

TOD in Edmonton Greyfields: A promising project, but is ad hoc planning good enough?

A Collaboration Between:

Tom Young, U of M City Planning student,
Alex Regiec, MCIP, Winnipeg Transit, and
Erik Backstrom, MCIP, City of Edmonton



BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In the context of the Kyoto Protocol, the drive for more sustainable communities, and the growing awareness about the problems of a car-dependent culture, transit villages, or transit-oriented development, are gaining a great deal of interest.

As Vancouver's Translink succinctly describes it: "A transit-oriented development (TOD) is a compact, mixed-use community centred around a transit station that, by design, invites residents, workers, and shoppers to drive their car less and ride transit more." It is not an entirely new idea, but putting it into practice in the face of a development, planning and public culture that privileges the automobile can be a challenging proposition.



Photo: Metrotown, Burnaby, BC. An example of the lack of human scale in some TOD projects to date.

Transit oriented developments have often fallen short of expectations in the past. Clareview Town Centre in northeast Edmonton is an example of a development that was meant to be a transit-oriented development that instead turned into a merely transit-adjacent car-focused development, complete with big box stores and acres of parking. Metrotown in Burnaby, BC, although much more successful than Edmonton's Clareview at integrating transit and development, still missed the mark on human scale and mix of uses, and is currently part of a redevelopment project by Translink aiming to create true transit villages in the Vancouver region.

Contents

| | |
|--|--------|
| Background and Context - | page 1 |
| Facts of the Case - | page 2 |
| Action and Interaction: <i>The Planning Process</i> - | page 3 |
| Lessons Learned - | page 7 |
| Resources - | page 7 |

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL BY THE NUMBERS

- 2,886 living units: townhouses, low-mid- and high-rise condos and apartments
- Approximately 5,000 residents
- 18,000 m² of office space
- 15,000 m² of retail space
- 17.4 ha site featuring 7.1 ha of publicly accessible open space and 1.8 ha of private open space
- Approximately \$500 mil. of investment

FACTS OF THE CASE

History and Site Context

Heritage Mall, a former district mall in southwest Edmonton, opened its doors in 1981. By 2000, changing retail patterns in the Edmonton area found the mall struggling to survive. The death of Eaton's, the movement of Sears to a competing district mall, and the shifting of Wal-Mart to the new South Edmonton Common, Edmonton's largest and newest power centre, only a few kilometers away, closed the mall for good. The site was sold in November of 2003 to Century Developments Ltd.

In spite of the closing of the mall, 111 Street, abutting the site, is a major commuting corridor between the rapidly expanding suburbs of southwest Edmonton and the central city. Heritage Valley, for instance, a major development area, is expecting 45,000 residents by 2030, with more to come. As such, Edmonton's transit expansion plans currently call for light-rail transit to reach the former mall site by 2010, serving both the Century Park redevelopment and park and ride users from new neighbourhoods to the south.

The Main Players

Century Developments is a collaboration between Calgary-based Procura Real Estate Services Limited and Vancouver-based Westbank Projects Corporation, a neighbourhood shopping centre developer that has over the last 10 years shifted much of its activity into large mixed-use development projects. Century Park represents the biggest and most ambitious development for either company to date.

Century Developments' architect is Vancouver's James Cheng, winner of the Governor General of Canada Medal for Architecture, and the man attributed with perfecting the 'tower-and-podium' high-rise form that has become an integral part of Vancouver's approach to street-life conscious urbanism.

The planners most involved in this project were, for the City of Edmonton Planning and Development

