

SEE Magazine

Issue #403: August 23, 2001

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News

by Andrew Hanon

Attractive young women greet you at the door. One asks for your signature in the guest book, while another hands you a name tag and points you in the direction of the staircase, where a third elegantly-dressed beauty guides you to the second floor. As you ascend the staircase, jazz rings off the stark, brick walls.

On the second floor, dozens of well-heeled potential clients are mingling. An ensemble plays in the corner, while some guests help themselves to finger sandwiches at a sumptuous buffet. A white sheet is hung from a beam to act as a screen for a slide show depicting elegant urban living. It looks like a typical afterhours mixer at any professional office in any corner of downtown Edmonton, except for one thing: this one is in a warehouse. Businesspeople in imported suits stand in small groups, sipping from glasses, apparently oblivious to the cumbersome construction hats perched on their heads. Parts of the sprawling room are off-limits because there's no floor, while gaping holes jack-hammered into walls give it a slightly bombed-out look. The incongruity of the scene borders on surreal.

From time to time, one of the many ominipresent hosts escorts a small group of guests to other floors, which are equally spartan. They ask them not to look at what is, but to imagine what will be.

'The place to be'

Scenes like this are becoming increasingly common in Edmonton's downtown core. Developers are selecting potential buyers, inviting them to "hard-hat parties" and offering them the opportunity to get in on the ground floor of the latest housing trend in the city: downtown lofts. They're re-developing empty commercial and warehouse buildings into condominiums. And they're selling like mad.

One case in particular, the Phillips Lofts project at 10169 – 104 St., has sold nearly a third of its 39 lofts, without even so much as a show suite.

"It's all been very low-key," said Helen Song of Worthington Properties, the company behind Phillips Lofts. "People are coming to us and asking about the project. Clearly people are ready for this kind of lifestyle in Edmonton."

Denis Liboiron couldn't agree more. He and his partner recently decided to leave the Old Strathcona area and head downtown to a \$270,000 penthouse loft. "We just feel that in three to five years, downtown will be the place to be."

Pieces to the puzzle

Officials at City Hall are convinced that after decades of stagnation, the city's moribund downtown core is on the verge of a breakthrough. In 1997, the city launched its ambitious Downtown Plan, one of the lynchpins of which was the call to get more people living there. At the time, only 6,000 people lived in the areas bounded by 97 Street, 109 Street, 100 Avenue and 106 Avenue, while 60,000 commuted into the downtown core from outlying areas every day.

One of the incentives the city used was the promise to subsidize the first 1,000 new residential units, to the tune of \$4,500 per unit. As it stands now, 984 units are either planned or built. This, they hope, will be the critical mass that will start drawing retail shops back to the city centre.

"Every time someone moves into the downtown area, that's one more piece to the puzzle," said Larry Benowski, the general manager of Edmonton's planning department. It's been an intricate puzzle to assemble, the biggest problem being: how do you get people to move into a neighbourhood with few conveniences such as grocery and hardware stores? And if you can't get people to move there, how can you convince retailers to set up shop in a neighbourhood with no customers?

The answer was Railtown, a suburban-style development just west of 109 Street, where new buildings for empty-nesters and shops went up at the same time. Now there are retailers such as Save-On Foods and Future Shop within walking distance of the downtown core. That development, city officials say, has opened the door for the loft development now going on in the core.

While Benowski would love to have city planners accept all the credit for finally coming up with a successful plan to breathe life back into the downtown, he acknowledges that the single greatest driver is Edmonton's red-hot economy, the fastest-growing in the country.

"Our plan just came out as things really got going up north," he explained.

However, Benowski hopes the downtown plan will help insulate the area from the ravages of economic downturns by encouraging as much diversity – both economic and social – as possible. In the past the peaks and valleys of the oil industry have seriously affected prosperity in the area, while in the 1990s downtown Edmonton was sucker-punched with austerity measures imposed by the Klein government. As the Tories began slashing government jobs in an effort to balance the provincial budget, office spaces

began clearing out in the capital city. But with the oil boom which began in the late 1990s, Benowski said, the downtown has finally recovered from government cutbacks and now city officials hope to buffer against such blows by ensuring the economy isn't as dependent on any one industry or employer.

At the same time, officials are encouraging development which allows as broad a mix of people as possible. While swanky lofts, which appeal to upscale yuppies, might be the most visible, the plan also encourages developers to refurbish old commercial buildings for low-income housing. One such project is the MacDonald building near the Baccarat Casino, which Worthington redeveloped and now manages. Song said such projects are considered good, long-term investments because of the rental income.

The next step in the plan is to encourage more development (known as "infill") in the empty industrial land around the core, particularly to the north. Historically, the areas surrounding North American downtowns have been populated by recent immigrants, producing neighbourhoods such as Little Italy and Chinatown. City hall is studying the catalysts of such phenomena to see if it can be repeated in the 21st century.

But while Benowski is hopeful Edmontonians will soon sense a surge in the downtown core's pulse as more people make it their home neighbourhood, he was careful to point out that it won't happen overnight. He pointed out that with such improvements as the creation of the arts district, things are already better than they were a few years ago. .

"It took time to get this way. It'll take time to get it back."

In terms of residential redevelopment in the downtown, the plum is still there for the picking.

For nearly two decades the old federal building, a colossal structure just north of the provincial legislature on 101 Street, has sat vacant. The province acquired it in a land swap with the feds, who moved into new offices in Canada Place across from the Shaw Conference Centre on Jasper Avenue. Since then the old building has sat empty.

David Bray, spokesman for Alberta Lands, which manages all government-owned property, said over the years a few developers have approached the government with plans to buy it and turn the building into condominiums, but nothing has come of them. Right now, he said, no one appears interested.

City officials have tagged the federal building the plum of old buildings in the downtown core. It's large, structurally solid and would offer buyers a spectacular view of the river valley.

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