

Preface

This narrative represents an attempt to explain urban sprawl in Calgary in terms of stakeholder relationships, with the prime emphasis being on the City of Calgary and the various land developers. The focus is purely on residential development, with only minor attention being paid to commercial or industrial growth. Both deserve further academic attention, particularly the role played by the big regional shopping centres on sector planning and development.

This case study concentrates on Calgary. It makes no attempt to assign either singularity or congruence as compared with other Canadian cities, although it seems likely that similar patterns were followed elsewhere. Again the absence of related studies would seem to confirm a need for further study of what to me was a fascinating foray into the dynamics involving profit-motivated private enterprise on the one hand and the multi-faceted municipal public sector on the other.

Given their popular reputation, developers (and City Hall for that matter) loom as easy targets for polemical treatment. However, I was not interested in identifying “good guys and bad guys,” mainly because, in my opinion, legitimate historical inquiry is not about according blame. To assign unscrupulousness and notoriety to all developers is as unfair and ludicrous as to ascribe inefficiency and corruption universally to the City officials with whom they had to deal. What the discussion tries to show is how shared philosophies about the roles of the private and public domains played themselves out against different constraints. To the developers, proper practice lay in meeting the demands of the market and optimizing profits by building houses as quickly and efficiently as possible, and by doing all in their power to sway civic policy makers to the same end. To the City, the demands of the same market needed to be set against wider considerations that dealt with planning conformity and constraints, and infrastructure costs and feasibility. The dialogue between the two sought to achieve a utilitarian balance with respect to the same desired end. This study tries to explain the complexity of their debates from a historical perspective; why each party acted as it did; where each can be criticized; and what might have been.

Finally, a note about sources. The bulk of the research was conducted in the City of Calgary Archives and its fine collection of papers from the various City departments. The reader will note that oral accounts figure very sparsely in this narrative. Except for a few developers whom I consulted mostly for their insights and for practical questions, and former mayor Rod Sykes, whose extensive papers are housed in the University of Calgary Archives, I avoided the oral route. The reason had nothing to do with credibility but more about the fallibility of memory and my reluctance to accord finality to unverifiable statements made about events and sensitive issues that occurred more than 30 years ago. Thus I have chosen to let the written record speak for itself.

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December 2007