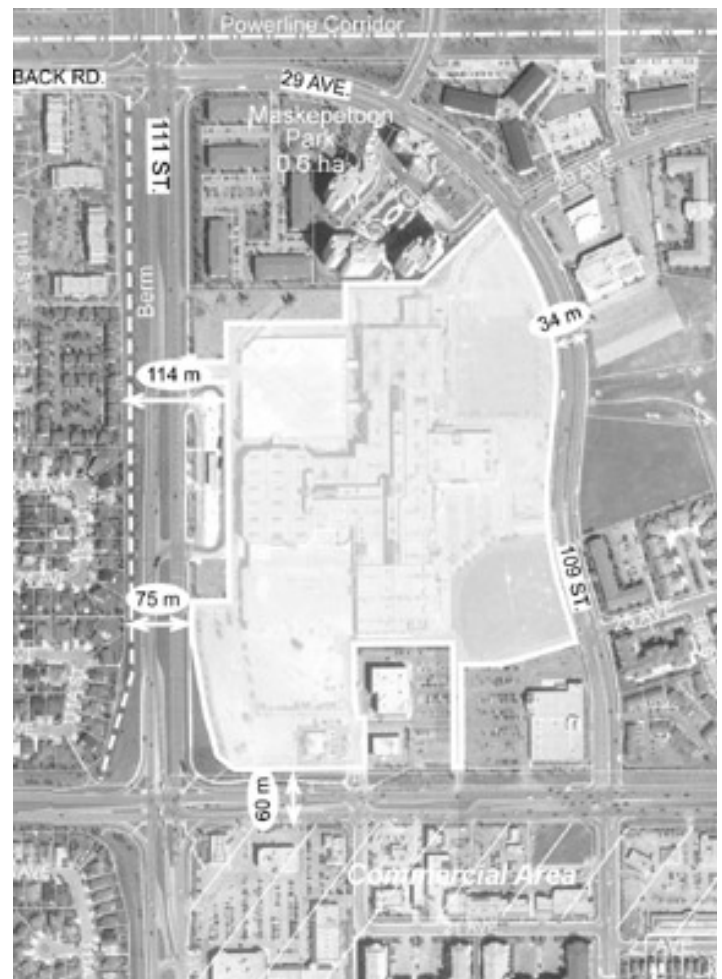


Photo: Aerial view of the 17.4 ha redevelopment site

opment department, Erik Backstrom and Stefan Feckner, the project lying within their area of oversight at the time of the proposal. In transportation planning, the main player was Brian Latte.

ACTION AND INTERACTION: *The Planning Process*

DC2 Zoning

DC2, or Site Specific Development Control Provision, is a zoning tool under Edmonton's by-law that allows more freedom to developers to develop sites that have unusual circumstances not well served by the standard zoning classes. In this case, the developer opted for DC2 owing to their interest in creating a mixed-use neighbourhood with high quality urban design characteristics, a development approach that is not usually allowed for outside of the downtown area.

Previous DC2 sites offer some guidance and convention in the development of new ones, but the fact that each DC2 is, by definition, a unique circumstance, means that much of the zoning must be drawn up from scratch in each case. This means, on the one hand, that the planners and city council can demand very high quality development, if the interest is there to do so. On the other hand, if the administration is lacking in will, or if the developer is adept at politicking for lower expectations, the resulting DC2 could leave much to be desired.

Hammering Out The DC2

Planners involved with this proposal were blessed with a developer and architect who were committed to a high-quality project that would be an asset to the city. Nevertheless, the planners contributed to much refinement and improvement of the proposal throughout the process. Architect, developer and an Edmonton planning consultant collaborated closely with the planners to create a proposal everyone would be happy with.

A huge change was made in the site layout. Although much of this can be attributed to the developer decision to remove the former mall



Photo: Developer's model showing the central public space and surrounding buildings

building entirely (the original proposal called for an adaptive reuse of part of the existing mall), planners influenced this design, contributing to a more coherent layout with a central public space as the focal point.

Public space was greatly increased in the final design, planners pushing for rooftop gardens wherever possible. The final plan calls for an increase of over 10,000 m² total open space, and a 17,000 m² increase for publicly accessible open space in comparison to the original proposal.

The original proposal included retail and recreational uses and residential, but lacked office uses, an important element for any mixed use development. The final plan calls for an office tower near to the future LRT station.

Perhaps the most significant contribution made by the planners was the introduction of specific design guidelines. Active frontages were mandated for the entire site, both for retail uses and residential uses, to create a pleasant walking environment, and also to offer more opportunity for 'eyes-on-the-street'. The amount of required glazing on building facades was increased to facilitate this as well, and was a significant improvement to the retail buildings in the southwest area of the plan, which had been conceived of as a



Transportation-related improvements included very specific guidelines for the developer regarding required street-network improvements over the course of construction. With TOD considerations in mind, refined parking guidelines were included, with potential for reassessment and reduction of parking requirements once the site is half developed or the LRT line completed. Requirements for bicycle parking provision were doubled. With support from the land use planners, language relating to alternative transportation modes was strengthened (discussion of car-sharing, increased emphasis on design for pedestrians, cyclists, etc.), and pedestrian routes to and from the transit centre were made more direct all across the site.

