

Staples: A giant step to improve Edmonton's livability

By David Staples, edmontonjournal.com February 3, 2012



EDMONTON - Edmonton should be a more sensible city in the near future, a place where, for instance, all new subdivisions will be designed to work in a part of the world that has abundant snowfall as opposed to abundant palm trees. This new version of Edmonton will insist that neighbourhoods be built with sidewalks and boulevards. People will have a dedicated place to walk, lovely trees will line the roads, and there will also be a place to pile the snow in winter so it doesn't cost us millions to have to haul away the snow in our efforts to keep the traffic flowing.

There's been no architecture, landscape architecture or urban planning school in Edmonton since the 1930s. We are now the only major city in Canada that has not had one of the three, says Simon O'Byrne, Stantec's head of urban planning.

But that is about to change. The University of Alberta is starting a community planning program. The program begins next fall with four professors and 30 students, all of them working hard to master the creative art and difficult science of properly designing a city.

What exactly will these planners do?

"Planners design the world around us," says acting program director Robert Summers.

"They're like the architects for cities. They deal with all of these questions of development, such as where the LRT line should run or should we even have an LRT? Or should we build another ring road? What will be the impact of the new arena on the downtown? Is it something we should build or not? Should we build more development on the outskirts of town, or do more infill? The airport redevelopment? (They work on) all of these big questions, but also on a smaller scale, like how we should do our street-scaping, such as, should we have more boulevards to help us deal with snow removal?"

Several years ago, the 700-strong Alberta Professional Planning Institute approached the U of A to say Alberta's town, cities and companies were chronically short of planning professionals, who generally make \$80,00 to \$110,000 per year.

The City of Edmonton employs about 130 planners, while Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo has 120 positions, but chronic staff shortages. A seasoned veteran in the Wood Buffalo office is someone who has been there two years, O'Byrne says.

Community planners come here from outside the province, mainly from Ontario and B.C., but many only stick around a few years, get some experience and head home, O'Byrne says.

The planners who tend to stay are the ones who grew up here, then came home after getting their training elsewhere, he says. He himself grew up in Garneau, but had to go to Manitoba to get a masters in city planning.

Most of Alberta's planners are also baby boomers, who will be retiring soon and need replacing.

So this new program will help train workers. But will it help the rest of us?

"A city that aspires to be great, and a city of one million people in a greater region of two million, must have its own planning school," O'Byrne says.

"It's got its own issues, its own concerns, its own architectural vernacular, its own unique characteristics, and we need a school where we have researchers, academics and students who are thoughtful people asking questions about how we make this place better."

It is easy to make a great place in warm July, O'Byrne says. The challenge of doing the same in the winter requires five times the effort. But local people who have trained locally and are committed to the city will provide a boost. "We've got a vested stake in making sure Edmonton is a better place because we grew up here and we actually care about this place."

Says Summers: "We need to develop our own model here in Alberta, for northern cities to address those issues. ... It will help us get more of a local focus on things, as opposed to having to adapt and adopt ideas from elsewhere."

The U of A experts can critique the city planners and/or private developers on major issues, says Coun. Don Iveson, another advocate for the program. "I'm excited about raising the level of debate about urban design and urban development in Edmonton, and having an independent group studying these things will just add to the discussion. It will improve the quality of everyone's arguments."

"As individuals, as academics, we're free to give our honest opinions fully and freely," Summers says. "We're unencumbered by our positions, so we really can be an independent and relatively objective third party to provide opinions on such things as whether we have to bury the LRT line on Stony Plain Road or whether it's fine being on top of Stony Plain Road.

"It would simply be more voices on board, offering differing opinions. They may be conflicting opinions, but there's at least a sense they come from an independent party without self-interest in the process."

Of course, a planning program is just one step, and it will take years for its promise to be realized, for winter-friendly planners to be trained and to rise up in organizations. The public will also have to be convinced in new Edmonton-developed, Edmonton-specific town and city designs.

So this is just one step, but it's also a crucial one. We will need all the help we can get in rethinking, reworking and redeveloping this largely unwalkable city of insular streets and car-dependent neighbourhoods. Young planners and young pros with deep, local roots and wide-ranging new ideas will help show the way.

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