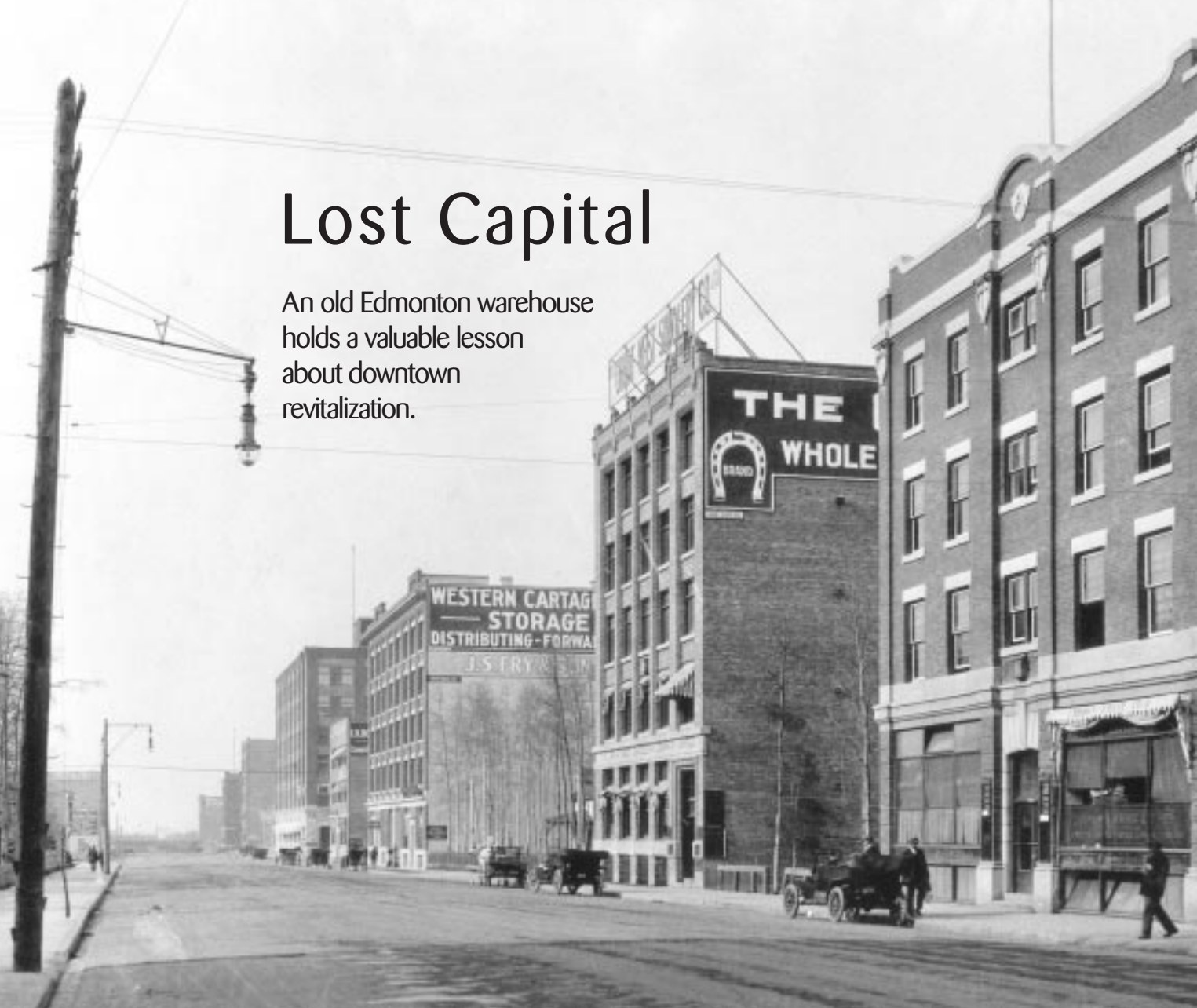


Lost Capital

An old Edmonton warehouse holds a valuable lesson about downtown revitalization.