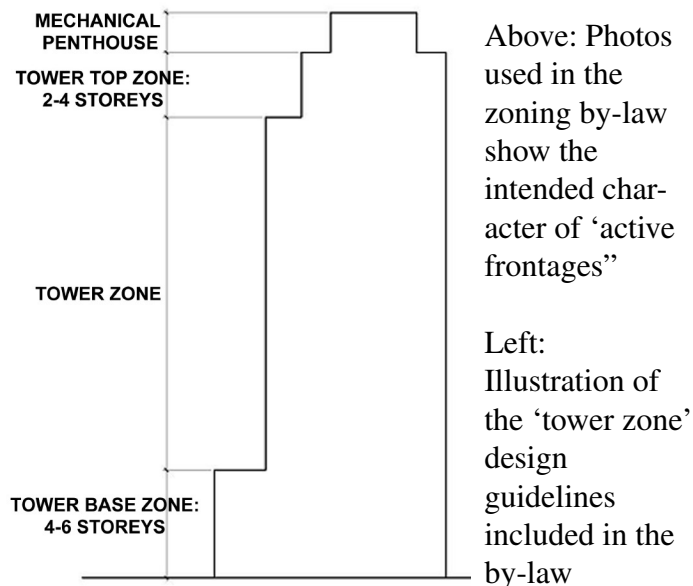
Addressing Community Concerns

Open houses and public meetings, in addition to meetings with representatives from the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues (EFCL), were held to present the concept for the redevelopment to members of the affected public, to hear their concerns about the project, and to find ways to address those concerns in the plan.

Community interest was substantial in the project, 700 people showing up for an open house and a further 400 attending a public meeting. The majority of attendees indicated that they were in favour of the project, although many concerns were also voiced. The critical message coming from residents was that the redevelopment was too dense, would create too much traffic, and that the tall towers proposed for the site would be out of place and cause shadowing problems for the rest of the neighbourhood, most of which is quite suburban in character. The EFCL called for cutting the number of units in half, to 1500, and reducing the overall heights of the buildings. These propositions were seen to mitigate the concern of residents about increased traffic coming from the development as well.

fairly typical strip mall development with lengthy unbroken walls facing major pedestrian routes.

Design guidelines for high-rise towers were broken up into 3 distinct 'tower zones', mandating the tower be stepped back from the podium to avoid an oppressive feeling of height and mass from street level. Design guidelines were aimed not at dictating style, but at ensuring that the relationship of buildings to the street, and especially the pedestrian, was carefully considered.



For the most part, the planning department decided to stand firm on these issues. Reducing the density would have made the project invariable for the developer. Traffic impact assessments

done for the proposal suggested that new traffic generated would be comparable to that generated by the mall before its closure, and in the longer term, the completion of the LRT line would serve to reduce traffic impacts by the development on the surrounding community. Tall towers are not new to the area, a cluster of them already existing immediately to the north of the redevelopment area, and these were necessary to achieve the needed density on the site without compromising the amount of open space available.

In the end, height was the issue that spurred the most changes, with maximum heights being reduced from 28 storeys to 24, and the average height of high-rise buildings also being reduced. This was accommodated by adding two new high-rise buildings to the site. The architect also did a detailed shadowing analysis to ensure that tall buildings would not seriously affect adjacent development.

Elements That Went Missing

Although the design goes a long way to meet TOD objectives, the fact remains that integration with the future LRT station has not been as carefully planned as it could have been. This is owing to a combination of factors, the biggest one being that Transportation and Streets has yet to do detailed planning work on the final leg of the LRT extension.

See the box at right for Erik Backstrom's story of the planning department's attempt to better integrate the LRT with the development.

Ultimately, most of the shortcomings of the project stem from a lack of coordination between different planning units in the City administration. Affordable housing, although an element that is always included in major Vancouver developments, appeared almost as an afterthought in this process; social planning units of the City of Edmonton were

PUSHING FOR BETTER INTEGRATION

- Erik Backstrom's experience

Current plans from Neil Crawford Centre to Southgate have the LRT running down the middle of 111 Street – a no-man's land, in my opinion – and what we've heard so far from the primary LRT planner is that he would keep the alignment in the median all the way to 23 Avenue.

The developers took the centre alignment as a given and planned the development accordingly. Otherwise the entire rezoning process would have been delayed who knows how long. The developers would have had to push Council to direct Transportation and Streets to start the planning of the Southgate – Heritage segment so that the alignment issue could be figured out. But of course the developers aren't coming at the development from a TOD purist position. Yes, their whole idea was to do a TOD at the Heritage station, and a really good development at that. But getting the zoning approved so as to be able to start getting revenue took priority over ensuring the best possible integration between LRT and the development.

