

# New life for Victoria Crossing

## Inner-city communities waking up

**Grady Semmens**

Calgary Herald

*Monday, March 03, 2003*

If the towering glass-and-steel skyscrapers of downtown are the heart of Calgary, where is its soul?

Is it the palatial homes and cul-de-sacs of the suburbs? How about the city's parks and river valleys?

Or is it the diverse collection of warehouses, homes and businesses in what have traditionally been labelled the poverty and crime-ridden neighbourhoods lining the south edge of downtown?

While it will likely depend on where you reside, if you're one of the thousands of people who have chosen to live, work and play in Victoria Park, there's no question about what your answer will be.

And anyone who has wandered through the streets of this Beltline community lately may be tempted to agree, after taking a look at the transformation underway in one of the oldest communities in Cowtown.

"I like to think of this area as a diamond in the rough," says Eileen Stan, executive director of the Victoria Crossing Business Revitalization Zone.

"What's happening down here is really exciting. It's got an enormous amount of

potential and if it's developed correctly, it's the place where Calgary can become a serious urban city."

Long known for its reputation of drugs, prostitution and other symptoms of urban decay, the neighbourhood east of 4th Street S.W. to the Elbow River, and between the CPR tracks and 17th Avenue S., is rapidly transforming into an attractive location for residents and businesses looking for inner-city atmosphere.

With plenty of vacant land still available and a wide selection of historic buildings begging for renovation, developers and city planners are waking up to the possibility of regenerating the area while trying to retain the variety that makes it unique.

It makes for an exciting time for those who took a leap of faith when they moved in years ago, seeking an alternative to suburban life.



**Margaret Lounds**



**CREDIT: Grant Black, Calgary Herald**

**Eileen Stan of the Victoria Crossing Business Revitalization Zone.**

"There are so many things I love about living here and it's getting better all the time," said Margaret Lounds, who has lived in a loft apartment in the Lewis Stationary building on 11th Avenue and 2nd Street S.W. since the building was converted to condominiums in 1995.

Lounds, 59, purchased her loft after raising a family in suburban Glendale.

"It's the juxtaposition of old and new. It's the fact that I can walk out my door and there are bookshops, thrift stores and upscale clothing stores, a library, the performing arts centre, the river and the Saddledome," she said.

"I wanted a place where I could stay until I'm 80. Where I'm close to everything and don't need to rely on a car to get around or worry about shovelling snow or cutting the grass."

A short stroll around Lounds' neighbourhood illustrates what she's talking about.

Beginning at the landscaped gardens of Central Memorial Park, which will be the subject of a \$10,000-rejuvenation plan later this year, we pass the historic, sandstone Memorial Park Library, near 12th Avenue and 2nd Street, where IBM Canada chose to locate its new headquarters in a sleek, silver "campus-style" building.

Heading east along 12th Avenue, we pass the YWCA's original Calgary location, which houses a fitness centre and the offices for outreach groups.

Next is a strip of restaurants and bars that have sprouted up along 1st Street S.W. in recent years, along with numerous stores, including O'Connor's clothing store, which relocated into a new brick building last year after decades in the downtown.

Moving one block east, we pay a visit to an office building on the southeast corner of 12th Avenue and Centre Street S., where the Calgary-based Kahanoff Foundation is converting an entire floor into a conference centre and subsidized office space for local non-profit agencies.

Back out on Centre Street is a reminder of the challenges facing Victoria Park regarding poverty and crime.

Prostitutes linger on the corners, while men wearing work boots gather every morning at "cash corner" in hope of being picked for a day of casual labour.

Homeless people, meanwhile, mingle outside the Mustard Seed Street Ministry, which recently expanded into another building in the 1000 block.

The land formerly occupied by the Co-op store, at 123 11th Ave. S.E., sits vacant as the City of Calgary continues to negotiate with the provincial government for money to build an educational and housing facility for low-income Calgarians.

Rob Taylor, who helped spearhead a city-sponsored study on the future of the West Victoria Park and Connaught communities, said caring for the area's less fortunate is an important component of redevelopment plans.

"Social displacement doesn't work," said Taylor, president of the Connaught Community Association, which is in negotiations to amalgamate with the Victoria Park Community Association.

"We know the buck stops here when it comes to issues like drugs and prostitution, and we're the people who have to address them, not just NIMBY them."

Area Ald. Madeleine King agrees.

"A constant challenge is inclusivity. We need programs for those who are having a tough time, while also making it a successful business area," said King.

With a similar study planned for East Victoria Park later this year, King said the Victoria Crossing communities are working with the city and private sector to revitalize their areas, with positive results.

"I don't think the success so far has brought more challenges. If anything, it has reduced them," King said.

"We have more people on the streets, which reduces crime and make it easier to get police help."

Continuing the tour, we enter the Warehouse District, where several old warehouses have been converted to hi-tech office buildings that have attracted software information technology tenants, and sturdy brick structures have been turned into restaurants.

The latest such renovation is occurring on the upper floors of the warehouse occupied by the Ribtor outdoor equipment store, at 318 11th Ave. S.E.

An engineering firm is scheduled to move next month into the second and third floors of the building, owned by Joel Lipkind's family for 34 years.

"This is something I've had in the back of my mind for a long time and now the time seems to be right," said Lipkind, referring to his decision to invest in renovating the building.

"People have asked me many times if I'm going to move Ribtor out and the answer is: No," Lipkind said.

"I believe having retail in the area is very important here. A good community has a mix of uses -- office, stores and homes. It's like the old style of neighbourhood where people can live and work in the same community."

Doubling back, we head south along 1st Street S.E. to the expansive city-owned gravel parking lot slated for a \$180-million commercial, residential and hotel development to be called Stampede Station. The project comes before the planning commission on Thursday.

Across the street, we stop by the European-inspired headquarters of Bernard Callebaut Chocolaterie before walking west on 14th Avenue, past several new condominium projects, to Haultain Park, where the city's first sandstone school has recently been converted into the offices of the Calgary Parks Foundation.

From there, it's back to Central Memorial Park where the tour began.

"That's why we call this the soul of Calgary," said Stan, referring to the BRZ's new marketing campaign aimed at attracting more businesses and residents to the area.

"We think it can be a model urban community for Calgary."

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