

MAVERICK MENTALITY SHOULD EXTEND TO CITY ARCHITECTURE



DARREN KRAUSE
MANAGING EDITOR
METRO CALGARY
darren.krause@metronews.ca

Calgary is architecturally conflicted.

While we are entrepreneurial in spirit and often described as “maverick” by our Canadian peers, those characteristics aren’t often translated in our buildings and urban design. It appears, however, that we come by it honestly.

If you think the debate over urban sprawl, car-laden transportation planning, walkable communities, mixed-use neighbourhoods and dwellings are topics of the last decade, think again. The same goes for the dispute over grandiose architectural wonders, such as the much-maligned Peace Bridge.

Dream big, Calgary

We’ve become accustomed to the Brutalist design, bred from penny-pinching ways, or, as city architectural designer Dustin Couzens puts it, we’ve become accustomed to ‘buildings (of) the lowest common denominator’ instead of architecture.

As detailed in Stephanie White’s new book, *Unbuilt Calgary*, young Calgary architects such as Gordon Atkins and W.G. (Bill) Milne struggled to break free from, first, the post-Canadian Pacific Railway corporate colonialism, and, second, post-war suburbanism, where all things (mainly roads) led to the downtown core.

That was in the 1950s and ‘60s. Yet, 50 years later, Calgarians still struggle with the same juxtaposition: The desire to be unbridled innovators and free thinkers, industrious people who push the boundaries — mixed with a deeply rooted pragmatism and linear thinking likely born of our first days as an outpost, then CP Rail Western Canada hub and, now, oil-and-gas juggernaut.

Reading *Unbuilt Calgary*, I saw myriad urban dreams quashed by the thumb of economics. Calgary has had some big plans, from a huge civic centre bordering the waters of the Bow River to a pedestrian-friendly downtown.

In fairness, we have bits and pieces of these dreams. Stephen Avenue is pedestrian-friendly, 7th Avenue is transit-oriented and we did end up building the Calgary Tower. Some were due to planning; others, determination. But White says Calgary’s architectural history has often fallen victim to our vicious boom-and-bust cycle. Big dreams are doomed when money is scarce.

We’ve become accustomed to the Brutalist design, bred from penny-pinching ways, or, as city architectural designer Dustin Couzens puts it, we’ve become accustomed to “buildings (of) the lowest common denominator” instead of architecture.

Having lived in the Calgary area for the bulk of nearly four decades, I have experienced the exhilaration of growth and its accompanying pains. I’ve witnessed the discussions over major infrastructure investments and what some would consider “designer” dreams.

Remember, we’re mavericks. We’re innovators. We’re pioneers. But we’re also pragmatists. We’re modest. And we’re trained by our corporate legacy to think linear.

But at what point do we buck the latter and embrace the former, in architecture, as we do in business?

White points to other oil-and-gas cities across the globe, such as Dubai, United Arab Emirates and Baku, Azerbaijan, which enjoy a measure of opulence unseen in other world cities, but that’s not the Calgary way, she says.

“The city as a whole doesn’t like to throw money around unless it really knows what it’s going to get. That’s an inherently conservative position,” White says. “That maverick spirit sounds like we should be great gamblers with our buildings and open spaces, but we’re not.

“As Canadians, we don’t spend our money this way.”

She’s right — we don’t. But maybe we should reap what we sow once in a while.

We might need more Bow buildings, more Stephen Avenues and more Garrison Woods — and, yes, more Peace Bridges. Or maybe we need to think even bigger. Even better.

Perhaps it’s just maturity. We need to grow up as a city — dabble, if you will — with something that satisfies our more ostentatious whims and desires.

If we do that, maybe we’ll have fewer “unbuilts” and more buildings and spaces we can share with the world.



Calgary’s skyline could have had a decidedly different look had some of the proposed projects throughout its history been realized. A new book by author Stephanie White

THE WAY CALGARY

Unbuilt Calgary. New book looks at the city’s discarded architectural plans — and dreams

LISA WILTON
lisa.wilton@metronews.ca

Calgary would look like an entirely different city today if certain architectural and urban-planning projects had been realized.

In her new book, *Unbuilt Calgary*, Stephanie White examines 30 failed architecture and design plans and paints an extraordinary picture of what Calgary might have looked like had these ideas come to fruition.

