

How Did Calgary Get Its River Parks?

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Article abstract

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Abstract

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Résumé

Comment Calgary a-t-elle obtenu ses parcs bordant la rivière? Ils n'existaient certainement pas lors de sa fondation ni pendant son développement : on a dû les créer. L'article montre que leur élaboration, plutôt récente, est issue de frictions avec le modernisme, qui aurait malheureusement pu destiner les terrains à d'autres usages. À Calgary, les parcs bordant la rivière ont fait leur apparition au milieu des années 1960, à la suite de contestations qui ont divisé la ville. Les mouvements de femmes de Calgary, de pair avec l'élite urbaine, de même que les bureaucrates responsables de la planification et les philanthropes se sont concertés pour mettre le projet de l'avant, sans oublier d'y intégrer la rivière. Les citoyens se sont tellement attachés à la nouvelle conception des abords de leur rivière qu'ils étaient prêts à risquer de subir des inondations pour en conserver les espaces verts. Le résultat aurait pu être bien différent, et l'a presque été. L'article met en relief un profond, quoique contingent, changement d'attitude populaire et politique à l'égard de la rivière dans la vie urbaine de Calgary, changement qui suscite des considérations culturelles marquées au sujet de l'environnement et de la nature.

Popular attitudes towards the environment change. What is acceptable, even commonplace at one moment, can become an abuse a short time later. How this occurs is not well understood. But it surely happens, and when it does, it inevitably comes as an unpleasant surprise to anyone operating on former assumptions. That a change has occurred is often signalled by

unexpected opposition to a seemingly conventional proposal; the ensuing controversy serves to spread and consolidate the new perception. Such was the case in Calgary in the 1960s.¹

Sometime during the mid-twentieth century the Bow River passed in the public mind from being a working river, privately and publicly appropriated, altered and used for economic purposes, to something completely different, a park appreciated more for the public amenities and pleasure it provided. It came to be valued more for its aesthetic, recreational, and cultural attributes than its narrowly defined economic applications. This shift in public perception reconfigured the boundaries of what it was permissible to do with the river and on its banks, and who had the power to do it. This attitudinal shift was most obvious in Calgary when a joint proposal by the city and the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1963 to relocate the railroad tracks and an expressway through the urban core to the south bank of the Bow River precipitated a controversy that revealed the extent of this fundamental rethinking of the relationship of the river, and eventually led to the redesign of the river as a park.

Public opinion might have been a necessary factor in the social reconstruction of the river as a park in Calgary, but it was not sufficient. There had been no shortage of plans for what the river might have been; to plan and then bring about change requires power. And political power usually involves a coalition of interests. Thus other contributing factors led to the reconfiguration of the river as park besides public opinion—economic, bureaucratic, and of course natural forces, emanating from the river itself. The river could not make itself into a park, but it could work with—and sometimes against—those social groups who, for quite different reasons, conspired in the transformation.

Without doubt the attitudinal and policy shift in Calgary mirrored and often drew upon similar changes in the broader culture. Attitudes towards the natural world and civic culture underwent profound changes throughout North America at this time.² This new public sensitivity to the environment, combined with a revival of consciousness about urbanism and popular involvement in civic governance helped make the late twentieth century a monumental epoch of park making. But it must be emphasized that the new cultural pattern emerging was not simply pure thought working itself out in Hegelian fashion, but rather the aggregation of hundreds of individual struggles over particular objectives—expressways, waterfronts, heritage structures, real estate developments—played out at the local level across the continent. The Calgary experience along the Bow is thus both representative of this much wider movement and by its outcomes and example a contributor to it.

In a democracy, public parks are made out of leisure, a cultural commodity that is available in differing quantities and expresses itself as different needs over time. Changing leisure patterns have much to do with this perceptual shift. Parks also express a certain collective affluence, a conspicuous rejection of more

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conventionally productive alternative uses. Leisure and affluence became relatively more abundant in the post-World War II era. Parks and the public use of parks also expressed a new civic spirit; as prideful public places they reified citizenship and provided focus for a sense of place.

The small but growing body of literature on the history of urban parks tends these days to focus on their social dimension—the social purpose built into their design, the social dislocation attendant upon their construction, the social control they exercised, differential social access to public space, and the changing social uses of parks.³ By contrast this paper will emphasize the environmental aspect of parks, including the political economy from which they emerge, their contingent nature, parks advocacy as part of a broader women's political agenda, the coalition of forces needed to build them, and the necessity for nature to co-operate in the redesign of a river as a park.

Through social and political action, the Bow River became incorporated in popular perceptions of urban space in a new way, and it was remade as a park in that image. The Bow became an easy and agreeable place to visit, an object of pride, an example for others to follow. Nothing symbolizes this more than the familiar photograph of Calgary composed in the 1990s, emphasizing the river as a swath of green and blue arching gracefully through the city, gently cradling the gleaming towers of the downtown core. In this photograph, as in the popular perception, the river is not only central to the self-image of the city, but also the curves and verdure of the river park have established a new harmonious equilibrium between nature and the hard-edged, rectangular verticality of the post-modern city.

How then did Calgary get its river parks? They certainly were not there to begin with. They weren't there as the city grew. They had to be built. Surprisingly, they were constructed relatively recently, and then only after an astonishingly close brush with urban renewal, in which the land might have been dedicated to other dramatically different uses. History and nature rarely draw straight lines. The story of Calgary's river-park system is as sinuous and indirect as the river itself. How the river become a park is only partly to be understood by asking why it didn't become an auto-rail transportation corridor. But that question provides a good starting point.

I

From the beginning, as the city grew up around the axis of the CPR, the river was very much the city's backyard. Industrial uses—sawmills, power plants—occupied the riverbank, at that time somewhat removed from the downtown. The city's first sewer emptied unceremoniously into the river just east of Centre Street. In a forthright manner, the river was first put to use. Appreciation came later. As the city grew northward, one by one the lots on the south bank became dotted with the frame houses of woodworkers from the Eau Claire Lumber Company, small businesses, and warehouses. On the eastern margins, the Chinese community congregated. Floods regularly coursed



Figure 1: Aerial photograph of Calgary in the early 1990s

through the district, sweeping away the more fragile structures, depositing muck and debris, doing little to enhance property values or encourage extensive investment. The south bank of the Bow thus became a gritty working-class, commercial part of town in the Edwardian era, and it remained so for more than half a century. In the process, Calgary's backyard, as sometimes happens, became something of a junkyard.

The idea that the river might be a park had therefore to contend with the reality that it was anything but. While business people, workers, and merchants went about the very unpretty business of making a living, from a loftier perspective others scorned their neglect and harboured more grandiose notions of what the river might become. The most famous of these episodes occurred just before First World War.

A British town planner, Thomas Mawson, passing through on assignment to draw up a town plan for Banff, saw much more golden possibilities in Calgary. With support and encouragement from a civic-minded group of business people, Mawson drew up a ideal city plan for Calgary that applied the principals of the City Beautiful movement to the Calgary setting. Town planners of this persuasion hoped to counterbalance the individualism, anomie, commercial clutter, and haphazard development of industrial societies with architectural grandeur designed to inspire civic engagement and maintain public order. Imposing public spaces, fountains, tree-lined avenues, parks, vistas leading the eye to statuary, monuments, and dignified public buildings were the instruments whereby a proud citizenry could live a better life and contemplate a higher destiny.⁴ Mawson deployed all of the elements of the City Beautiful vocabulary in his imaginary remake of the Calgary into what visually resembled the capital of some theatrical middle-European principality. He realigned the main east-west axis of the city along the river, drawing the civic core of the city northward into