James Cheng's second design for the project, which we got in June 2004, had a much better integration with transit than the first. The first had a parking lot right next to the transit terminal, where the empty Eaton's store now sits, as the plan was to demolish the anchor stores and retain the core of the mall. The second design, the one ultimately approved, blew away the mall, put pedestrian-oriented shops right across from the transit terminal and showed an enclosed overhead connection to a centre-running LRT; much better in terms of transit integration. But some of my colleagues and I thought that the integration could be better yet if the LRT were on the east side of 111 Street.

Our choice at that point was: "How hard should we push for better integration?" Since the LRT alignment wasn't something we in Planning or the developers had any control over, and since Transportation was perhaps two or three years away from making the final determination, we decided to do a soft push on the developers. We asked for drawings showing how the development could be integrated with the LRT if it were shifted to the east side of 111 Street. The developers came back with a soft response: a couple of not-very imaginative drawings showing minimal changes as a result of an east-running LRT alignment.

About this time I came across the design of a Washington, DC-area TOD with an urban-style bus terminal, where buses load and unload on streets (as they do in downtown

Edmonton) around an urban square next to the Metro station instead of at a suburban style bus loop like the one at Heritage Mall. I wondered: “Wouldn’t something like this make for a better integration?” This idea led me to the realization that the City has a strategic asset: the land of the bus terminal and the land of the planned park & ride facility, a total of about 2 hectares. Could we sell or give this land to the developers in exchange for a more integrated design and the developers building extra underground parking for us for park & ride purposes?

This was a good idea, potentially getting rid of an ugly City-owned park & ride parkade standing out like a sore thumb from the rest of the project and tightly integrating the development, transit facilities and park & ride spaces – but one we quickly realized the developers wouldn’t go for unless there was something in it for them. Even if they got extra land, what benefit would it serve them and why would they build expensive underground parking stalls for the City if they couldn’t realize extra income from additional units at the site? This just before a municipal election in which Councillor Anderson was echoing the community sentiment that the 3000 housing units then on the table should be cut to 1500. Neither we nor the developer would risk a good project by telling the public that we would allow even higher densities (3500 units perhaps?) to get an improved transit-development integration that wasn’t a priority for them anyway.

What we did instead was to write into the zoning a clause allowing design changes to the approved site plan to allow better integration the development with transit. If we are ultimately able to convince Transportation to put the LRT on the east side of 111 Street, we’ll be able to work on a more creative integration without opening up the zoning again; unless, of course, the density needs to increase as a result to make the integration financially viable for the developers. In that case the zoning would have to be opened up to public scrutiny again – another opportunity for whatever opponents are left out there to fight another battle.

not at all involved in the review process for this proposal. City Council has directed the administration to work with the developer further on the issues of accessible design and affordable housing (the developer agreed to 50 units of affordable housing; a drop in the bucket in a nearly 3000 unit development), but the time when significant progress could be made on these issues is already past.

Another issue may be the minimalistic role that the Edmonton Transit System (ETS) planners have in the design of their own system. ETS’ place in the municipi-

