

Case-in-Point 2018

Planning a Future for Dead Malls: Learning from the Experience of Edmonton's Century Park



(Image Credit: ProCura)

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Abstract

The demise of a shopping mall represents an opportunity to reshape the urban fabric and create an urban milieu in typically suburban settings. Forward-thinking proposals may include mixed residential and commercial uses, aimed at creating an integrated complete community where past practices have strictly separated land uses. The value of a large intact redevelopment site illustrates the need for a comprehensive and forward-thinking plan to guide development. The plan should seek to include land uses that are logical additions to the area and encourage appropriate mixed uses.

The Century Park development in Edmonton is an example of a mall redevelopment that proposes creating transit-oriented development and a complete community. Built on the site of the short-lived Heritage Mall, the development was proposed in the early 2000s after the mall's closure. The City of Edmonton, placing a priority on transit-oriented development and seeing the site's potential, fast-tracked the South LRT expansion that would connect the development with the Downtown area and other parts of the city. Today, after having been stalled by a real estate market downturn and the developer having revised its vision for the land, the development of Century Park is being restarted with a focus on rental housing.

Background

The Century Park development site, located in south Edmonton at the intersection of 23 Avenue NW and 111 Street, was originally developed in the early 1980s as the site of a shopping mall. Opening in 1982, Heritage Mall was built to serve new and future suburban developments in Edmonton's south end during a period of booming growth due to high oil prices (Carlson, 2006). While the mall was well patronized in the years following its opening, several factors conspired to cause its downfall and eventual closure just 20 years after opening. The first, and arguably most important, factor was the sudden crash in oil prices that started in 1986 and only truly ended in the new millennium. This crash altered Edmonton's previously inflated long-term growth projections and stalled much of the development that the mall was expected to serve. The second, and still very important, factor was the turmoil experienced by the retail industry in the 1990s. This decade saw many shakeups, including mergers, closures, and the rise of big-box retail, that affected the mall's anchor retailers and caused many vacancies toward the end of the decade. The third factor, which is relatively minor but compounded the other factors, was its proximate location to nearby Southgate Centre, which is closer to central Edmonton and has better road connections. Particularly, the Whitemud Freeway that opened in late 1993 provides cross-city connections and includes an interchange at the southern edge of Southgate (Wang, 2017). These locational advantages ensured Southgate would be the surviving mall after it became apparent there was no room for both malls in Edmonton's retail industry. Originally anchored by Eaton's, Safeway, Sears, and Woolco (later Walmart), these stores left Heritage Mall one-by-one for other locations, with Sears being the last to leave in 2000, after which the mall closed less than a year later.



Image 1: East-facing aerial view of Heritage Mall in its heyday. (Coldrsx, 2011)

A Vision for Redevelopment

After Heritage Mall closed, with South Edmonton Common providing big-box retail nearby (this is in fact where Walmart relocated after closing their mall location), and Southgate Centre taking many of Heritage Mall's former tenants, it was evident that retail would not be a primary use on the site in the future. The property owner sought to redevelop the property, and proposed rezoning to the City. Around the same time, the City of Edmonton was becoming interested in transit-oriented development and was planning on expanding the existing Light Rail line south from the then-current terminal at the University of Alberta (City of Edmonton, 2018a). After negotiations between the developer, ProCura, and the City, the site was rezoned in 2005 to DC2 Site-Specific Development Control Provision. This zoning category allowed for the site to be

designated for Mixed-Use Transit-Oriented Development, with the site design calling for 2,900 units in residential towers, a central amenity area with water feature, and lower height buildings toward the edges of the property. With the site plan in place, it was planned to extend the light rail line southward incrementally, with Century Park serving as the terminal in the medium-term. Over the next five years, two components of the site plan were developed. In 2006, a commercial shopping plaza was developed in the southwest corner of the lot (at the intersection of 23 Avenue and 111 Street), and in 2008 and 2009, a residential complex with 400 units was developed on the eastern edge of the lot.



Image 2: Existing Land Uses at Century Park. (City of Edmonton, 2018)

A Change in Direction

In 2008, the Global Financial Crisis that started in the United States came to Canada and caused a downturn in the housing market. While the downturn did not last long in most areas of Canada, it did cause the housing market to change, and ProCura determined that the original plan would not be feasible for the future and opted to redesign the site plan. The original plan, being a “towers in the park” concept, was considered ill-suited to the concept of a complete community, and there was little diversity in the selection of housing options. Additionally, a large area of the lot (50% of the area) would have been dedicated to unusable park space, which altered the feasibility of the project compared to other potential concepts.

While the project was being reassessed, after two extensions that had been completed within the previous five years, the Light Rail extension finally reached Century Park in 2010. As part of the new station, ProCura leased a large portion of the land to the City of Edmonton for use as a park-and-ride lot. Also included in the station design was a bus terminal to allow for transfers. As the bus terminal is directly adjacent to the future entrance for the Century Park development, care was taken to limit pedestrian access to the bus roadway, for both the short-term access from the park-and-ride lot (access was cordoned off with concrete barriers) and in the long-term plan for the interface between the bus terminal and the development (this will be addressed by landscaping techniques). The new development plan retains some towers from the original plan, but includes more types of housing, particularly “missing middle” types of housing (housing between single-family and apartment blocks in scale, including townhouses, duplexes, and live-work units, among others). The new plan also incorporates a Main Street concept, to allow for appropriate mixed uses at the ground level and the presence of a street life.