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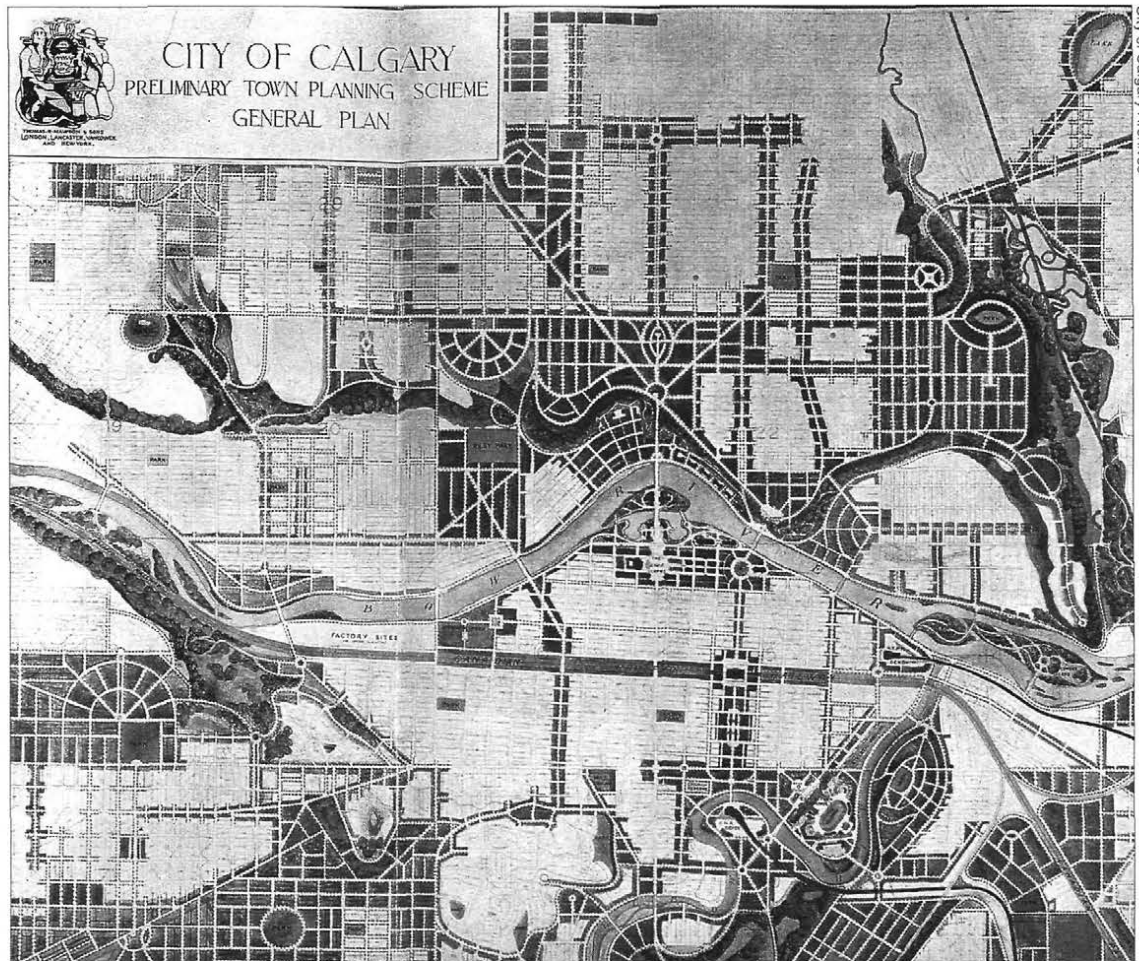


Figure 2: Detail of Thomas Mawson's Plan for the City of Calgary, 1913

the curve of the Bow. At the intersection of the north-south and east-west axes he placed a huge roundabout—a Trafalgar Square, a Place de la Concorde—centred on a plinth. To the west he situated a domed city hall, facing east onto a long mall, liberally adorned with state buildings, that led to another large traffic circle at Centre Street, where a huge municipal auditorium echoed the government buildings at the opposite end. Government (city hall), history (museums), and the performing arts (concert hall) anchored the three cardinal points of Mawson's triangular core; he connected these points with grand avenues, ceremonial spaces, and, on the hypotenuse, river parks. Above all, Mawson turned the river into a major civic asset. Quays along the south bank and neoclassical building facades leant a suggestion of London or Paris to the Bow. An elegant bridge carried the main north-south artery across the river, between two grand museums on Prince's Island. As the road entered the city between towering gates, across massive squares and under an admiralty arch, two scalloped lagoons carved out of the south channel served as elegant reflecting

pools to the surrounding architecture and boating basins in the summer. Mawson lined the Bow with green space and elegant driveways on both banks.

In the eyes of history, Mawson's Plan is little more than a designer's pipe dream.⁵ The timing could not have been worse; the collapse of the real estate boom in 1913 put a damper on creative thinking about urban design; the war stamped it out entirely. After the war the imperial triumphalism of Mawson's design rang a little hollow. Beautiful and awe inspiring Mawson's plan might be, but it seemed obviously unsuited to a city this size, out of step with public taste, the western ethos, climate and especially to the turbulent and unpredictable behaviour of the river.⁶ Major floods in 1915, 1923, and 1928 put a good deal of Mawson's plan under several feet of muddy water.

Meanwhile some scattered pieces of the river-park puzzle were gathered up in haphazard fashion. At the turn of the century, William Pearce, the federal land agent, persuaded the government of Canada to sell three small islands in the Bow River for

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one dollar to the city for park purposes. With minimal investment, St. George's and St. Patrick islands became a tranquil retreat a short distance from the city for fishing, boating, and picnicking. Before World War I the city acquired from the newly formed province of Alberta a strip of land it owned along the north bank of the river—originally the intended routing for the CPR—for a road. After the war, Memorial Drive, planted by civic-minded service clubs, became an automotive arboretum to the memory of the fallen.⁷ On the river above the city, another river-park concept flourished. On a flood plain at the end of a trolley line, a summertime amusement park and pleasure ground at Bowness attracted the city's youth. Downstream at a bend in the river by the Western Irrigation District weir, the Pearce family donated its estate, once a model farm, to the city in the 1920s. Shortly afterward Selby Walker surrendered the family's riverfront property in Inglewood for a bird sanctuary.⁸ Up and down the river between 1900 and the 1930s, the city acquired several isolated properties without any clear plan or purpose. But together they contained the germ of the idea of a system of river parks.

Thus from the 1920s onward, industry and neglect defined the south bank of the Bow River and the automobile the north. During the Depression the revival of a public works ethos to absorb excess employment presented a theoretical opening to riverfront renewal (and some work was done to shore up the dikes at St. George's Island), but civic effort was then fully focused on completing construction of the costly Glenmore Dam and waterworks. The Second World War redirected public investment towards airfields, army camps, and war industries. Thus it was not until the revival of an urban economic expansion in the 1950s, fuelled by the discovery of oil, that civic thinking returned to the question of what should be done with the river.

In the 1950s the south bank of the Bow River in Calgary was an eyesore, a decaying and derelict commercial site. A greasy zone of light industry, largely dedicated to the maintenance, repair, and accommodation of automobiles, separated the downtown from the Bow River. Box-like warehouses, fragrant autobody shops, garages, and parking lots, and the abandoned Eau Claire sawmill—a painful reminder of the transience of resource-based industrialization—blocked approaches to the river in the urban core. Weeds, shrubs, poplars, and cottonwood trees had haphazardly recolonized Prince's Island. Seen from the north, the south bank presented a grim, vaguely fortified brow of hastily thrown up dikes, bulldozed from the scoured riverbed in the mid-fifties, casually surfaced with broken pavement from city streets, punctured occasionally by storm-sewer outfalls. Chain-link fences topped with barbed wire lined the dikes, guarding littered storage yards and squat cinder-block buildings. Literally hundreds of properties abutted the riverbank along the south shore, a miscellaneous collection of residential lots and commercial establishments, all resolutely backing rather than fronting on the river. The river was still a forgotten part of the city, not exactly out of sight, but certainly

out of mind. The river was still Calgary's "out back," a place to pile rubble waiting for another day, or toss aside broken pieces of equipment, like the wrecked car teetering on the dike, about to tumble into the river, captured in a 1955 photograph.⁹

During the 1950s the strongest public pressure for river-front redevelopment came from the Calgary Local Council of Women. As part of a larger campaign to improve social services and public amenities in the city, the organized women's movement petitioned city council to create a ribbon of park along the south bank of the Bow River from 14th Street in the west to the Cushing Bridge in the east.¹⁰ On 28 November 1955, council accepted the idea of a River Bank Development Scheme in principle and afterwards took three steps in the direction of carrying it out. First, it set aside a small sum of money to acquire land when it became available and landscape the river property it already owned. Second, in 1958 in an effort to stem the flow of development toward the suburbs, it rezoned the area between the city core and the riverbank, from light industrial to high-density residential. This zoning change, it was hoped, would revitalize a decaying area, replace grimy industry and deteriorating single-family houses with modern high-rise apartments, complement the commercial core with a nearby residential area, and increase tax revenues to pay for improved services, including parks. Third, the city began to engage the many interest groups, public agencies, and its rudimentary planning capabilities in a process of thinking about a more comprehensive development plan for the downtown, including both the central business district and the river. Thus the Local Council of Women's simple green strip along the river became swallowed up in the bureaucratic machinery of urban renewal.

