

There's a Tale of Two Cities in the New Downtown

CAN HOMELESS SERVICES AND THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY CREATE A CORE THAT'S SAFE AND WELCOMING FOR ALL?

BY RHONDA KRONYK • PHOTO BY BLUEFISH STUDIOS

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Julian Daly's Boyle Street Community Services office overlooks a 105 Ave. bench that's usually occupied by one of Edmonton's 2,307 homeless residents. On this particular sunny afternoon, a middle-aged woman and an older man who look to be homeless sat together, not far from a throng of others laughing and conversing.

They're surrounded by the rapidly maturing body of Rogers Place, the Epcor Tower and the hammering and rumbling

that's has come to symbolize revitalization. The forest of cranes captures our imagination: we want to know what treasures they'll reveal in our unending quest for more, for better. Within a few years downtown will house the Royal Alberta Museum, the tallest Canadian skyscraper outside of Toronto, Edmonton's next four-star hotel, and manicured pedestrian-friendly streets.

But the people working and living in the shadows of revitalization know what's masked by our desire for improvement. As Edmonton grows, we'll need to reconcile our idealized vision of a progressive modern city with the realities of the poverty concentrated in the downtown core. Newly arriving businesses and residents will need it to feel safe and welcoming—for everybody, including the two people on that bench.

Moments later, they're joined by another man from their community who brings the woman a plate of lunch. "They comfort and look out for each other," says Daly, looking outside. The question is, how will the broader community do the same?

Here To Stay

Most Edmontonians won't miss the profusion of black asphalt, gravel lots and rundown buildings that stood where many of downtown's most anticipated developments are taking shape. When City Council approved the comprehensive and ambitious Capital City Downtown Plan (CCDP) in 2010, it was heralded as a blueprint for a lively downtown core. But while it's grand scheme for cultural and economic vibrancy was clear, it left many unanswered questions about how social services like Boyle Street and the people who use them fit into the big picture—or whether they fit in at all.

When downtown revitalization began, says Daly, nobody reached out to Boyle Street. "There were no social impact studies on the development plans and what they would mean for the downtown population."

Edmonton may outperform the rest of Canada in many economic indicators, but the percentage of our population that is homeless is equal to Vancouver's and higher than Toronto's, reports a 2013 Wellesley Institute and Canadian Homelessness Research Fund study. Each long-term homeless person costs taxpayers approximately \$100,000 every year in policing, ambulance services and psychiatric hospital beds, according to the Edmonton Homeless Commission. The report says housing and support services could cost as little as \$35,000 per year annually (but up to \$180,000).

Housing is critical to Edmonton's 10-year plan to end homelessness, but it's not a singular solution. Boyle Street and Bissell Centre's clients require support after they're housed. Outreach workers teach clients how to shop, find medical services, get a job, budget, lock doors—skills most others take for granted. Those without homes are supported with training in jobs, First Aid and CPR, plus victim and mental health services and hot meals. "There is the idea in Edmonton that Boyle Street brings nothing good to the city, that it only attracts bad," says Daly. "But think about where these people would go without the centre." He means that they're not just in the core because of its services, but because it's one of the few safe spaces they can spend the day. "This is a home where people feel safe and are not judged."

But at what point is the average citizen's right to enjoy their city center outweighed by a homeless citizen's access to services? Looking out from the Boyle Street window has heartening moments. But it can also be an uncomfortable sight: people openly drink, sniff or shoot up, some scabble in the dirt for needles. In their struggle to survive, they're understandably not concerned about the average passerby.

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"Boyle Street should make us uneasy because it's a disgrace on us all," says Daly. "What sort of society allows people to suffer without housing, health benefits, and mental health benefits?" Ward 6 Coun. Scott McKeen is even blunter in his assessment: "It is a pox on our house that we have allowed ill people to live in such conditions." But he's adamant about one thing—the City will not force services out of the downtown core. But he may find that revitalization itself pushes homeless people into other parts of the city.

The Capital Region Housing Corporation hasn't noticed a hike in rent that's attributable to the arena, but lower-income people tend to move when they no longer feel comfortable in the space they use, says Daly. Boyle Street has called its current location home for 23 years, but when plans to develop the Ice District began, "clients wanted to know if they would lose their home," says Daly. To that end, Bissell Centre, which has operated downtown for over 100 years, and Boyle Street bought their buildings and land. They have no intention of leaving their neighbourhoods.