In 2012, the Edmonton City Council approved Transit-Oriented Development Guidelines. These guidelines specify different types of station areas for LRT stations and major bus interchanges depending on setting. Century Park Station was assigned a hybrid station type, Neighbourhood and Enhanced Neighbourhood, these being differentiated based on residential density and presence of non-residential uses (City of Edmonton, 2012). The hybrid assignment was based on the presence of a residential subdivision on the west side of 111 Street that would only see potential infill on a much smaller scale than the development in Century Park. For Century Park itself, the guideline specifies residential unit densities equivalent to a mid-rise apartment block.



Image 3: Century Park Station and Park-and-Ride. (City of Edmonton, 2011)

Current State of Development

The process of implementing the new development plan began in 2013, when ProCura sought a site rezoning. Because of the site's zoning district regulations, the site's old and new zoning districts were the same, DC2 Site-Specific Development Control Provision, but the rezoning included the new development plan mixed-use and residential components (City of Edmonton, 2018b). The rezoning also allowed the park-and-ride currently occupying the lot to be moved to the northern edge of the property once construction is ready to commence. In 2015, the first development permit was issued, allowing the development of one high-rise building with 176 units. A second development permit was issued in 2016, this time for a total of 446 units split between townhouses and three tower blocks, as well as over 9,000 ft² of retail space. Around this time, ProCura made public their long-term plans for the development, which will include 4,500 units of rental housing in townhouses and buildings of heights varying from four to 24 storeys (Kent, 2016). Unit size is planned to be smaller than in the original plan, which is the primary reason for the increased number of units.

The City of Edmonton's lease of the park-and-ride lot is scheduled to end in 2020, after which the remaining parking spaces will be moved to the edge of the property to allow construction to begin, the process of which has already begun. Construction on the first approved apartment tower started in late 2017, and is expected to be complete in mid-2019 (CBC News, 2017). Further construction will commence after the park-and-ride lot has been vacated. With approximately 1,200 parking spaces currently comprising the park-and-ride lot, it will be a challenge to incorporate all the parking demanded by the market (while by-laws allow for reductions in the minimum number of parking spaces, the market does not yet allow for

significant reductions), and to plan for a future with reduced personal automobile usage. It is expected that full buildout will take at least 10 years, and may take longer, possibly 20 years or more, depending on market absorption rates.



Image 4: Future Concept of Century Park Development. (The Globe and Mail, 2016)

Lessons Learned

- *Large-scale transformational projects need to be carefully considered*

The site design for Century Park, in both the initial and revised plans, represented a significant change from the prevalent development pattern previously seen in the area. As could be expected, this generated concern among area residents, primarily due to the scale of the proposed buildings. Furthermore, as witnessed by the redesign process, if a project requires revisions, it becomes incrementally more difficult to make revisions with increasing project scale. If similar changes had been made to a smaller scale project, the process of working out the changes and getting them approved would be simpler. This is the reason why for many large-scale projects, such as Century Park, individual area plans are incorporated, as opposed to relying solely on broad-scale zoning by-laws and design guidelines.

- *Make a bold vision, but allow for flexibility*

With transformational projects such as Century Park, the ability of the development to make a break from predominant local development patterns depends on the planners and designers creating a bold vision for the development project. A bold vision that is successful can have positive effects on development in other locations. However, as seen in the case of Century Park, circumstances change and parts of the vision become no longer feasible, so it is important that there is a certain amount of flexibility in the project. If there is not enough room to make changes that would improve the feasibility of the project, there is a good chance the development would stall and the property goes unused until someone can come up with a better plan.

- *Make sure there is cohesion of the project with the setting*

There is one reason why the original vision did not end up working that is not related to the housing crash. The team that worked on the original design concept was based in Vancouver, and that showed in their design choices (Stolte, 2012). The “towers in the park” concept, while having been used in some Vancouver development projects (False Creek having many examples of this concept), would have been out of place in the Edmonton context, which would have likely magnified opposition had the plan been developed. The new concept is truer to the Edmonton context, and is more sensitive to the surrounding area, including some lower-scale (but still not single-family) housing, even while retaining towers.



Image 5: Model of original Vancouver-type development. (Edmonton Journal, 2012)

- *Consider what the market says about the development*

The main reason why the initial Century Park development stalled is because the housing market crashed and after it recovered, ProCura found that people had different priorities from before the market crashed. The new design plan takes these changes into account, and reduces unit size while including high quality fixtures and several amenities, which matches the lifestyle choices of many modern young professionals. The new design plan also includes more mixed-use development, which matches the emerging preference for complete streets as opposed to separated land uses.

- *Incremental change can still have a profound effect*

While Century Park is a large-scale development, it is being developed incrementally, as opposed to being developed all at the same time. This is good practice, because for a development of this scale, it would take a significant amount of time for the residential and commercial units to be absorbed into the market. Development on two components of the project was completed before the plan was reworked, and even though those components will end up different from the rest of the project, they were well-received at their time of opening. This reception was vital in proving the demand for a development like Century Park, which helps convince financiers that the project is feasible.

Conclusion

Century Park is a work-in-progress development project that has seen a significant design change over the course of its development process. When Heritage Mall closed in 2001, there might have been the possibility of the site seeing single-family residential or big box commercial

development, as has happened with other cases of dead mall re-development. The potential of a large-scale transformational development project requires considerable care to ensure the property is developed in such a way that allows for the project to be well-received. In cases like Century Park where the project needs to be rethought partway through the development process, it is important that the development process remains in motion, lest the project stall permanently. Above all, because the development process for large projects like Century Park takes a long time from the start of planning to the end of construction, both patience and persistence are key to ensuring the project is completed successfully.



Image 6: Rendering of "Main Street" in new Century Park model (Edmonton Journal, 2016).

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