

Planning for City-Building

Calgary Municipal Land Corporation using public-private collaboration to bring life back to an inner-city neighbourhood.

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Abstract

The Calgary Municipal Land Corporation (CMLC) is a special purpose agency established in 2007 by the City of Calgary to lead and implement the Rivers District Community Revitalization Plan. Based around a public infrastructure upgrade program, CMLC is tasked with facilitating the reclamation and community redevelopment of the long neglected inner city brownfield area of the East Village, known as the Rivers District.

CMLC operates as a private developer, however is ultimately accountable to the City of Calgary and its citizens. Working at arm's length from the government, it offers an alternative model to manage public land and guide inner-city redevelopment. This unique position has facilitated collaboration and partnerships between public and private actors needed to drive the project forward. Through an innovative financing tool and strategic planning policies, CMLC has been able to coordinate extensive infrastructure improvements, enhance the pedestrian realm and perception of safety, provide public recreational facilities, increase connections to and across downtown, provide public art space, and preserve cultural and historical identity. With significant portions of the infrastructure upgrades complete, private sector investment has begun to follow where the public sector is leading. CMLC's work has supported bringing the neighbourhood back to life strengthening the urban fabric of the whole City.

Background & Context

The East Village is located at the east corner of Calgary's downtown just south of the Bow River. The neighbourhood made up the original city downtown, however, over the years attention shifted to the downtown business core and suburbs leaving the area neglected. Redevelopment has been a long-standing objective of the City with a number of renewal attempts in the 1960s and 1970s. However, in 1985 a poorly designed Municipal building cut the neighbourhood off from a main pedestrian corridor and isolated it from the rest of downtown (The City of Calgary, 2005). Over the years the area declined as businesses closed and people left, leaving aged and inadequate infrastructure, the need for environmental remediation from past industrial usage and rising social concerns. It wasn't until 2005 when a new political will pushed to amend the East Village Redevelopment Plan, that the City began taking the action needed to drive rejuvenation and attract private investment back to the area (CMLC, 2013a). Recognizing that the City budget would not be able to fund the extensive infrastructure upgrades needed, the City worked with the Province to establish a new public financing mechanism - the Community Revitalization

Levy. With a financing tool in place, the CMLC was established in 2007 to lead and implement the Revitalization Plan for the Rivers District.

Facts of the Case

The Calgary Municipal Land Corporation operates like a private developer working at arm's length from the government. The City is however the sole company shareholder making CMLC

ultimately accountable to the public. The City appoints the seven person Board of Directors and approves the annual business plans and budgets. The Board is made up of industry leaders with diverse experiences, including the mayor as the only elected official. The board is responsible to facilitate community redevelopment in order to bring the "neighbourhood back to life, and make it part of the city again" (CMLC, 2013a).



The Rivers District from the East looking West.

Source: CMLC, 2012.

The Rivers District is approximately 504 acres of former commercial, industrial and residential land (The City of Calgary, 2007). It includes the East Village, East Victoria Park and areas of the Beltline neighbourhoods, as well as the Calgary Stampede Exhibition site, Fort Calgary and Olympic Plaza. The land is in a prime location, however there has been limited development activity in the area over the past decade with private investment deterred by the need for major infrastructure and environmental remediation, as well as by a negative reputation of lack of safety and crime.

An innovative public financing tool was established when the city had to think outside of the box in order to fund the infrastructure improvements needed to attract private and public sector development. With changes to the Municipal Government Act, the City worked with

the Province of Alberta to develop the Community Revitalization Levy. Similar to the Tax Increment Financing (TIF) mechanism, money is borrowed based on the incremental assessed value of property to provide stable funding for upgrades without an impact to the City's operating and capital budget or additional tax burden to citizens. Once the infrastructure is upgraded, it is predicted to attract developers whose new developments will supply the tax revenues that can pay off the initial borrowed debt. The levy will not create additional charges as the province has agreed to forgo a portion of their property tax revenues from the Rivers District for a 20 year period, allowing the tax levied to be the same combined property tax rate as that charged to the rest of the City (The City of Calgary, 2007). At the end of the 20 year CRL period, property tax from the area will contribute to the general revenues of the City and the Province.