Still, by 1959, not much had been accomplished towards riverbank development. A pre-existing Parks Department plan to turn Prince's Island, an abandoned lumber storage yard, to recreational uses got off the ground in 1955 with an appropriation of \$75,000 for clearing and the construction of picnic facilities. The city quietly purchased ten properties abutting the river for an additional \$65,000. But there were reverses too. An interdepartmental public works comedy of errors interfered with headway between Centre Street and the Langevin Bridge. The Parks Department cleaned up and planted this stretch of the riverbank no less than four times, only to have the Engineering Department rip everything out to raise the dikes against floods. The city lacked the will, and accordingly the resources, to tackle the river park project seriously. The City Planning Department and the Technical Planning Board estimated the total cost of a modest River Development Scheme at \$852,486 in 1955. This figure broke down into \$320,965 for land acquisition and \$531,521 for development.¹¹ Even a more financially digestible half-measure was estimated to cost a minimum of a half a million dollars. Some of this amount could be squeezed out of annual departmental budgets, but most would have to be new money. Thus, despite good intentions, progress on the river park stalled when it came to the cost. Political commitment to

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Figure 3: Backyards on the south bank of the Bow River, Calgary, in the mid-1950s

the River Bank Development Scheme was half-hearted; so too, as it turned out, was civic investment in the park idea.

II

Appropriately, in a petroleum city, the automobile drove the next phase of the process. The corollary of suburbanization was, of course, traffic congestion entering and leaving the city centre. There were effectively three barriers to smooth traffic flow in Calgary: the river, the railway tracks, and the narrow downtown streets. In the eyes of transportation planners, the city needed more bridges across the river to connect with the northern suburbs, more access points through the railway lands to the south, and a major east-west artery through the central business district to distribute and collect traffic. Of course parking places also had to be created for the thousands of cars pouring into the city each day. Beyond this narrowly focused thinking lay a broader modernist concern: an old, worn out, and largely wooden two-storey cattle town needed to be completely refurbished with roads, office buildings, and apartment towers to make its proper mark on the skyline of a booming oil economy.¹²

As part of the urban renewal thinking, city transportation engineers had begun to draw up plans in the late 1950s to accommodate increased automobile traffic in the core. Tentatively a new bridge was proposed to bring traffic in from the northwest, which would connect with a much-enlarged parkway aligned along 1st Avenue. The city had long resented the inconveniently

placed CPR rail corridor, which, apart from dividing the city with an 120-metre-wide "iron curtain"¹³ penetrable at only a few points, also occupied more than forty hectares of untaxable prime real estate slicing through the heart of the central business district. If only the CPR could somehow pick up its tracks and go to some other part of the city, all of the north-south streets could be connected across the rail lands, there would be ample parking close to downtown, and more importantly, millions of dollars worth of developable real estate would instantly modernize the city and produce the taxes necessary to fund enhanced services. At the beginning of the 1960s this amalgam of suburban drivers' frustrations, traffic engineers' dreams, and municipal modernist yearnings came together with near-fatal consequences for the slowly gestating River Bank Development Scheme.

A simple letter from the mayor of Calgary to the CPR, about parking and other uses of railway lands, launched a series of secret meetings, a parallel planning process, negotiations, and ultimately a master agreement between the city and the company for a major urban redevelopment. If completed it would incidentally have buried the riverbank beneath a parkway and a railway mainline.

In 1959 Mayor Harry Hays asked N. R. Crump, president of the CPR, to give some thought to a city parking study that suggested higher urban development of the company's right-of-way. Since the CPR executives had themselves already begun

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Figure 4: Junk on the banks of the Bow River, mid-1950s

to explore ways of maximizing the value of the railway's extensive land holdings across the country, they readily opened confidential discussions with the mayor about ways of turning the railway lands into real estate.¹⁴ At this early stage it was vaguely assumed on both sides that the tracks would either be rerouted around the city, or buried in a tunnel. After hasty preliminary studies, the railway rejected all of the bypass routes because of cost and unacceptable grades. It also concluded that the track burial scheme was impractical on account of the high water table. By a process of elimination, the CPR's preferred solution involved rerouting its main line around the city in an arc along the south bank of the Bow River. The city transportation planners welcomed the idea, mainly because it presented them with an opportunity to run a multi-lane crosstown parkway parallel to the new railway alignment.¹⁵

On 4 April 1963, after months of rumours, Mayor Harry Hays, and an energetic young CPR executive, Rod Sykes, unveiled the joint plan at a news conference in the Palliser Hotel. The railway main line would be moved; the new right-of-way and an accompanying parkway would sweep around the downtown in a crescent along the south bank of the Bow River. On the central portion of the vacated right-of-way the CPR planned to build about a dozen new buildings, including several gleaming office towers, a major department store, a hotel, a transportation and communications complex, and a convention centre. The rest of the old rail corridor would be freed up eventually for similar development. In the meantime, four new north-south crossings would be pushed through the rail lands, with a possibility of four more in the future as required.¹⁶

This combined downtown development and transportation corridor realignment was, to say the least, the most revolutionary and comprehensive development proposal ever made in the city. At first glance the plan lifted the iron curtain dividing north

from south, delivered a skyline of instant modernist architecture to the city, dramatically expanded the tax base, and solved some vexing traffic issues. At this stage, however, the city and the company had settled upon only a framework for the overall concept, a document called the Heads of Agreement, under which negotiations would continue to resolve technicalities.¹⁷ As might have been expected, the devil lurked furtively among the details.

The spectacular complex of buildings on the rail lands generated the most public excitement and gushing press support. The associated road/rail routing along the river came across as a secondary issue. With our concern for the shape of the river, however, the fate of the south bank is more pertinent to this paper than the rail lands. It is important to note that the river park was not foreordained, carried inexorably forward by some civic greening zeitgeist. Indeed in 1963–1964 it seemed likely that the concept would be traded off with only mild regret. Economic and political power in the city seemed to support a different outcome. When the city and one of the largest corporations in the country agreed on a transportation corridor for the riverbank, it is worth asking why it did not get built?

The railway-city proposal envisioned a two-track main line running along the bank of the river on a fifteen-metre right-of-way. A barrier of trees and landscaping would separate the rail line from a four-lane divided automobile parkway at a slightly higher elevation. Both parallel routes would be further screened from the city by a wall of trees and green space. The south bank would become a mirror image of the north bank, with the addition of two railway tracks and many more trees. At the east end by the confluence of the Bow and the Elbow rivers, a new union station serving both CN and CP trains would be built. The city and the company agreed to share the cost of land acquisition proportional to their respective needs, as well as the necessary road and bridge realignment. Initial estimates placed these costs at \$4,296,000.¹⁸

There were some notable exceptions to the overwhelming popular response to the project. Women led the charge against the transportation corridor. Immediately following the announcement, Kathleen Worall wrote to the city on behalf of the University Women's Club deploring the loss of the riverbank. Most progressive cities, she reminded Commissioner Steel, were clearing tracks and industry from these areas. Soon afterward, the Local Council of Women added its voice, forwarding a resolution to the city, reminding council of its earlier promise of a park. Individual women, such as Mrs. W. Barker, wrote condemning "the use of the river bank for cars and trains." Six professional engineers in the city recommended routing the rail corridor around the city via a northern alignment up Nose Hill Creek, thereby sparing the riverbank. From inside the municipal government the superintendent of parks expressed some concerns about the project, even though he had not been given a formal opportunity to study the plan. Landscape costs had not been fully calculated, he warned; Princes Island appeared to be almost completely cut off from the city. "From a beautification

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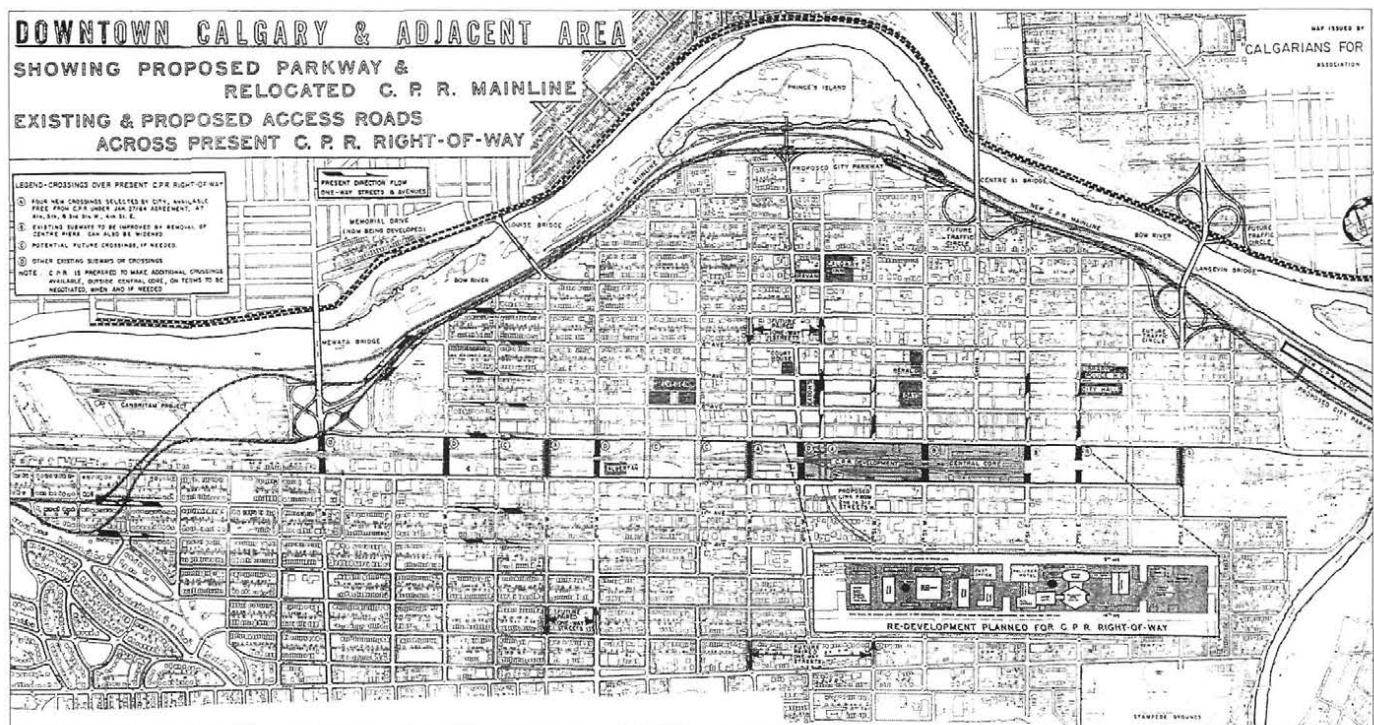