By Christopher Wiebe

On November 20, 1999, more than 400 artists and art lovers gathered at Artopia: The Party, an art event celebrating the unique art and community being forged in the Phillips Building, an old warehouse in downtown Edmonton. Groups of people milled about in a large renovated space recently vacated by an architectural drawing firm. Multimedia and installation art were set up around the massive fir pillars which had been exposed and restored. Paintings and photo-art by artists in the building were hung along the pale yellow brick walls previously hidden beneath swathes of sixties office panelling. At intervals, various companies presented modern dance performances and dramatic readings.

One of them, Big Sky Theatre, put on a *tableau vivant*

version of their play *Heart of the Flower*. Anna Marie Sewell, who heads the aboriginal theatre company, says this work was particularly influenced by the other artists in the building: what began as a series of poems was then illustrated by another tenant, then dramatized for the stage. Finally, a version combining static actors with spoken word was performed at Artopia. Artists in the building commented on the community's stimulating atmosphere and how it incubated collaborative projects among the many emerging artists.

"The evening was very bohemian," recalls Todd Janes, executive director of Latitude 53 Gallery just down the street. "In one corner musicians were jamming and people dancing, and in others there were serious discussions going

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on about art.” The space showed off not just innovative work but the potential that lurked beneath the rest of the 1913 building’s shabbiness and neglect.

The partygoers had another reason to celebrate. Two months earlier, Midco Equities Ltd., manager of the half-empty building, had told tenants it was losing money and considering closing it down. Midco had responded favourably when the tenants offered to promote the building as a venue for art studios. Through their collective, Artopia, they’d managed to fill the building in short order. By the November party, more than 70 artists and arts groups—including visual artists, dancers, theatre companies, photo artists, writers and filmmakers—had set up a work space in the Phillips Building. Artopia: The Party became a celebration of their work and the continued future of the old building.

Downtown Edmonton has been pronounced “dead” in the popular imagination for the past 15 years: the doughnut hole of an otherwise apparently energetic city. Even the hotrods and Harleys that once paraded along Jasper Avenue on weekends have decamped across the river to Whyte Avenue in search of an audience. While the sources of the malaise are often readily apparent, their remedies are surprisingly complex. Downtown “renewal,” “revitalization” and “diversity” have long been buzzwords accompanied by the wringing of hands.

For Ken Johnson, senior city planner, “Edmonton’s downtown has a beautiful basic structure like a small town.” The commercial and civic core ranged around Churchill Square and the broad “main street” of Jasper Avenue neatly divides the warehouse district to the north from the MacKay Avenue residential area.

For more than 20 years, the warehouse district, with its expanses of undeveloped land and thin covering of older buildings, has been identified as an important hub for downtown revitalization. In particular, the 10 historic buildings along the three-block stretch of 104th Street are seen as the seeds of a “character area” in a downtown long considered sterile and alienating. Though located in this cluster of buildings, the Phillips Building was never historically designated.

The award-winning “Capital City Downtown Plan” of 1997 marked the street as a “heritage area,” and enacted a series of new policies, zoning changes and bylaw amendments. The pivotal policy in this bid to revitalize downtown is the Downtown Residential Reinvestment Program, which gives developers \$4,500 for each new housing unit. This program is currently fueling a mini-boom in downtown residential construction that has

seen 2,000 units built since its inception in 1997, a contrast with the 50 or so in the previous decade.

Johnson, the plan’s project manager, envisioned 104th Street as a “bridge” or “main street” (replacing lifeless Jasper Avenue) between the residential developments underway in the Warehouse district and the MacKay Avenue area—already home to 6,000 people. At ground level, the most obvious improvement was the “streetscape” in front of the Phillips Building. More than \$3-million was spent on benches, cast iron light standards, tile sidewalks, decorative planters and a long sculpture that partially disguised an immense surface parking lot.

The dozens of artists working in the old warehouse seemed to be just the thing the planners and politicians had been hoping for: a budding community promising life on the streets and a building which, if not postcard material, had the warmth and human scale desperately needed in much of downtown.

Less than a year after Artopia: The Party, Midco would receive a demolition permit for the Phillips Building and the tenants would be served with eviction notices. The empty building would sit for two months on the brink of becoming a surface parking lot, following the tenants’ unsuccessful appeal of the permit. At the end of October 2000, Worthington Properties Ltd. purchased the building for redevelopment as high-end loft apartments. The building reopened in November 2001, its façade restored and its interior parcelled into 41 suites (priced between \$115,000 and \$265,000), but the remarkable group of artists and commercial tenants who secured its survival are again scattered throughout the city.