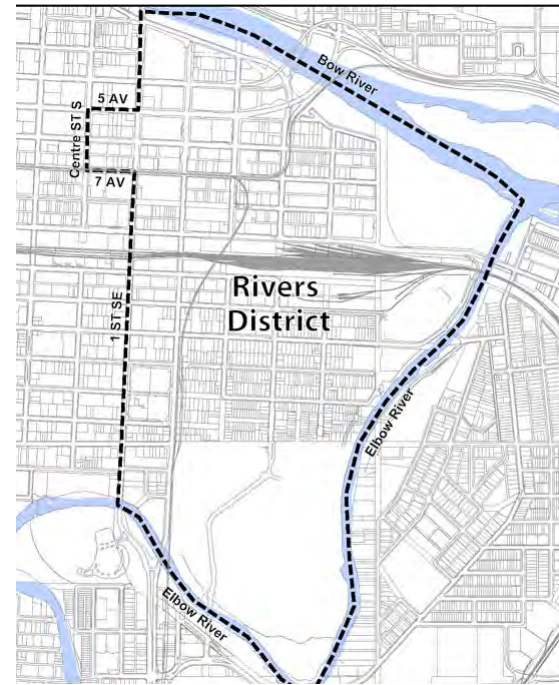


Photo: The City of Calgary, 2007.

Infrastructure improvements and environmental land remediation were the first steps to prepare for redevelopment. Since 2007, more than \$150 million have gone into upgrades such as major street and utility renovations, including raising a 49-acre area for flood prevention; improved pedestrian environment and safety through streetscaping, lighting and public art; historical building preservation efforts; and, increasing connectivity with the 4th Street underpass and the Riverwalk pathway (CMLC, 2011). There has been \$2 million in removal of contaminated soil left from historic industrial uses as well as a storm water treatment facility set up that showcases the way wetland habitat naturally cleans storm water runoff that previously drained unfiltered into the Bow River (CMLC, 2011).



Photo: CMLC, 2012.

Observation Deck on RiverWalk Phase 1.



Photo: CMLC, 2012.

CMLC's offices are located in the newly restored historic Hillier Bloc building and are heated by the district energy system.

The state of the art ENMAX District Energy Centre is located in the District offering a sustainable heating system for buildings in the area. Heat is provided through a network of upgraded underground insulated pipes and is more efficient and less harmful to the environment than traditional systems.

Actions & Interactions

CMLC's directives along with the Rivers District Community Revitalization Plan are intended to achieve wider community and city goals. In order to incorporate a city wide planning context, CMLC has collaborated with all three levels of government making sure planning considerations and implementation actions align with both Provincial land

use policies and the City's plans and policies. These include the Calgary Municipal Development Plan, the City of Calgary Land Use Bylaw, Calgary Environmental Policy, Calgary Transportation Plan, Urban Parks Master Plan, Centre City Plan, East Village Area Redevelopment Plan, and Beltline Area Redevelopment Plan. CMLC also works within the Debt Policy Framework in which Council approved a self-sufficient tax supported debt capacity of \$150 million to fund the Districts redevelopment projects (The City of Calgary, 2007).

Establishing the

Redevelopment Plan and acting on the projects would not have been possible without the public, private and third-sector organizations collaboration. Beyond government agencies, CMLC has partnered with business and arts communities, academia, local social agencies such as the Calgary Drop-In Centre and Salvation Army, and key civic partners such as the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede, Fort Calgary, and the Calgary Public Library. CMLC has also actively engaged local community associations, land owners and the general public (CMLC, 2013a).



Photos: CMLC, 2013b

The Riverwalk is a four kilometer pathway that runs along the Bow and Elbow River and is part of a larger regional pathway system leading into the Trans Canada Trail. It is a key public amenity for recreation as well as to increase connectivity to and across downtown. It has become a destination providing arts and public event program space.

Outcomes

The CMLC has successfully initiated and undertaken remediation of environmental conditions as well as coordinated extensive infrastructure improvements. The Riverwalk is nearly completed providing an amenity for the whole city and enhances connectivity to and through the area. Public green space and streetscaping improvements along with public art and cultural programming encourage activity in the area and increase the sense of safety. The infrastructure

improvements program has been combined with a targeted Land Sales strategy and development review process providing new opportunities for both residential and commercial development. CMLC reviews all proposed development plans to ensure they are consistent with the area's Master Plan and has collaborated with developers and the City to facilitate development permit submissions (CMLC, 2011). In 2011, two development deals have been signed for mixed-used, multi-family developments with street front retail space. The first is with



Photo: CMLC, 2012.

Riverwalk and residential development along Riverfront Lane.