Of the more ambitious plans that didn’t quite make it, the complete reworking of the area around city hall is possibly the most complex.

Though some of the elements were realized — the civic centre, performing-

arts centre and Olympic Plaza, for example — a huge atrium and shopping complex and “civic realm” on the east side of city hall were scrapped.

“It went to a referendum (in 1980) to see what Calgarians thought of it and they turned it down because it was going to cost so much,” says White, who spent a little more than a year researching and writing the book.

“I’m glad it didn’t quite happen. It was a bit monolithic.”

Though there are some interesting ideas in the book, White says most of these discarded plans didn’t get off the ground for good reasons.

“It wasn’t usually for esthetic reasons, it was usually down to economics,” she says.

“What it indicates is that there’s always a fragility to the economy in Calgary that makes people quite cautious in what they propose and really cautious in what they build.”



tracks 30 city projects that were never built. METRO FILE

BUILDING A BETTER CITY

Metro asked local architecture professionals to share their thoughts on Calgary's architectural and landscape designs

Metro: Describe Calgary's architecture.

Dustin Couzens, MoDA Architectural Collaborative: "Buildings' are often designed to the lowest common denominator (price, materials, etc.), utilitarian in their use and engagement with the public. 'Architecture,' on the other hand, endeavours to imbue built form with a sense of purpose and viscerally heighten the experience of

the everyday.

"With respect to the current state of architecture in Calgary, I would say that due to our conservative provincialism, our city continues to be dominated by 'buildings,' with only a few instances of 'architecture.'

"Thankfully, the up-and-coming generations are beginning to question the conservative status quo and asking if there is an alternative."

Metro: What do you like about Calgary's architecture?

Jeremy Sturgess, Sturgess Architecture:

"I like the fact that, in the past 10 years, the city has begun to embrace density and urbanism as a sustainable goal.

"I like that the city is investing in the public

realms, and in the realization that the pedestrian is the most important member of the transportation network.

"Also, we are no longer getting 'branch-plant architecture,' as we did in the old days. As a function of our growth as a financial capital, we are attracting far more sophisticated architecture."

Metro: What needs improving?

Trish Krause, Tricor Designs:

"Calgary's architecture is restricted by the City of Calgary Land-Use Bylaw and Communities.

"The city needs to get the planning and building department on the same page and staff needs to be trained properly.

"Our esteemed mayor (Naheed Nenshi) needs to start paying attention to this industry. He appears not to care about or understand the struggles of the construction industry due to the incompetence and continuous changes made by the planning department."

Peter Schulz, architectural design manager, Riddell Kurczaba Architecture:

"More cultural spaces, which lend themselves nicely to contemporary design, should be added to the city fabric.

"Examples would be a central modern library that connects to public life at street level, a new building for the Glenbow Museum, a new museum of contemporary art featuring international exhibits and perhaps even a modern museum of energy that keys on the history of Alberta oil and gas, innovations in exploration and operations and sustainability and alternative energies."

LISA WILTON/METRO



Calgary needs to embrace urbanism, many say. ROBSON FLETCHER/METRO

MIGHT HAVE BEEN



White knows first-hand how important a strong economy is to Calgary's architecture industry.

After attending univer-

sity in Winnipeg and London, England, she moved to Calgary in 1977, during the middle of an oil boom.

When the bubble burst, in 1982, White saw hundreds of architects leave the city to look for work elsewhere as new building developments dried up.

"Whole offices went from 200 people to 10," she recalls. "This boom-bust cycle has been Calgary's architectural story as well."

White says she didn't have many expectations

when she first started researching the book, but was fascinated by the number of century-old architectural ideas that made their way into more recent designs.

Although it didn't make it into Unbuilt Calgary, White was struck by the similarities between the 2009 aerial-view rendering of the East Village plan, by London-based firm Broadway Malyan, and 1912 landscape designs by Thomas Mawson.

Mawson was a British

landscape architect and city planner, who proposed several garden-oriented designs across Canada, including a pedestrian area near Centre Street downtown.

"It was full of walking spaces and squares and a long promenade along the river," White says.

"If you look at the East Village plans, it's lots of walking spaces, plazas and promenades along the river. We've waited a hundred years for this. We might get it now."