The Phillips Building’s viability was determined by a bewildering array of forces: land values, demographics, the business market and culture, building codes, zoning, heritage building planning, insurance rates and property and income tax regimes. Like pilings or footings, these forces must bear the weight of a structure’s existence, or it crumbles.

When I began researching the Phillips Building, my chief interest was the building itself—the tenants were colourful extras. But the example of Winnipeg’s floundering warehouse district reminded me that a concentration of old buildings does not necessarily ensure vibrancy. While the preservation of the Phillips Building and other old buildings along 104th Street was a necessary first step, the uses to which they would be put were far more important to the area’s revitalization.

While the Phillips Building has been “saved” by a developer, was its rehabilitation as loft apartments really the



LARA HERR

The interior of the Phillips Building was the site of Artopia: The Party.

unalloyed success touted by local government and media? What can old buildings enable and what opportunities were lost with the Phillips Building's residential conversion? What do we mean when we say we want "diversity" in our urban neighbourhoods?

In her 1961 classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs persuasively argues that the "need for aged buildings" is so great that "it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them." These older buildings are not "museum-buildings" but less conspicuous ones, often in need of repair. Their inexpensive spaces can host a broad spectrum of small businesses and organizations who could neither afford space in a newer building nor gather the capital to build one of their own, but whose presence adds immeasurably to a neighbourhood.

The old buildings Jacobs lauds, however, cannot go on functioning indefinitely in a state of benign neglect. At some point they either have to be repaired or torn down. Sadly, the select few rehabilitated as "historic" buildings suddenly become premium space, all but shutting out

those who made use of them during their years of decline.

Downtown Edmonton circumvented this by eliminating much of its older building stock, beginning with the grand, social-engineering inspired visions of the 1960s and the office tower craze of the 1970s, to which many venerable public buildings succumbed. The almost total elimination of street-level retail around Jasper Avenue by the mid-1980s was particularly damaging. The scar tissue of Edmonton's decades of poor decision-making is visible downtown in the vacant sidewalks and cratered gravel parking lots beyond the garrison of bland office towers.

Meanwhile, on Edmonton's south side, historic Whyte Avenue—and Old Strathcona as a whole—staged a daring, community-driven reinvention of itself and flourished in the face of suburban shopping malls. The area benefited from an organic shift in the roles of its many older buildings, as it turned from an object of pity to one of the best retail areas in the province. These buildings offered low rents at first, allowing small businesses to take root; then, with the rising fortunes of the area, the buildings were historically refurbished. In addition, the area wisely reinforced the sense of place provided by its vintage architecture by cultivating such appropriate usage as cultural venues and a farmers' market.

Many caution against easy comparisons between Old Strathcona and 104th Street. Whyte Avenue had always been a "main street," with a history of retail dating back to the 1890s. 104th Street was built as a warehouse district, threaded with spur lines for freight and interspersed with wood frame houses into the 1970s. In the 1950s and '60s, warehousing moved to the city's periphery, and the street became an office area and thriving fashion district, complete with tailor shops. By the late 1970s, 104th Street was gracefully referred to in planning literature as in a "state of transition," marked by high vacancy rates.

Midco Equities Ltd., owned by Bill Comrie of the Brick Warehouse furniture and appliance chain, purchased the Phillips Building and adjacent parking lot in 1981 for \$6-million, intending to erect a 25-storey office tower. The block was zoned as part of the commercial core, with the highest FAR in the city. (The Floor Area Ratio determines the maximum height and density of a building according to the plot of land it sits on).

"With a high FAR," says Ken Johnson, "you get a lot of people holding out for a high-rise and not going with a low or medium density building. So you have everyone holding out, and it kills everything." It was politically impossible to reduce the FAR in the 1997 Downtown Plan. So the plan's project staff removed a substantial disincentive by eliminating the parking requirements for new residential development along 104th Street to zero.

Six months after Midco secured the building, the "irrational exuberance" of the oil boom dwindled to recession, and office tower plans were put on hold. Still useable, the Phillips Building was rented as office space. By doing only

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basic maintenance rather than substantial repairs on the building, Midco benefited from its steadily depreciating worth on business and property taxes.