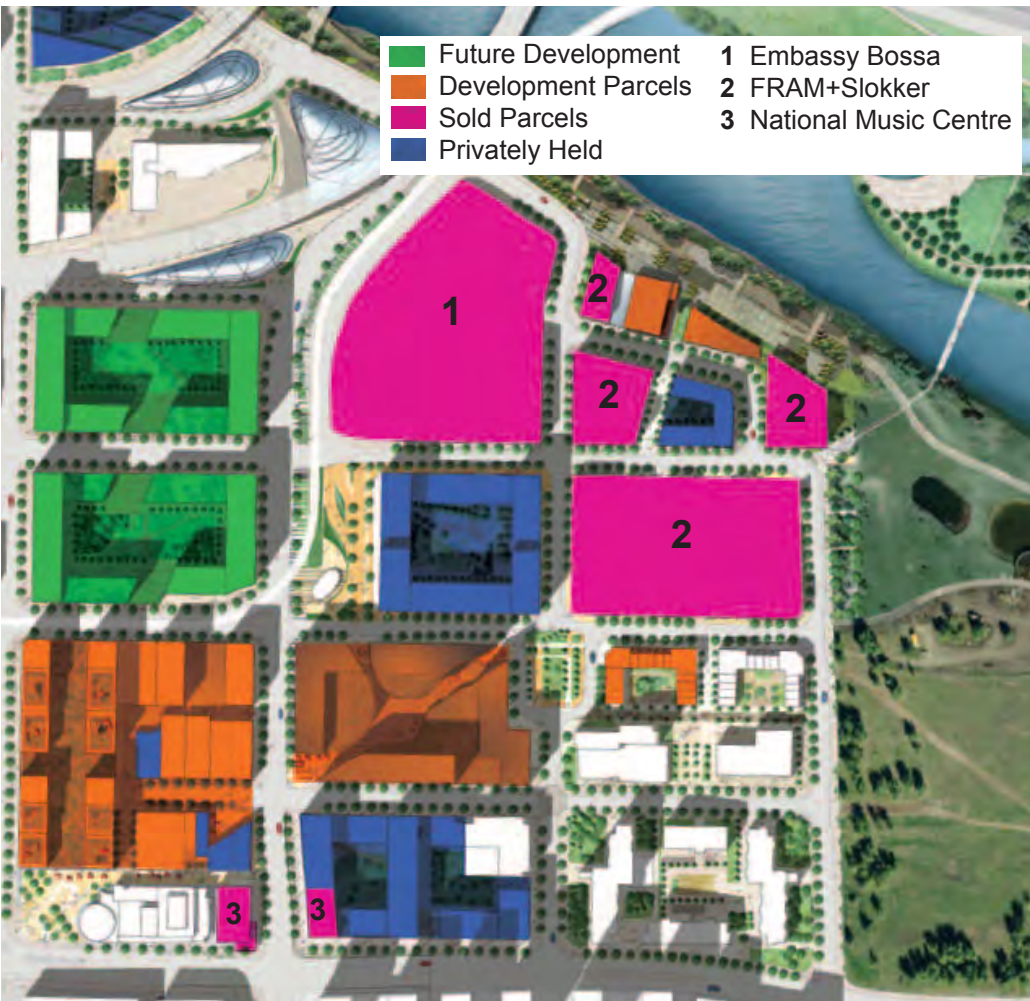


Photo: CMLC, 2012.

The East Village Development Plans.

Embassy Bosa and the second with FRAM+Slokker. The CMLC has pre-qualified and is working towards achieving LEED for Neighbourhood Development Certification. This award uses a rating system based on principles of smart growth and green building practices to identify innovative neighbourhood design. The New Central Library and the National Music Centre are set for development within the River's District, adding key cultural amenities and will provide important community gathering spaces. Along with a number of public art initiative and installations in the East Village, the former Seafood Market was converted into workspace and studios for local artisans enhancing the art and cultural character of the District (CMLC, 2011).

Lessons Learned

Coordinated Approach:

The large scale infrastructure upgrades required in the area were cost prohibitive for individual developers leaving much of the land in the area underutilized. Using the Community Revitalization Levy the City was able to take a coordinated approach in order to carry out the improvements needed across several blocks in the most cost efficient manner.

CMLC's unique situation as a quasi-government corporation has allowed planning to take place with a wider scope and size than if the area was broken into smaller parcels of land with individual landowners. Having one guiding planning document has allowed a unified approach with better coordination of development



Photo: CMLC, 2013b.

THE SAME WAY BETTER/READER by Ron Moppett on Riverfront Lane. The mosaic represents the role the neighbourhood has played in the City's history, the renewal work of CMLC and is a tribute to Mr. William Reader, one of Calgary's first visionary urban planners.

across the neighbourhood. The CMLC can usher-in projects in phases to ensure redevelopment occurs in a fashion that meets demand. By providing residential options prior to establishing commercial spaces CMLC can ensure enough local support exists for successful business opportunities.

Although pieces of land will be sold to private investors, the development plans must fit the District's overall Master Plan's objectives.

Connections:

An interconnected network of streets and pathways is essential to support the District's development goals (The City of Calgary, 2005). Along with major street and sidewalk upgrades, a transportation and connectivity strategy has been set out to ensure continuity and connectivity to and across the area bringing people and 'life' to the area. An active flow of people supports commercial ambitions, can increase safety and cultivates civic engagement and pride. Taking into account the wider city connections as well as the related policies and plans, CMLC has coordinated projects to increase pedestrian, cycling and transit capabilities as well as ensured vehicle traffic is accommodated. The Riverwalk,



The Rivers District from the East looking West.