Figure 5: Map of the riverbank expressway, CPR track relocation and rail lands redevelopment proposal

point of view there appears to be practically no opportunity to view the river from the road-way due to the railroad embankment."¹⁹

The city responded to these criticisms by stressing that its zoning changes and urban renewal would beautify the entire industrial/commercial area, not just the riverbank. But the city promised to study the issue and do its utmost to mitigate the perceived problems. The CPR was more aggressive. From Montreal, Ian Sinclair firmly rejected the suggestion to depress the tracks below grade in their present location. That would disrupt main-line operations, open unknown problems in combating the high water table, and certainly require costly maintenance. In Calgary, Rod Sykes refuted criticism of the project: "The redevelopment of the river bank will make attractive what is now a wasteland and partly a commercial slum." He recommended that Calgarians see the riverbank for themselves: "You can't see it from the car, but take a short walk westward along the dyke starting from the slaughterhouse at 6th Street East." Development would make the riverbank more attractive, he claimed; the tracks would be clean and neat, the curve beautifully landscaped, running without sidings, yards, or industries through trees and shrubbery under pedestrian and motor bridges. The track would run along the protective dike system, an area unsuited to parkland on account of "the deep, swift running current." Sykes insisted, "Parents concerned for their children's safety never let their children play in this area."²⁰

During the summer and fall of 1963, aspects of the development became clearer as numerous surveys and studies were conducted and the detailed negotiations between the city and the CPR continued. Consultants were retained, and several evaluative studies commissioned to help guide deliberations.²¹ From the outset a hefty majority of the city council endorsed the proposal. A minority led by Alderman Leslie remained adamantly opposed to such intimate dealings with the CPR.²² When Harry Hays won a federal by-election (defeating Alderman Leslie) and entered the cabinet as minister of agriculture, Alderman Grant MacEwan had to carry the ball for the city, first as acting mayor, then following the municipal election as mayor in his own right. Initially he was a tepid supporter of the scheme, insisting that the ratepayers approve any final agreement in a plebiscite. Unlikely and somewhat awkward in the role of real estate developer, a somewhat diffident and bemused Mayor MacEwan nevertheless had to handle the complex negotiations with the CPR, deal with the province, and, along with Commissioner Steel, lead the public campaign.²³ The municipal elections that year as it turned out were the only opportunity for the ratepayers to pronounce upon the issue. The election could not, however, be construed as a plebiscite on the project. MacEwan's personal popularity won him election; no members of council would appear to have either won or lost on account of the development. Outside of council, public opinion seemed to strongly support going ahead. A predictable coalition of interest groups formed behind the project, including the Calgary Real Estate Board, the Chamber of Commerce, the

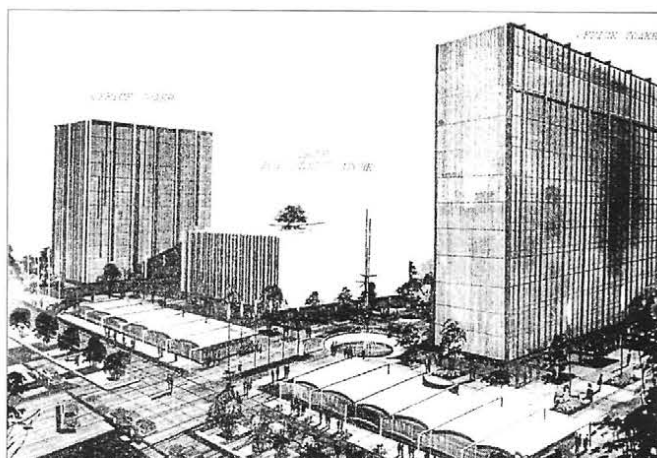
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Calgary Labour Council, several local service clubs, and both newspapers, the *Herald* and the *Albertan*. A prominent oilman, Carl Nickle, headed up the Calgary Development Committee to lead the publicity campaign for the project.

One by one the studies came in from Stanford Research, Van Ginkel Associates, and Dr. Hansen offering favourable evaluations of aspects of the proposal. In November the City Planning Department endorsed the project. On the subject of corridor relocation the Van Ginkel report concluded emphatically that the trade-off of four hectares of riverbank "which is at present worthless" for more than forty hectares of prime land in the city core was amply justifiable: "The south bank of the river is not used at present. Indeed, this whole stretch along the river is completely lost to the community and in many instances is a disgrace. The new parkway will give the river back to the city. Landscaping should be capable of handling this area in such a way that the railway tracks are not unsightly."²⁴

Negotiations had reached the point by the beginning of the New Year where the city and the CPR needed to enter a formal contractual agreement to proceed further. The nineteen clauses of the contract fleshing out the earlier letter of intent filled six double-column pages with fine print. But the picture was essentially the same. The city promised to acquire the necessary lands for the new right-of-way and parkway, either by purchase or expropriation. The railway agreed in turn to pay for the land required for the rail right-of-way, which would be free of taxation just as the former route was. Cost-sharing for bridge reconstruction and the relocation of utilities was spelled out. Meanwhile the CPR undertook to spend a minimum of \$10 million over seven years developing the vacated rail lands, beginning with the old station site but extending eventually to its entire tract, creating taxable real estate as each project was completed. As part of the CPR downtown development, the city undertook to build a convention centre and use the proposed transportation centre as the hub of its municipal transit operations. At a tumultuous meeting on 22 January 1964 the city council voted eight to three to execute the contract with the CPR.²⁵

As plans solidified, and especially after a contract had been negotiated and published, the critics had something concrete to attack and they became more vocal. Substantial challenges to the proposal came from three sources: trained professionals including academics and planners; disaffected real estate interests and others who instinctively distrusted the CPR; and the Local Council of Women. In December 1963, professors Coulson, Johnson, and Nelson from the University of Calgary released a sharp condemnation of the plan. This brief attacked the plan on five fronts: the city's planning failure to bring a more comprehensive view of downtown planning to the project; the biases of the studies justifying the economics of the plan; the city's apparent loss of control over CPR lands development; the inadequate consideration given to alternative routes for the rail line; and the misuse of the riverbank for transportation purposes.²⁶ A few months later, Dr. D. Styliaras published a mild-mannered but devastating critique of the plan in the *Journal*



Glenbow Archives, Calgarians for Progress pamphlet

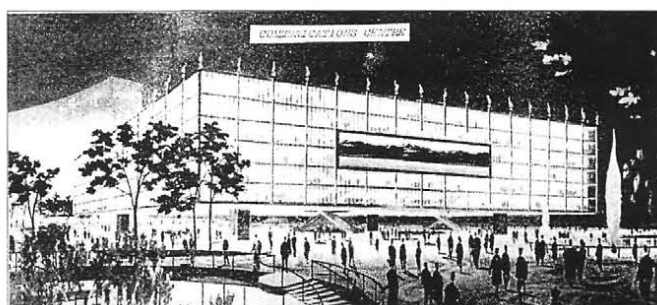


Figure 6: Artist's rendering of the office towers, transportation hub, and conference centre planned for the CPR lands

of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. The east-west parkway did not address Calgary's largely north-south traffic problems, he argued. Moreover, in violation of good planning principles, it relocated a freight railway through the heart of a city rather than diverting it around the city. And he concluded, "The character of Calgary is likely to remain fragmented,

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aimless and spotty with little or no true urbanity. What should be its most cherished natural amenity, the river bank, has been chosen to serve irrelevant transportation purposes."²⁷