By the time Don Bouzek moved into the building in the summer of 1997, Midco's basic maintenance policy was plain to see. There was a retail furrier and a tailor shop on the ground floor, the architectural drawing firm on the second, and a coin and stamp shop on the fifth. The rest of the five-storey building was a warren of vacant space and irregularly sized, yet practical, art studios. "My space was totally raw," Bouzek explains. "I spent two months getting it workable. But that was the deal: I took it as is." The huge, 3,500-square-foot space, for the "low, low price" of \$300 a month, was ideal for his work as a theatre artist and video producer.

Midco's shift to 30-day leases in the summer of 1999 forced the architectural drawing firm, an anchor tenant, to look for space elsewhere, thus threatening the financial viability of the building. It was at this point that the Artopia group formed and set about filling the building with artists. When the tailor shop's five-year lease wasn't renewed in May 2000, the owners were free of their last contractual obligation. Midco management met with the tenants on July 5 and presented a set of building costs that showed they were losing between \$15,000 and \$20,000 a year; in addition, the roof was leaking, the wiring and elevators required inspection and the boiler system needed \$450,000 in repairs. The boiler would have to be fired at the end of September; if money couldn't be found for repair, the building would have to come down. Midco had taken out a demolition permit either way.

Bouzek reasons Midco wanted to see what support the building's artists could drum up from the government and arts organizations. "It was pure and total business for Midco: if money came from government subsidies for the arts, fine; if it came from turning it into a parking lot, that was fine too." When I contacted Midco for this article, vice-president Craig Styles was cryptic about the company's interests and motives, saying simply, "We're a property holding company, not a developer." Clearly impatient, he told me the fuss around the Phillips Building was now "water under the bridge," a closed book.

On July 18, a second meeting between tenants and management was attended by Michael Phair, city councillor; John Mahon, executive director of the Edmonton Arts Council; and Marianne Fedori, president of the Alberta Historical Society. At that meeting, Phair said that while the city supported the idea of more art space downtown, it wouldn't cover Midco's upkeep of its property. Another

possible avenue of support was the non-profit Arts Habitat Association of Edmonton, on whose board Mahon sat. The association had recently struggled to raise money for a small art studio/residence project two blocks away. According to Mahon, a similar conversion of the Phillips Building would be beyond the association's means.

For her part, Marianne Fedori told Midco that the Phillips Building had historic value but that the money they could anticipate from municipal historic designation would be for façade restoration, not basic maintenance. But where had this "historic value" come from so suddenly? Why had the building not been on the city's heritage lists all along? The reasons can be traced to the origins of the heritage preservation movement in Edmonton and across Canada.

Canada's centennial was, paradoxically, a time when government and planners were focused on the future at the expense of the past. The 1967 "Urban Renewal Concept Report" on Edmonton's central business district features on its cover a bulldozer dramatically cresting the rubble of urban blight. The document mentions only five "interesting structures" in the downtown area (just two "worthy of retention"), offering the following explanation: "a frontier prairie town's style of architecture was one of improvisation and expediency rather than glamour and structural excellence."

Given these circumstances, advocates for old buildings in the 1970s were obliged to lend themselves the credibility of a selection process or risk being branded "hysterical preservationists." Heritage groups needed an "objective" process, a rigorous methodology whereby the emotional terrain of the "landmark" could be rendered numerically and aesthetically. Edmonton's 1982 list of heritage buildings reflects this attitude, placing emphasis on architectural distinctiveness or association with a significant person or event. Only a small part of the evaluative equation considered a building's contribution to its immediate context.

The Phillips Building had been left off the 1982 list and 1995 Register of Historic Resources for the simple reason that it didn't look old. Consultants had concluded that its 1960s façade of metal cladding, marble and beige stone had irrevocably damaged the original surface underneath, making it too costly to restore. Its warehouse interior had also been diminished by its partitioning into offices.

Inclusion on the register may not have guaranteed a smoother ride for the Phillips Building anyway. On October 27, 2000, crews began demolishing one of the 440 buildings on the register. The MacFarland Building, around the corner from the Phillips, was on the "B" List, which meant its



Then: The Phillips Building, c1914, formerly called the Purcell and Foote Building.

demolition did not have to be approved by city council. Current heritage planner Robert Geldart explains that the register acts as an inventory, raising awareness about certain buildings, but providing only limited protection. “Historic Designation” provides serious protection from demolition and inappropriate alterations, in turn making available funding and tax rebates. Designation requires the building owner’s participation, however, and as many find its terms unacceptably intrusive, few seek it.