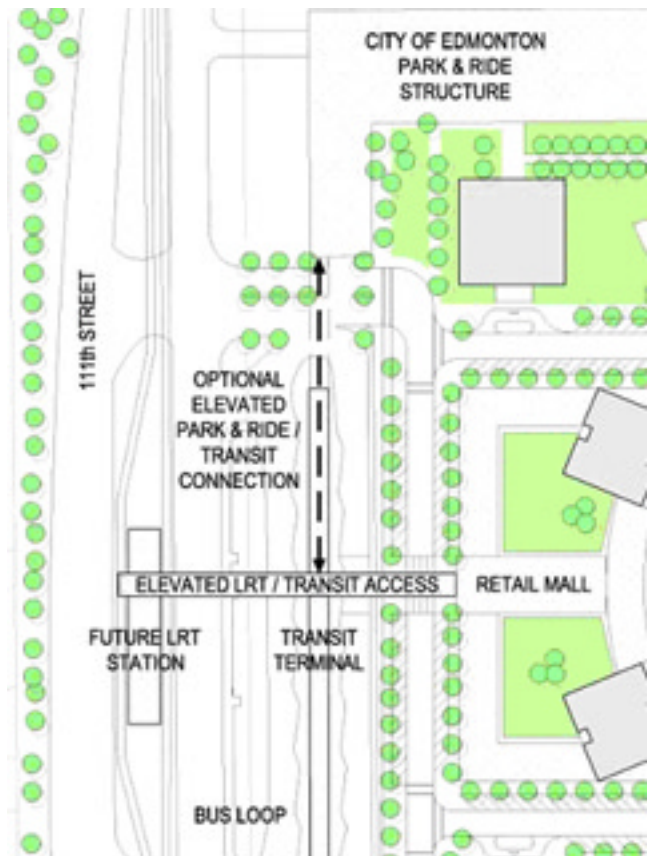


Image: Design for the transit area, showing the LRT station constructed in the median of 111 St.

pal hierarchy is as a sub-department of the larger Transportation and Streets, which does most of the major planning, including planning for LRT alignments. ETS is consulted on planning work done by the larger department, but has a largely subsidiary role. ETS was consulted for its opinion on this development proposal, but did not have its own seat at the table. The opportunity exists for transit planners to have a role equal to or greater than the transportation planners to ensure that steps are taken not only to expand service, but also to push for planning decisions that could expand ridership, something which improved integration between the future LRT station and the development might have accomplished.

Approval

In spite of some limitations, the project appears to be an excellent one. The developer impressed City Council and even some of the community opponents. It certainly helped to have parties as varied as another

developer, the Sierra Club, Capital Health and community residents speak in favour of the proposal. City Council gave its approval to the proposal on February 3rd, 2005.

LESSONS LEARNED

A developer with high expectations of the quality of its developments is a fine developer to work with indeed. However, it cannot be relied upon to happen in every case.

DC2 is a flexible zoning tool, but is flexible in both directions. Its intention to serve as an ad hoc catch-all for sites not served under standard zoning is hardly a recipe for high quality of development. There may be another zoning model that offers similar flexibility for large sites, but also lays out more specific guidelines regarding urban design. DC1, Direct Development Control Provision, is a zoning designed to be applied to historic districts. As the zoning states: "The purpose of this Provision is to provide for detailed, sensitive control of the use, development, siting and design of buildings and disturbance of land where this is necessary to establish, preserve or enhance:

1. areas of unique character or special environmental concern, as identified and specified in an Area Structure Plan or Area Redevelopment Plan; or

2. areas or Sites of special historical, cultural, paleontological, archaeological, prehistoric, natural, scientific or aesthetic interest, as designated under the Historical Resources Act."

Transit-oriented development requires a special character of urban design and comprehensive planning in order to be entirely successful. Without carefully designed and convenient public space, it is less likely that residents of such developments will be encouraged to forgo the comfortable private space of their automobiles. DC1 is most often employed to preserve districts of special character. Why can it not be used to help create them as well?

Unlike Calgary, which recently put out a municipal policy document guiding developers in the creation of transit-oriented developments, Edmon-

ton has not articulated any sort of coherent policy vision for developments within its jurisdiction. Could such a document serve to guide not only developers and land-use planners, but also other departments such as transportation in their planning?

Finally, the last lesson offered by this project is the need for a planning approach that integrates all the relevant planning functions for a project of this size and complexity. Affordable housing, in particular, is an issue growing in importance as homelessness increases. These concerns need to be represented in the planning process.

Making development sustainable and offering effective public transit are challenges facing every city in Canada. Most of our cities could benefit from a more vigorous approach to urban design. Many downtown areas attempt to regulate the form and quality of development. Why is it only our downtown areas that are considered to need special care and attention? Transit-oriented development, if done properly, could serve as a part of the puzzle for each of these challenges. It is up to us as planners to find ways to make it happen, and to use our roles as advocates for the public interest to demand the highest level of quality.

RESOURCES OF INTEREST

Bertolini, Luca and Tejo Spit. 1998. *Cities on Rails*. Routledge, New York.

Dittmar, Hank and Gloria Ohland. 2004. *The New Transit Town: Best Practices in Transit-Oriented Development*. Island Press, Washington.

Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority, Urban Showcase Project
www.translink.bc.ca/Plans_Projects/Urban_Showcase/default.asp

Westbank Development Corporation
www.westbankcorp.com

See the approved zoning bylaw, DC2.652 at www.edmonton.ca/ZoningBylaw/DC2/Dc2.htm

See more about Edmonton's DC1 Provision at www.edmonton.ca/infraplan/ZoningBylaw/Bylaw_12800.htm