

Project Calgary: East Village a lab for ideas on walkability

BY TONY SESKUS, CALGARY HERALD OCTOBER 14, 2011

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The corner of 5th Street and 8th Avenue S.E. in the East Village is considered one of the best examples of pedestrian-friendly design in Calgary, with wide sidewalks, benches and greenery.

Photograph by: Gavin Young, Calgary Herald

CALGARY — Not so long ago a stroll through Calgary's East Village could be a pretty grim hike.

Crumbling sidewalks, dimly lit pathways, poorly marked crosswalks and shadowy streets — they all contributed to the pitfalls that awaited visitors.

Combined with the criminal activity once so pervasive in the neighbourhood and you had all the makings of a no-go zone for most Calgarians.

So when the city decided to overhaul the neighbourhood on City Hall's east side, thousands of hours were devoted to making it a place people would actually want to explore on foot.

Today, the neighbourhood showcases some of the clever strategies that go into making walkable communities, from the positioning of mailboxes to elevated intersections to the addition of urban braille.

"Walkability was a big key in just about everything we did," says Chris Ollenberger, who led redevelopment of the area when in charge of Calgary Municipal Land Corp.

"It's a grand experiment box, but there are so many elements here that you can take some of them now and take the lessons learned and import them somewhere else," adds Ollenberger, now an executive with Opus Corp., a commercial mixed-use development company.

But experts say there are also small steps citizens can take in every community that will make a difference for pedestrians, too, even if it's just shovelling the sidewalk.

"When we can walk around in our community, we often can increase our overall sense of belonging to that area," explains Angela Torry, education co-ordinator with the Alberta Centre for Active Living.

In East Village, one of the best places to see the science of walkability in practice is at the busy corner of 5th Street and 8th Avenue S.E.

Across from a loft-style condo building is a large seniors' complex. On the opposite corner is a pharmacy and a food store — valuable amenities for residents to have nearby.

The sidewalks are so wide that two groups can pass each other without having to step into the road.

Street furniture — recycling bins, bike racks, newspaper boxes, benches — are aligned to one side so walkers don't have to dodge them.

Street lights also illuminate the sidewalk, unlike so many others downtown that only light the road for motorists. They're also spaced to avoid dark pools of shadows.

And as the intersection approaches, the street narrows to 6.1 metres — the minimum allowed in Alberta — to help slow driver speeds.

The road rises into the intersection, lifting pedestrians into view. There isn't a step-down curb, making it easy for seniors to use with walkers.

"This is one of Calgary's only raised intersections to this point, but I think you'll see more," Ollenberger says.

The junction also employs "urban braille" for pedestrians, particularly those who are visually impaired.

Short, black posts with reflective tape mark the arrival of the intersection. Sidewalk tiles close to the street are dark in colour. And those tiles nearest the road are studded with small bumps alerting walkers to the intersection's edge.

All of it is designed to an international standard that guide dogs would also recognize.

Walkability in East Village was identified as key to its future, but it wasn't just for its "feel-good" factor. It was part of the business strategy to attract the market that wanted to be able to walk to work, walk to the shops and other things, too.

"Would you be able to put in that kind of intensity of effort into a curvilinear subdivision and economically see it work? I would say no," Ollenberger says.

"But in a concentrated area of 12-square blocks, in which you are intending on bringing over 8,000 people, it makes total sense. It's part of the package that makes the overall East Village more desirable for those consumers."

But he sees applications for other parts of the city, too.

Pointing to wide roads in some neighbourhoods, he says sidewalks can be widened and roads narrowed, slowing down traffic.

Creating public spaces that people want to gather in also offers opportunities. An old gas station site, for example, could be used for a mixed-use project, a small park or community gardens.

"There's a number of different things that can be done with them depending on the size and location," Ollenberger adds.

There are also simple things people can also do to help make their neighbourhood more walkable, says Torry at the Alberta Centre for Active Living in Edmonton.

It can be something as simple as shovelling your walk or trimming a hedge so people don't have to navigate any obstacles.

"Say a mom is pushing a stroller with her kids and there's a gigantic hedge growing there (and) now she has to go on the road," Torry says. "It's a big deterrent and it discourages her from walking."

By driving slowly in their own community, residents can be "moving" speed bumps that helps to slow down traffic, she says.

People can also let the city know when sidewalks are in poor repair and require fixing, she says.

Longer walk signals at traffic lights are also helpful, but not expensive. And signage that shows potential walking destinations and distances might also encourage people to hike places, Torry says.

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