According to Marianne Fedori, Edmonton has the strongest heritage planning policy in Canada, and yet its effectiveness is consistently undermined by lack of political will. City council’s spirit of compromise with business and its desire for citizens to “see their tax dollars at work” has led to an overemphasis on the protection of a historic building’s façade or, at worst, “architectural elements” from it. In 1995, council found itself in an absurd debate over whether

the façade of the Metals Building Annex (across the street from the Phillips Building) should be preserved while the rest of the building gave way to a surface parking lot. “Façades are a way of putting up a front to say to people ‘we care about heritage,’” says Lawrence Herzog. “They are baubles for a forsaken past.” This lack of respect for its own heritage bylaws (characterized by the occasional “delisting” of designated buildings—most spectacularly the Rossdale Powerplant) led to the stormy resignation of heritage planner Murray Miller in 1999. A few months later, Herzog resigned from the Historic Resources Review Panel, along with two other members, after a city councillor told him, “Advisory bodies are there to be ignored.”

In order to demolish a building, a demolition permit must first be obtained from the city’s Planning and Development department. On June 29, Midco received

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this permit, more than two weeks before the tenants discovered they could appeal it. The problem is that appeals have to be made within 14 days of the issuance of the permit, yet neither the city nor the building owner is required to publicize it. “It really is a Catch-22,” says Bouzek. “You have to appeal something you don’t know about within a set period of time.” Though the tenants’ appeal was filed late, on July 19, the city agreed to accept it and bring it before the Subdivision and Development Appeal Board on August 17.

When the Phillips Building tenants received their eviction notices at the end of July, they didn’t just wait for the appeal process to take its course, they held a news conference. It garnered widespread coverage in local press and radio, including disclosure that multimillionaire and sometime Edmonton-booster Bill Comrie was its owner. At the appeal hearing, Midco’s lawyer cited another case where a developer had sued the same development committee for hearing a late appeal and revoking a demolition permit. The committee deliberated but, rather than face a costly lawsuit, decided to strike the appeal off the agenda.

Dan White, president of Worthington Properties Ltd., became interested in the beleaguered Phillips Building when he read about its imminent demolition in the newspaper. “I have a personal interest in heritage buildings,” he explains. “I have experience with them, and I’m prepared to deal with the hassles.” He cites the Downtown Residential Reinvestment Program and the streetscape improvements as “significant factors” in his decision to rehabilitate the building. His company began talking to Midco Equities in August 2000 and only concluded the sale in late October, following protracted negotiations. Not long after, he sought heritage designation for the building, and city council eventually approved \$250,000 to restore its façade.

I met White at the Phillips Building in March, entering through a back door off the alley. Sealed garbage bags full of asbestos-laden office panelling sat off to one side. A large industrial heater blasted warm air into the gutted building, which was awaiting new mechanical systems. In most warehouse conversions, White explains, the basic shell is really the only reusable part. He predicts a general shift in the development community as they see that these kinds of buildings can be profitable. We take an elevator up to the fifth floor, where he shows me a freshly varnished patch of original oak flooring. “Structurally, this place is absolutely solid,” White says as he pats one of the huge, rough fir posts that punctuate the space.

“Revitalization” is hard to come by, because it requires the collective imagination of a whole host of players to tease potential out of what appears stagnant or moribund.

The vacant MacFarland Building had no constituency to advocate on its behalf and quietly disappeared. Michael Phair has no doubt about who saved the Phillips Building: “I’m convinced that, if it were not for the people working there, it would be a parking lot now.” Similarly, Old Strathcona was rescued by a community mobilized in opposition to a specific threat: a massive freeway that promised to obliterate much of the neighbourhood. The plan had thrown the area into limbo, with building owners understandably reluctant to repair buildings that would soon be torn down.

The transformation of Old Strathcona grew out of a 1971 urban geography course taught by Gerald Wright in the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Extension. At course’s end, a group of students organized an open-house consultation with Old Strathcona residents, exploring the future of the area. It was met with widespread enthusiasm. The Strathcona Historical Group formed shortly thereafter and



Now: The Phillips Building, 2001.