Understanding by Collaborating

Boyle Street doesn't shrug off safety concerns. It has installed bright lights and security cameras, while working with police to guard its clients and others from drug dealers. Similarly, Bissell Centre, five blocks east, is building relationships with Edmonton Police Services to find positive solutions to panhandlers, garbage and other manifestations of social strife. "People often want to respond [to such problems] with a security response," says chief programs officer Gary St. Amand. "That's not a bad thing, but we can collaborate to ensure good for everyone."

Bissell staff do security and cleanup sweeps of the area several times daily. The organization also reaches out to stakeholders, staff, neighbours and the McCauley Community League.

Recognizing the need to be part of downtown development, Boyle Street formed a community outreach program in the spring of 2015 to help local businesses work with vulnerable people. The program has helped staff at the Baccarat Casino, City Centre Mall and Epcor.

Epcor approached community agencies in the area after the completion of its 28-storey tower in 2011. "We want to be a good neighbour and thought our staff should have a better understanding about these groups, what they do and who they serve," says Tim le Riche, Epcor's external communications specialist. Jordan Reiniger, Boyle Street's programs and development coordinator, says the most important wisdom for surrounding businesses is to dignify homeless neighbours. "If homeless citizens become aggressive, we need to recognize that most have dealt with trauma that has led to mental health and addictions problems," he says. "When businesses treat the homeless like humans, they usually don't have problems."

While there have been minor incidents, Epcor has not had “any significant trouble,” emphasizes Le Riche. “Overall, the situation seems to be well understood, and our relationship with agencies such as Boyle Street has been positive. We know of a number of Epcor staff who have volunteered in the community.”

PCL Construction took advantage of the Boyle Street’s job placement program by holding a job fair for more Rogers Place workers. The service agencies hope the business community will offer other novel ways to welcome their clients.

Learning from the Past

Collaborative approaches to homelessness don’t guarantee smooth sailing. Dwayne’s Home is a 140-bed transitional housing building that provides services for people in need. A former hostel was converted by Dave Martyshuk, a businessman wanting to help Edmonton achieve its homelessness plan. While Dwayne’s Home demonstrates the positive impact private-public partnerships can have in city-building, it has also created conflict in the Downtown Edmonton neighbourhood. “There have been issues with loitering, aggressive panhandling, and people being threatening,” says DECL president Chris Buyze. However, now that Dwayne’s home clients have access to residential social services, Buyze is hopeful that conditions will improve.

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The community league supports the development of social housing. “Just because people live in social housing doesn’t mean they can’t be responsible neighbours,” says Buyze. He says DECL wants to meet and understand the needs of all downtown residents, regardless of socioeconomic status. OCL president Lisa Brown echoes this. She says the league’s Civics Committee wants the City to mandate a minimum number of below-market units for every newly rezoned project in Oliver.

This type of co-operation gives Coun. McKeen hope that Edmonton can address homelessness. However, he says, “we have to spread social housing around the city on major transit routes and allow other communities to volunteer to help. It’s up to all of us to make sure that this city is a just, welcoming and compassionate community for everyone.”

Providing safe housing is not simple. Some neighbourhoods actively block social housing; others are forced to take more than their share. This happened in five downtown neighbourhoods, including McCauley and Central McDougall. In 2012, 61 percent of McCauley housing was “non-market” (ie: social housing) units. Some argued that concentrating social housing creates ghettos and potentially houses those who are vulnerable to addiction and exploitation in triggering areas. The City put a moratorium on new non-market housing in those five neighbourhoods and is encouraging families and seniors to move into the area.

Housing isn’t just about giving people living in difficult circumstances a safe place to suffer, McKeen says. It’s a chance to reach their highest potential. “[Most homeless citizens] are gentle people with the potential to be happy, creative, and good volunteers and neighbours.” Without making room for them, via social housing or accessible services, the housed citizens won’t see beyond the stereotypes of our vulnerable populations.

We’ll always need the Boyle Streets and Bissells of Edmonton. But if we can lessen their loads by providing good housing and stability for the people they serve, Edmonton can become an even better city than the one envisioned in the CCDP. And the bench outside of Daly’s office could come to symbolize something more than the obvious. It could be a place where any of Edmonton’s citizens could sit together and, in doing so, show their highest potential.