewhere while new firms located in business parks far away from the centre.



Grant MacEwan Community College's \$100 million, 700,000 square foot downtown campus consists of four buildings, each with three stories above ground, and one below, combining to produce enough space to house a variety of programs.

The slashing of provincial government spending and payrolls in the mid-1990's emptied many downtown offices. Restaurants, shops and commercial and professional services firms followed, closing down or moving to the suburbs and exurbs. West Edmonton Mall and "power centres" on the recently divided and widened Calgary Trail at the southern edge have drawn away the shoppers and entertainment seekers who once gravitated downtown. The quirky shops, bars, restaurants and heritage buildings of Old Strathcona, ten minutes' drive from downtown on the south side of the Saskatchewan --- especially its principal corridor, Whyte Avenue --- have siphoned off young urbanites in search of an unhomogenized, unpasteurized downtown of their own.

Over the years a series of renewal initiatives has been launched. Some central streets have been gentrified or beautified with new lampposts, benches, cobblestones and trees, and a few older buildings, including former high rises have even been converted to residential apartments. New or expanded educational institutions - many in the private sector - have brought in younger people who are looking for activities and opportunities to spend their money, adding more bodies to the streets. New residential and

commercial development has started to converge on downtown, mainly from affluent and increasingly expensive West Jasper, Oliver and Glenora. The removal of the CNR line on downtown's northern border has brought new land into play, beginning with Grant MacEwan College, then the shops and restaurants of Oliver Square I and II and, eventually, new apartment buildings. There are a few more retail developments as well, including the redevelopment of the old Eaton Centre into Edmonton City Centre. A project to develop what is now called "Railtown" on old CPR property came a cropper in 1994 on political, "activist" and union interference --- teaching city hall a hard lesson in the process --- but has finally taken off.

The City and civic-minded volunteer organizations have made strong efforts to preserve what little is left of Edmonton's historic buildings and neighbourhoods in order to keep a modicum of character in the central city. Tax abatements have helped provide incentives to restore and reuse older structures.

The City has decided to stop competing with its growing suburbs, choosing to market the capital region jointly with them. This has eliminated both the bad-mouthing of rivals and the beggar-thy-neighbour incentives and tax credits that never resulted in any net gain for the area. Under this new approach, the economy has started to improve. People without young families, for whom the pleasant but dull post-1970 residential developments, have little appeal, are now moving inwards. With no debt and raising taxes only in line with inflation, the City has given itself the gift of fiscal flexibility.

Edmonton has doled out subsidies and tax breaks on a per-unit basis for construction or redevelopment of buildings for residential use in the downtown core. This is gradually starting to have an impact. Downtown (east of 109 Street) is now livelier, with more entertainment and restaurants open and viable, but it is still mostly a ghost town after 5:30 p.m. and on weekends.

The absence of rent control – abolished 20 years ago -- is also a major consideration. Many new and refurbished residential buildings are rentals; they would not have been built as, or converted to, condominiums --- or would never have existed at all --- if rent control still was in force. While this redevelopment is slow, it seems at last and at least to have a solid base, not being artificially supported beyond a \$4,000 one-time per-unit subsidy. Changes to laws and the regulatory regime --- chiefly the reduction of zoning strictures --- have also spurred redevelopment and commercial activity.

Another helpful thing has been very accommodating rule changes to aid redevelopment and commercial activity, with few zoning strictures (after all, light industry, let alone heavy industry, is very unlikely to move in, given much better infrastructure and wider spaces available in the large, outer industrial parks here).

Edmonton has gradually been building a ring-road system that will conduct commuter and long-distance traffic around the city, thus relieving the congestion that produces noise and pollution, endangers pedestrians and cyclists and interrupts the ebb and flow of neighbourhood life.

In addition, the City has reversed its former policy of trying to make it as easy as possible to get to and through downtown, which only encouraged people to race through without staying. Many one-way streets and avenues have been made two-way again, and there is free-after-six metered parking once more on nearly every street. It may seem perverse but traffic jams downtown are a good sign, indicating that people want to be there. Central cities cannot and should not try to compete with car-oriented shopping and entertainment areas. Does anyone care that you cannot easily or cheaply drive or park a car in New York, London, Paris, Rome or Madrid?

Governments have perennially subsidized suburban blandness: long, high-capacity roads and every other kind of infrastructure is expensive on a per-resident basis in those low-density areas, sucking money away from the centres of cities. Without a viable centre a city will die. No businesses will relocate there: think of Detroit and Los Angeles. The latter, the second largest American city, hosts only two or three corporate headquarters. Four cities with the densest cores in the world --- Chicago, San Francisco, Vancouver and New York City --- boast a heavy concentration of corporate headquarters, other important economic engines, many resident professional people and a plethora of business and personal services and amenities. Despite traffic congestion and high living costs, they are considered particularly desirable places to live.

Among the most appealing aspects of European cities are walkability and their multitude of shops, services and historic sites, all accessible without a car. Many people in Europe and the larger North American cities do not even own one. If the automobile is simply not subsidized and motorists are not coddled, the rest - a more human and pleasant urban environment – will likely follow.

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Related reading

Frontier Centre Backgrounder - How Government Policy Hamstrings Downtown Revival

A profile of Winnipeg's Renaissance Man, Tom Dixon, and his experiences with redeveloping old buildings in Winnipeg.

(add link here)

Selected Policy Notes on Winnipeg City Reform -

http://www.fcpp.org/publications/policy_notes/hpg/winnipeg/w_index.html

add Tom Dixon backgrounder



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