The Barrons, the father J. B. and the son Robert H., owned commercial real estate in the vicinity of the CPR lands. Following years of bitter experience with their neighbour, they harboured an almost visceral animus against the CPR in general. This project in particular raised their ire. Robert H. Barron, a lawyer, gathered all of the relevant documents, clipped the newspapers assiduously, marshalled his evidence, then launched a withering critique of the plan in a series of letters to the editor and public speeches. Barron began with a disarmingly simple question that had a profound resonance in a western city: "How much will the CPR pay in taxes?" He was not much exercised about the routing of the main line of the CPR along the riverbank. Rather, what offended him most was the fact that the old tracks would largely remain long afterwards as sidings serving local industries: the "iron curtain" holding traffic out of the core from the south would remain. Once the contract was published he was in his element, picking it apart clause by clause, showing how the city had been hoodwinked by sharper legal minds. He was especially effective in pointing out the way in which the CPR lawyers had ensured that existing properties would be removed from the tax rolls and that large portions of the proposed development would also remain untaxed for many years to come. With scathing sarcasm he showed how the contract was a one-sided deal favouring the CPR: it obligated the city in many ways, but the CPR was not similarly constrained. W. H. Morrow, counsel for a group of Calgary citizens, professionals, and property owners, joined Barron in decrying the tax exemptions granted to the CPR by the contract.²⁸

The Local Council of Women played an increasingly effective role in informing public debate, providing a forum for discussions and questioning the authorities. One member of a special committee struck to examine the proposal, Ruth Gorman, a lawyer by profession, emerged as an unfailingly polite but devastating critic of the development. She too focused on the tax implications of the contract for the CPR. She peppered the council with precise and often embarrassing questions about who was to pay for what. The public meetings sponsored by the Local Council of Women and Ruth Gorman's relentless interrogation of city officials contributed to the growing public suspicion that *the city did not fully understand what it was getting itself into*. Moreover, the Local Council of Women did not lose sight of their longstanding objective: a green strip along the riverbank. The city's oft-repeated promise, they observed mordantly, "seems to have fallen into the river."²⁹

A combative Rod Sykes fired back with gusto to refute some of the more outlandish rumours. Mayor MacEwan and Commissioner Steel dutifully turned up at public meetings, only to be shouted down by angry critics. The city constructed a scale model to show more clearly the dimensions and the benefits of the riverfront proposals. To counter the mounting opposi-

tion, the oilman and former Chamber of Commerce chairman Carl Nickle formed a new group with the Labour Council president Leo Chikinda, Calgarians for Progress, to press even harder for the scheme. This lobby group stressed the broad community support behind the development and its benefits for all Albertans. The multi-million dollar investment would reduce the Calgary property tax burden, create jobs, build an "alliance for growth" between the city and the corporate sector, halt the "dry rot" in the downtown, and give Calgary an entirely "new look." The CPR would begin its development promptly, it would pay taxes amounting to a net gain to the city of more than \$4 million in 1981. If a feasible alternative route could be found, Calgarians for Progress insisted they too would preserve the riverbank, "even though the odds are heavily against it ever becoming an area of public enjoyment in the form envisaged by some." Turning the riverfront into a green strip would cost a prohibitive \$4 million. In large measure that objective could be obtained for free as a consequence of this larger development. "River bank beautification is, in fact, a key feature of the City-CP Project," their literature claimed. The railway would be screened with landscaping, as would the parkway. "The Bow River South Bank would, under the project, be far more attractive than today."³⁰

In the early months of 1964 the city polarized for and against the development. Debate over the joint city-CPR project unbridled the emotions of the city, not all of them admirable. Intemperate letters to the editor, inflammatory speeches, and threats of lawsuits poisoned the atmosphere; rational debate became almost impossible. Outrageous claims were made on both sides. Tempers flared. Mayor MacEwan and the alderman supporting the scheme received death threats.³¹ The opponents still probably represented a small but vocal minority of the population, yet they made telling arguments, seemed to run circles around the city, and tapped deep reservoirs of resentment against the CPR. Calgarians for Progress fought to ensure that a modernist future for the city would not slip away. For different reasons the opponents were just as determined that they were saving Calgary from an irreversible fate.

The scope of the project and the many technical issues it raised required the city to petition the province for amendments to its charter, some protection from liability, and broader enabling power. The CPR also preferred to have the sanction of the senior level of government for its agreement with the city, which was, after all, in legal terms, a creature of the province. Thus hearings in Edmonton on the city's desired legislation gave critics both a powerful forum and standing as interveners that was equivalent to the principals'. When the city plainly fumbled its presentation to the Agriculture Committee and appeared flat-footed under cross-examination, the opposition case gained strength. All the familiar arguments were restated, though with less heat and at lower volume. The Labour Council, the Calgary Real Estate Board, Calgarians for Progress, the North Calgary Businessmen's Association, and others supported the city and the CPR. The Southbank Bow River Property Owners

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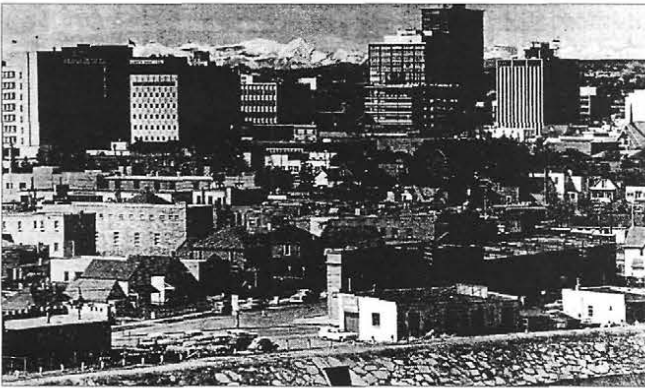


Figure 7: The unsightly south bank of the Bow River where the new expressway would be built and the CPR tracks rerouted

Association, the Calgary Business Men's Club, some local property owners, and R. H. Barron challenged the city's petition for additional powers to implement the agreement. Curiously the Local Council of Women was not represented at this hearing. Mayor MacEwan did not appear comfortable and was not an effective advocate. In any event, the city was blind-sided and its case considerably damaged by the admission of its solicitor, Carson MacWilliams, who testified that he had not been consulted on the file, that it had been handled entirely by a junior, and that in his opinion the contract entered into by the city represented the most one-sided agreement he had ever seen.³² The city's own lawyer thus vindicated the critics. Nevertheless, more out of obligation than the strength of the case, the government agreed to introduce the necessary legislation with only minor changes. Premier Manning himself did just enough public grandstanding about the iniquity of CPR's tax exemption to make everyone forget that he in effect endorsed the project.³³

The way was thus clear for the city and the company to proceed. There were still many small details to be ironed out, and one or two larger issues. The acrimonious controversy had begun to wear down even the proponents of the proponents on council. "Everyone sick of it," Mayor MacEwan wearily observed in his diary on 8 June 8. The CPR, sensing a loss of

will on the part of the city, became more resistant to proposed changes, more insistent upon its rights under the contract, and more demanding that the city fulfill its part of the bargain. To add further to the burden to be borne by the city, the price tag inevitably kept rising. Even pushing the rail line out onto the bed of the river in a few places to save money could not prevent a steep escalation of the price. In January 1964 a more rigorous analysis of the property needed for the new transportation corridor and the cost of reconstructing bridges to raise their height pushed the total cost of the project up over \$8 million, fully \$6 million of which had to be borne by the city.³⁴

Nor was that all. The eastern end of the corridor presented the most intractable problem. The CNR rail yard occupied the terrain just west of the confluence of the Bow and the Elbow, ground across which the CPR tracks were to be diverted and the new parkway was to be run. Indeed, it was expected that a new union passenger terminal would be built on this location as well. The CPR, after having failed on its own to get an agreement with its rival, expected the city to negotiate with the CNR for the surrender of the necessary lands under the terms of the contract. The CNR, though not particularly enthusiastic about the project and with its own interests to protect, nevertheless was prepared in an amicable way to discuss a relocation

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of its entire rail yard to another part of the city. Of course it had its price, which in the spring of 1964 turned out to be \$5 million, most of which would have to be paid by the city. The city had estimated a price of only \$680,000, half of which would be shared by the CPR. When the city in distress turned to its erstwhile partner the CPR to share the unexpected burden, president Crump and vice-president Sinclair insisted that the city fully live up to the terms of the agreement within the time specified or risk losing the project.³⁵

A defeated and disillusioned Mayor MacEwan and his team flew home from Montreal knowing that the additional \$5 million represented the proverbial nail in the coffin for the project. Moreover, they knew that the public support had weakened greatly through the nasty battle.³⁶ On 22 June 1964 council voted ten to three against a continuation of negotiations with the CPR.³⁷ The CPR downtown development was thus pronounced dead and along with it the prospect of a cross-town parkway and a riverbank rail line evaporated.