Photo: CMLC, 2012.

parks and squares upgrades, bridge projects and streetscaping efforts have enhanced the public realm creating pedestrian links and recreational amenities. Road and bridge improvements, along with street realignment, building the 4th Street underpass and ensuring a coordinated transit plan, have also improved links to downtown and access within the area.

Partnerships and Stakeholders:

Partnerships and collaboration between public and private actors have led to the strengthening of both the physical and the social urban fabric of not only one neighbourhood but of the whole city. Whether it has been between government departments, local social agencies, or area residents and users, the cooperation among the diverse stakeholders has facilitated design better suited to the needs of the City and its

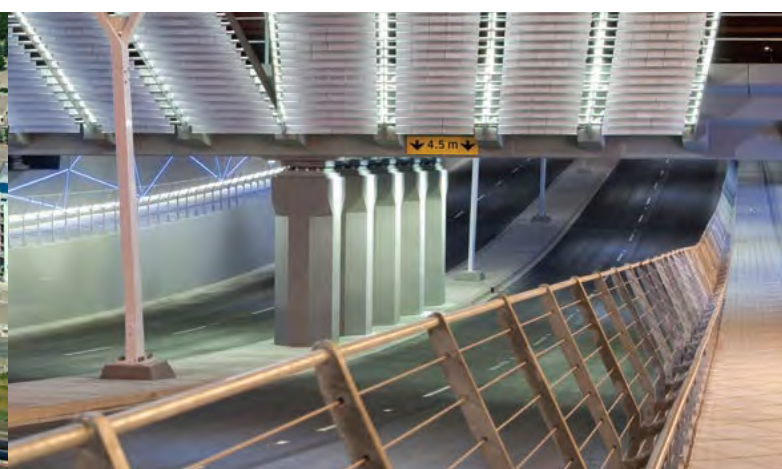
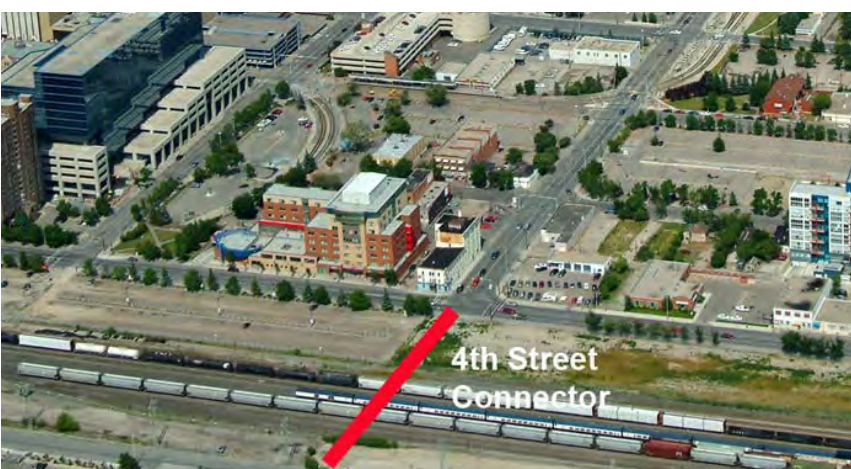
citizens. These relationships have helped establish funding and coordination for much needed infrastructure upgrades, enhanced public recreational facilities, increased connections to and across the downtown area, created opportunities for business, public art space, and preservation of cultural and historic identity.

The benefits of collaboration continue as CMLC organizes programming and events to invite people to use the new area amenities (CMLC, 2013b). It has also partnered with the District’s two private developers to create a coordinated marketing plan to promote a common message and maintain continuity across the neighbourhood (CMLC, 2011). CMLC has collaborated with public and private stakeholders and strives to attract mixed-use developments while creating an environment that enhances the physical and social well-being of a wider community



Photo: CMLC, 2012.

(CMLC, 2012). There is still a long way to go to ensure local residents are not displaced in this redevelopment process but through engagement and partnerships with local social agencies and residents, current and future, the Rivers District redevelopment is bringing a positive change to the area’s social environment and creating a place that enhances the well-being of a wider community.



Photos: (R) The City of Calgary , 2007. (L) CMLC, 2013b.

4th Street underpass opens a southern connection to the Stampede Grounds and Victoria Park. It features LED lighting and dedicated bicycle lanes. The joint venture project, between the City and CMLC, was completed under budget in November 2011 and supports future public transit objectives (CMLC, 2011).



Photo: CMLC, 2012.

Resources

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