CHRISTOPHER WIEBE

The flaw at the heart of heritage planning is that its concerns are limited to preserving a building for the community as an empty vessel, as an object.

began developing alternatives to the freeway project with the help of a small grant from the city. “There was a humanness about the process of bringing it together,” recalls Gordon Thorkelsson, a founding member of the group and then-president of the South Edmonton Business Association. “It was a mixture of economics and socialism.” In 1974, the community-based Old Strathcona Foundation was established with funding from foundations and all three levels of government. It subsequently oversaw protection of the area’s older buildings, reuse and development controls, design guidelines and a concerted infrastructure and streetscape program.

Though 104th Street has many of the same elements in place—tangible interest from the city, sensitive zoning and bylaws, design guidelines for sympathetic infill, and the support of the Downtown Business Association—it doesn’t have the same level of community-driven vision. Although the recent formation of the Downtown Edmonton Community Association has gone some way toward filling this gap, it has, as yet, little of Old Strathcona’s depth and cohesion to draw on. The warehouse district will continue to be represented by the interests of property owners and businesses for the foreseeable future.

In this respect, the conversion of the Phillips Building into lofts is a partial failure that foreshadows more to come. The Downtown Business Association has little more than a formulaic vision for 104th Street, imagining a Klondike-theme bar strip with gift shops selling “traditional Alberta products” for the tourism and convention crowd, perhaps with “funky artists” as a bonus. “It depends on what the market sees as the opportunity,” says executive director Peter Mercer. “The public sector doesn’t have the investments.” He believes the street will follow the path of Whyte Avenue: an “anchor” will come in, creating an atmosphere, and other businesses will then go in and “clone” it.

Mercer’s version of Old Strathcona development, of course, is revisionist history. The district’s success was grounded upon the cultural and social amenities put in place at the beginning: an art house cinema, a live community theatre that attracted others, a farmers’ market and a sense of community participation. In the floors above the shops were publishing houses, film production companies and professional offices. Whyte Avenue is more than just an interesting destination with trendy cafés in old buildings—it is a community’s “main street,” a dynamic space that generates an attractive atmosphere. Its primary market is the surrounding community, not the transitory interests of tourists.

The preservation of old buildings, then, is not an end in itself. The flaw at the heart of heritage planning is that its concerns are limited to preserving a building for the com-

munity as an empty vessel, as an object. Old buildings, even a concentration of them, do not in themselves guarantee diversity; they can embody it, intensifying an area’s distinctive character, but they ultimately take a subordinate role. What they can provide is an opportunity for reflection, for choices, because redevelopment demands greater creativity than new construction. Old buildings give communities a unique opportunity to fundamentally shape urban spaces normally dominated by private interests. Essentially devalued and discarded by the market, the run-down buildings of Old Strathcona gave its community the chance to paint with a wide brush. Old buildings need to be recognized as powerful instruments for change in our urban areas, not merely precarious “treasures” or guilty totems of our all-too-disposable “heritage.”

Many former tenants of the Phillips Building regret the fact that an arts community that grew out of necessity and began to show such promise, ended so abruptly. “The theatre world is quite insular,” says Heather Inglis, producer for Theatre Yes. “When we moved into the Phillips Building, we began working with visual artists. There were the seeds of things there.” Bouzek sadly agrees: “You could walk out of your studio when you were working on a creative problem and talk to another artist, get feedback. I miss that dialogue, that sense of community, enormously now.”

If 104th Street is to be the “gathering place” city planning suggests, it has to foster the “diversity” that the tenants of the Phillips Building brought to the area, and which the Latitude 53 and SNAP galleries continue to provide. The City’s oft-stated “encouragement” of artists and arts groups to locate in heritage buildings downtown needs to be supported by financial incentives like those which have proven so successful for residential development. Artists, who often spend more time in their studios than at home, can be an important part of bringing downtown back to life. For stable and enduring revitalization to take root in downtown Edmonton, city politicians and planners will have to undertake bold initiatives that reconcile business with social interests, bringing together the visions of all of the area’s constituencies. It will require engaged and passionate voices like those in the Phillips Building who briefly forged a community in a redundant warehouse.

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