Aldermen blamed the obduracy of the CPR for the collapse; others in the city breathed a sigh of relief that the city had been freed from an exacting agreement.³⁸ Neither side had foreseen the difficulty or the cost of rerouting the right-of-way. The ratepayers would never get to vote on the development; thus it is impossible to say whether or not it would have proceeded beyond the necessary plebiscite if the city had been able to obtain an economical right-of-way at the eastern end. The election of Alderman Jack Leslie as mayor in 1965 might signify majority public support for his determined resistance to the project, but on the other hand he was succeeded in the mayoralty in 1969 by Rod Sykes, the major proponent of the scheme. Without the CNR obstacle, it is quite likely that there remained enough support on council and in the city to approve the development. Most of the opposition focused upon the terms of the contract governing development on the old right-of-way across midtown. The loss of the riverbank was not the most objectionable feature of the project for many, nor was it the deal-breaker. Instead rivalry between the two national railways and a strategic miscalculation by the CPR put the city in an impossible position. On the municipal side, negotiating incompetence and a growing suspicion that the city had become too close to the developer doomed the project but saved the riverbank. As Commissioner Nicholson explained to an eastern correspondent, the major stumbling block was the inability to secure a right-of-way at the eastern end. Looking ahead he reflected, "At the moment we feel that the matter must be rested for a few years. When it is reopened, it will probably be on a different fundamental plan—perhaps the rerouting of the railway around rather than through the city."³⁹

III

As of the summer of 1964, the riverbank would not be a railway or a parkway, but that did not determine what it would become. For the moment it remained as it had been, a junkyard, a back-

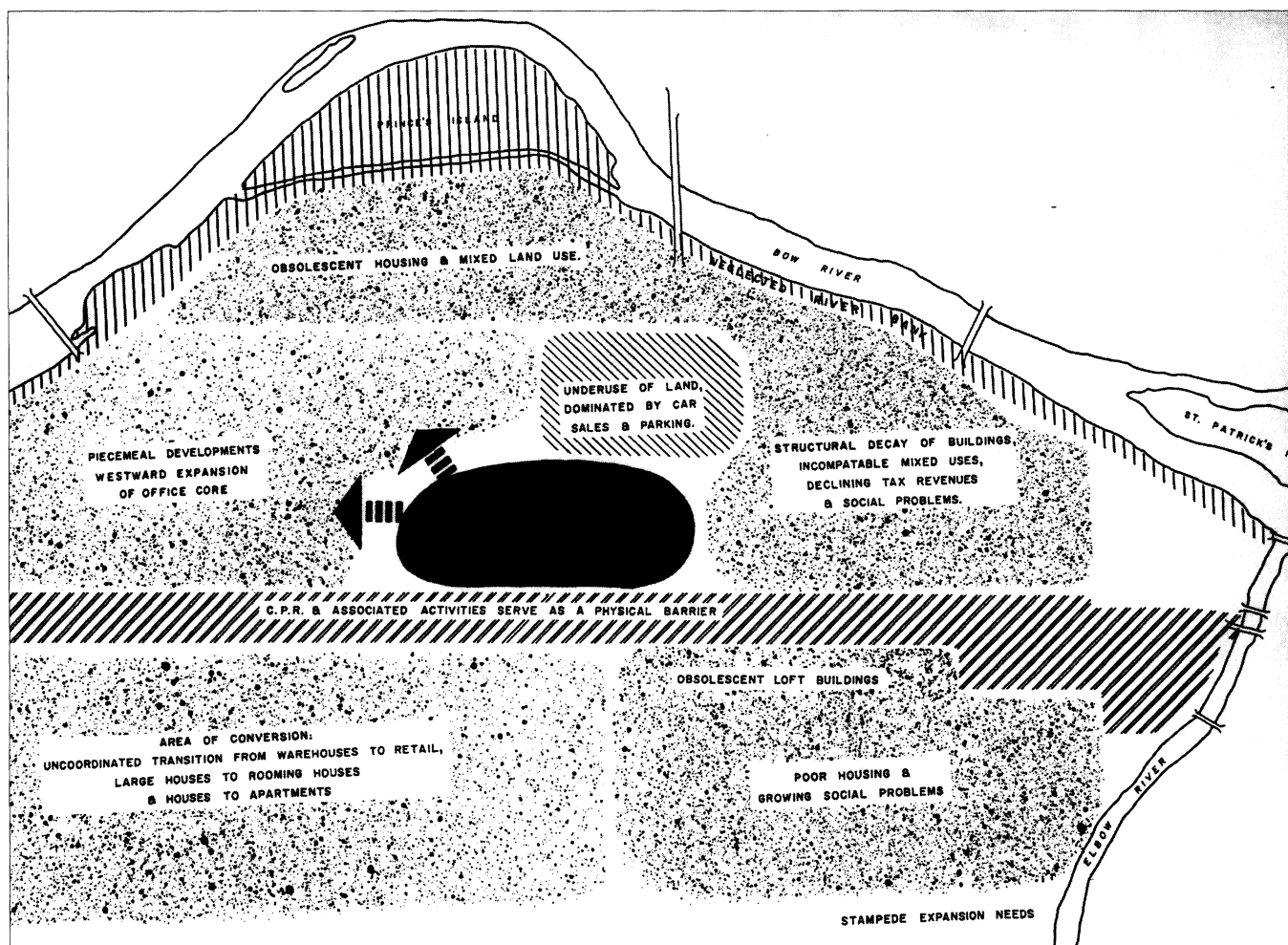
yard, a parking lot, a dike, a disused lumberyard, an industrial site, and a decaying residential neighbourhood.

So where did Calgary's river park come from? In the aftermath of the CPR debacle, several forces converged to make the riverbank a park. First of all, planning received a big boost from the controversy. The need for a more comprehensive concept of the urban core rather than a piecemeal approach to individual developments had been amply demonstrated. Second, the Local Council of Women's campaign for riverfront beautification broadened to include influential urban elites. Coming from elite male domains, the Ranchman's Club and the golf clubs, the park idea seemed more sound. It was no longer simply a women's issue. Third, the river itself had settled down between its banks; it shed its rogue image, appeared more benign and tranquil, something to be adorned and admired. Fourth, a broader cultural shift heightened public awareness of the environment. In this new ethos, the river and its valley represented nature in the city, something to be protected and enjoyed. And last, private philanthropy prodded the city into action. Calgary's first family and largest fortune offered to match municipal expenditures to ensure public pedestrian access to a continuous trail along the riverbank throughout the city. Simultaneously and from these different directions vision, the will and the money emerged.

The emergence of urban planning in Calgary in the aftermath of the CPR debacle certainly assisted the river park movement, but it was not a prime mover. Plans simply gesture in a certain direction, offer a guide for change, state preferences or desired outcomes, all other things being equal: they do not themselves cause things to happen. City planning, as it gained authority in Calgary in the late 1960s, provided legitimacy and a professional endorsement to the idea of a river park.

The city of Calgary did not have an official plan at the beginning of the CPR negotiations. Since 1950 it retained a small planning department that conducted studies, such as the Downtown Parking Study that started the ball rolling. Planning had not yet acquired much authority or professional influence in Calgary.⁴⁰ In the midst of the CPR tumult, in 1963, the city adopted a preliminary development plan—said to be the first in Alberta. Soon after the collapse of the CPR project, however, the city launched a major planning exercise under the direction of a Planning Advisory Committee. The committee's report, *The Future of Downtown Calgary* published in 1966, featured a stinging critique of the "drab and depressing" downtown, the "ring of blight" surrounding it, the worn out residential, commercial, and retail space, and "the lack of downtown parks and breathing space." The Planning Advisory Committee's prescription for the downtown need not detain us here; however, two of its recommendations had implications for the riverbank. In the first place, the committee displaced the crosstown parkway, formerly designated for the south bank, farther south to 4th Avenue. At the same time the committee report deplored the short-sightedness and lack of proper zoning regulation that had allowed the "numberless beauty spots" along the rivers to

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City of Calgary Archives

Figure 8: Map showing downtown decay from the City Planning Department document, *The Future of Downtown Calgary*

become blighted. Only "comprehensive redevelopment" would restore the bank to its rightful purpose and former beauty. The fifteen hectares of Prince's Island presented an excellent opportunity to create an amenity as handsome and useful as Stanley Park in immediate proximity to the downtown. The committee plan envisioned riverbank redevelopment on either side of the main island park that would afford "leisurely, landscaped walkways as an integral part of the Downtown pedestrian system."⁴¹

As the new planning bureaucracy embraced the park idea, some veteran advocates of a riverfront green strip continued their campaign and gained powerful new allies. In 1969 the Local Council of Women received a letter from another group to join forces to beautify the river. The invitation, which the women accepted, came from Mr. Justice Colin McLaurin's newly formed Bow River Beautification Committee. McLaurin, a respected judge and chancellor of the university, had taken up river park development as a civic duty. Having grown up in Calgary skating on the river, he deplored the fact that the river

had become the "back alley" of the city. However, after years of neglect the moment had come to redeem the situation and adorn the city with the unparalleled continuous river park it ought to have enjoyed all along. After three years of arm twisting McLaurin formed a classic elite pressure group of forty-two men and women. Now the river park idea could no longer be dismissed in political circles as simply a women's issue. These people knew how to work the political system work. First they put up \$36,000 to fund a professional feasibility study proposing a design for the keystone of a river park system. A renewed Prince's Island would in turn form the backdrop for major urban renewal in the Eau Claire area.⁴² They also knew that existing shared-cost programs reduced the city portion to only 20 per cent of the total cost. The federal government would put up 50 per cent and the province 30 per cent.

Thus in the late 1960s a powerful lobby group put a convincing proposal to the city, consistent with the emerging urban plan, along with an attractive proposal to finance it. As it turned out

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the city did not need much convincing. City officials, working in parallel with this private lobby, had meanwhile developed their own master plan for the island. In 1968 the city would launch a five-year \$1.5 million Prince's Island and Bow River Bank Beautification Program designed by the landscape architects Man, Taylor, and Muret.⁴³ A river park had become the conventional wisdom commanding social, bureaucratic, and political support. And all of this occurred without so much as a word being said about the possibility, only a few years earlier, of the river becoming a transportation corridor.

When Calgary adopted a general plan in 1973, the river park concept had become firmly embedded in municipal thinking. Maps accompanying this report showed continuous green space along the Bow and much of the Elbow. This report demonstrated that parks had moved from being municipal luxuries to necessities, in two fundamental ways. The planners pointed out that the growing leisure accompanying economic and social change created new responsibilities for municipal governments to provide more parks to meet the incorporation of recreational activity into daily life of the citizens. At the same time, well-placed and properly designed parks enhanced the visual quality of the city. Parks thus filled two roles: as places for recreational activity and aesthetic elements in the urban form. Accordingly the 1973 official plan proposed that the river valleys be developed as open spaces that offered continuous public access to all riverbanks at all times and connections to public footpaths throughout the city. The park areas should provide protection against air, water, noise, and visual pollution. Parks were thus a type of wearable art for cities, providing functional amenities and beautiful forms.⁴⁴

Planners and elites could not plausibly have envisioned beautiful parks along the bank if the river did not also co-operate by assuming a compliant character. By the late sixties it had seemingly given up its unruly nature. Summer floods were a thing of distant memory, thanks, it was thought, to the Calgary Power Company's extensive system of hydroelectric storage reservoirs. At the same time, the dikes and the new Bearspaw Dam just upstream from Calgary, built in the late 1950s, seemed to have solved the problem of winter flooding due to ice jamming. The river was no longer a destructive force in the community. Apparently tamed, it flowed gently between its banks. One could go down to the river without fear or foreboding and invest in expensive landscaping on the assumption that it would not all be swept away. In fact the city engineer, more familiar with flood hazard, expressed alarm at the Parks Department program of construction for Prince's Island. Citizens, consultants, and Parks employees should be told that in a major flood the island would be under water at a flow of 1,400 cubic metres per second.⁴⁵

Ironically just as the public had begun to take the river for granted, the city administration had been forced to think otherwise and take action to minimize its flood liability. Public reaction to municipal efforts to cope with potential floods indicates the extent to which both the domesticated river and the river park ideas had penetrated public consciousness. In the late 1960s the

city commissioned the Montreal Engineering Company to study the possibility of future floods and make recommendations to deal with them. In an extraordinary analysis of the hydrology and flood history of the Bow River, the consultants concluded that the possibility of catastrophic floods still existed. Upstream storage had been only a minor factor in flood control. Rather, the weather conditions that produced major floods—extensive wet periods followed by torrential downpours on the foothills—had simply been absent. The river had not been tamed, the frightening implications of which could be seen in the detailed maps of the areas likely to be inundated by a flood of historic proportions. The city could mitigate the problem, and accordingly reduce its liability for property damage, by clearing a flood plain, dredging, raising dikes, and through zoning changes, removing vulnerable buildings from the path. In one sense the Montreal Engineering Flood Study provided yet another argument for a river park. In the event of a flood, mainly municipal parkland with no substantial built structures on it would be at risk. In response to this report, the city accelerated its riverbank land-acquisition program, renewed its efforts to widen and deepen the channel, and stabilized the banks of the river.⁴⁶

Municipal attempts to act responsibly in the face of the likely risk of flooding worked to reinforce the river park project until 1973, when the objectives came in conflict. In an effort to clear the flood channel of potential obstruction, city works crews cut down more than 100 trees encroaching on the bed of the river near St. George's Island. The remarkable public outcry signalled the extent of the shift in popular thinking about the river. In an era of participatory democracy, citizens groups demanded a say in what could be done to *their* river, along with technocrats and bureaucrats. Many ratepayers groups became alarmed looking at the maps of the huge swaths of urban real estate declared to be in the putative flood plain and began worrying about sinking property values. Reeling from the uproar, the city and the province jointly commissioned a Calgary Bow River Study Committee, amply stocked with citizens representatives, to make recommendations about what ought to be done in response to the Montreal Engineering Company report. The commission quickly concluded that the aggressive flood-plain management plan proposed by the consultants should *not* be implemented. Public meetings unanimously condemned a program that involved indiscriminate clearing of the floodway and rezoning of threatened districts. "Speakers on behalf of communities were emphatic in stating that the residents were prepared to take the risk of any flood damage," the commission reported in January 1974. They rejected intrusive excavations of the river, tree removal, and wholesale rezoning of property for flood-control protection, in favour of better flood forecasting, upstream flood-control projects, and a flood-insurance program. There were strict limits on what might be done to the river, even in the name of public safety. Certain aspects of the river could be tinkered with, but the dikes could not be raised to the point of obscuring views, trees removed, or property values threatened by regulations.

A research report prepared for the Bow River Study Commission revealed the extent to which the idea of the

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riverbank as open-space park had been firmly fixed in the public mind. "An overriding policy is required that gives priority position to the recreational resources of the Bow River Valley," the Lombard Group consultants concluded after extensive discussions with community groups and individuals. The city should dedicate undeveloped land to parkland and develop a comprehensive system of parks along the valley floor throughout the metropolitan region. For years the Calgary Local Council of Women had been a voice in the wilderness on this subject, Frances Winspear pointed out in presenting its brief. "We emphasise and reiterate the statement in this impact study that all city and provincial land owned in the flood area should be retained and dedicated to open land space, with no new buildings on these areas, but kept as future natural and recreational land." Prince's Island rehabilitation had been a major triumph; henceforth the city needed to set aside a strip of up to sixty metres for wildlife conservation and recreation. The long-term threat of floods, the women argued, need not interfere with the program of beautification that the Local Council of Women had long advocated.⁴⁷ The consultants noted that active public interest in the river was largely confined to communities alongside the river. However, in those districts the inhabitants were willing to accept the low probability risk of flooding in order to retain "the natural beauty of the river." The look of the river took priority over public liability concerns. The Lombard study emphasized the importance of preserving and enhancing the "visual zones of the Bow River through Calgary" by maintaining vegetation and natural features and rehabilitating "unsightly areas and eyesores."⁴⁸

A certain kind of environmental sensitivity pervaded public consideration of the Bow River in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The river and its banks were to be sure both objects of beauty and a welcome natural presence in the urban environment. But it was a highly selective view of nature. Not everything about the river was beautiful, and nature was valued most when it served human goals. In the consensus, nature should not be interfered with, but in other respects it needed to be improved upon. Minor adjustments to contours and banks could be permitted. Lagoons and reflecting ponds could be scooped out and the channel reamed, but dikes could not be raised too high or trees removed wholesale. Indeed, it was not sufficient just to leave the riverbanks as they were; certain kinds of improvements, some quite expensive, needed to be undertaken—such as planting, landscaping, accommodating picnickers, building cycling and footpaths—for the river to achieve its potential. Grass had to be planted and cut, gardens and rockery tended. On the treeless prairie, the poplars and cottonwoods growing alongside the river in protected valleys were especially valued. Trees were to be encouraged, planted where necessary, and protected from not only human interference but also the increasingly abundant beavers drawn to the city by its trees. To maintain the appearance of the river as a park, municipal employees had to confine all of these trees within wire cages, otherwise they would have been ruthlessly levelled by the industrious national symbol.

There were, to be sure, contradictory elements in this view popular view of nature; it emphasized some things and ignored others. The Bow River valley in Calgary was to be remade in accordance with a "designer" view of nature that privileged aesthetics and certain kinds of pedestrian recreation. Nonetheless, in less than a decade the green strip, once the province of the Local Council of Women alone, became a highly popular public policy, one closely watched by a vigilant and aroused citizenry in the riverside neighbourhoods. The city set an extensive program of public works in motion, within the framework of an official plan, with impetus from urban elites. This program retained broad popular support as long as certain rules were observed, a table of commandments spelled out in considerable detail by the Bow River Study Committee. Afterwards a Calgary River Management Committee, with representatives from the city, the province, and various interest groups kept track of the extensive parks, recreation, floodway, and environmental enhancement projects under way in the metropolitan region.⁴⁹

One more element had to be brought to bear to bring the goal of a continuous system of connected parks throughout the city into being: private money. In 1975 Donald Harvie's Devonian Foundation, which had generously endowed the city with, among other things, the Glenbow Institution and many other charitable donations, offered to put up \$330,000 towards the construction of a twenty-two-kilometre hiking and biking trail if the city would commit \$115,000 to the project.⁵⁰ The city readily accepted. In subsequent years both the Devonian Foundation and the city increased their contributions. The partnership expanded to include the provincial government, which contributed both land and money. More than a million dollars would eventually be poured into this aspect of the river park alone. As a result, the trail system expanded many kilometres to the west.⁵¹

The word *trail* had a special resonance in a Calgary setting. Aboriginal trails through the mountains and across the prairie, and the trails over which cattle were driven were part of popular folklore. When the city built suburban expressways it called them trails. Thus the Harvie gift and the government response also inscribed the river valley with another evocative meaning. The river became both a park and a trail. This string of public lands through which a 1.2-metre-wide trail had been laid was thus crafted into a symbolic space, free of autos, commerce, and buildings, for people to recreate a uniquely western experience of moving on foot under a big sky over distance. There was no historical justification for a trail parallel to the river; Aboriginal travellers took more direct routes. But this was a postmodern trail, not to or from anywhere, but rather along something and through something, a space to pass through aimlessly, simply for the joy of moving. A city being refashioned by oil money, which gloried in its anachronistic Stampede, added a river trail through parkland to its image.

IV

By 1984 the city of Calgary had developed a detailed River Valleys Plan and program of implementation to enhance the

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Photo by the author

Figure 9: Calgary seen from the river park in autumn

riverine environment, permit continuous public access to the river, encourage harmonious uses in adjacent areas, develop the valleys as a focus of year-round recreational activities, improve safety and public health, and reduce losses from flooding, and do so in a way sensitive to community interests. The current Calgary Plan and the Urban Park Master Plan adopted in 1994 put a continuous integrated river valley park system at the core of a Healthy Environment Strategy.⁵² The authority of planners, the power of elites, the compliance of the river, a sentimental but selective popular embrace of the natural, and the newfound public and private wealth from oil allowed Calgary to adorn itself with a remarkable system of connected river parks. These forces came together uniquely in the late sixties and early seventies; they had not all been present earlier. And they converged to drive public policy only after the failure of an alternative proposal that would have lined the riverbank with trains and traffic.

It would now appear that Calgary's river parks had always been there. As we have seen, they had to be imagined and created in a complex political process. They are now an integral part of Calgary's self-image, the green foreground a complement to modern glass towers gleaming in the background. The river park also channels a flow of humanity as well as water. In the central districts the trail is awash with a strolling, running, rolling mass of humanity moving linearly through space. A 1987 survey confirmed that the river park had become the major recreation asset in the region. About 70 per cent of households

claimed to use the river park in one way or another, most for walking, cycling, jogging, and picnicking. (In subsequent years rollerblading would have to be added to the list.) The telephone survey extrapolation indicated something like 3.48 million user days over a twelve-month period in the river valley. This recreation activity accounted for untold direct expenditures, and even those Calgarians who did not use the parks received intangible visual and aesthetic benefits from the view.⁵³ The river park became a vital aspect of life in the city.

There was some small irony in this. Not only had the recent possibility of a parkway and railway to be put out of mind, but also Rod Sykes, the man the CPR sent to Calgary to move its tracks to the riverbank, presided over the initial phases of the "greening" of the river during his terms as mayor between 1969 and 1977. People evidently changed their minds in Calgary in the decade after 1963. It was a reversal of tremendous importance for the meaning of the river to the city, the look and feel of the urban space. For the first time the river and its banks could be incorporated into the civic psyche as an object of beauty, even a defining characteristic. The river park gave form and elegance to the city; it afforded space too for bodies to be similarly shaped, and for a certain kind of nature to give pleasure in a multitude of ways. After an alternative trail was not taken, planning, social pressure, the domestication of the river, the greening of Calgary, and private philanthropy combined to drape the south bank of the Bow with an emerald—and in the autumn, golden—necklace of parks. Unacknowledged in all of

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this in the context of intense urban rivalry was the fact that in the 1970s and 1980s Calgary at last had something that the city of Edmonton had boasted since before World War I: a glorious river park.

Notes

1. This essay arises from a collaborative research project on the environmental history of the Bow River funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council on which I am engaged with Matthew Evenden and Christopher Armstrong. A version of this paper was delivered as a public lecture at the Nickel Art Gallery at the University of Calgary in the spring of 2003. I am grateful to Don Smith for organizing this event and Anne Davis for hosting it. Attentive readers will notice how confronting living sources at this lecture gave me a better understanding of some of the issues and personalities. Seminar presentations at the University of Western Ontario and McMaster University helped me get the subject into focus. I am also grateful to the guest editor and the three perceptive readers whose criticism has sharpened the argument.
2. The essays by Samuel P. Hays, which focus on the shift from a producer's to a consumer's ideology, provide the best introduction to this cultural transformation, in *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York: Cambridge, 1987). See also Samuel P. Hays in collaboration with Barbara D. Hays, *Explorations in Environmental History: Essays by Samuel P. Hays* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), and *A History of Environmental Politics since 1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).
3. The development of a system of public parks in the city of Manchester out of mid-nineteenth-century political campaigns, private benefactions, club gardens, commercial pleasure grounds, and municipal initiatives is briefly treated in the exhibition pamphlet written by Clare Latimer for a show at the Manchester City Art Galleries, *Parks for the People: Manchester and Its Parks, 1846–1926* (Manchester: Manchester City Council, 1987). The gradual transformation of the ten royal parks in London and vicinity into de facto public parks is the subject of Hazel Thurston, *Royal Parks for the People* (London: David & Charles, 1974). An interpretation of urban parks as sites of the creation of a new civic culture, less class-bound and regulated than before, is to be found in Nan Hesse Dreher's "Public Parks in Urban Britain, 1870–1920: Creating a New Public Culture" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1993), which contrasts with a more strictly "social control" interpretation more prevalent in the literature. See, for example, Susan Lasdun, who emphasizes fear of social disorder as a perpetrator of parks in *The English Park: Royal, Private and Public* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991). Peter Bailey in *Leisure and Class in Victorian Britain* (New York: Methuen, 1987), and Martin Daunton in *House and Home in the Victorian City* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), in quite different ways emphasize the controlling aspects of parks over the working class. On urban parks in North America see David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986); Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982); Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); William Irwin, *The New Niagara* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), and Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *The City Parks of Canada* (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1983).
4. Mawson explained to a Toronto audience: "City planners are out to save souls of communities, by providing conditions in which intellectual, moral and physical well-being became a possibility." The bishop of Toronto, who was present, reportedly cheered. John Crosby Freeman, "Thomas Mawson: Imperial Missionary of British Town Planning," *Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 2 (1975): 41. See also Walter Van Nus, "The Fate of City Beautiful Thought in Canada, 1893–1930," in *The Canadian City*, eds. G. Stelter and A. Artibise (Ottawa: Carleton Library, 1979), 162–185. For the influence of these ideas in the United States, see also W. H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989).
5. The plan is usually treated as a footnote, a sidebar, or a remarkable curiosity in popular histories of Calgary. See, for example, T. Ward, *Cowtown: An Album of Early Calgary* (Calgary: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 382–383.
6. For perceptive critiques of the Mawson plan, see E. Joyce Morrow, "Calgary Many Years Hence": *The Mawson Report in Perspective* (Calgary: City of Calgary and the University of Calgary, 1979), and Freeman, "Thomas Mawson," 37–47. Mawson's drawings toured Alberta's provincial fairs for several years until they remained unclaimed in the lost luggage department at one of the railway stations. At some point a workman appropriated the neglected artwork for use as wallboard in his garage. Mawson's drawings resurfaced in the 1970s during the demolition of the garage. Art historians rescued the remaining work and restored it to its former glory, forming the subject of the exhibition that accompanied E. Joyce Morrow's booklet.
7. "From Prairie to Park: Green Spaces in Calgary," in *At Your Service: Calgary's Library, Parks Department, Military, Medical Services, and Fire Department* (Calgary: Century Publications, 1975), 121–256.
8. Terry Bullick, *Calgary Parks and Pathways* (Calgary: Rocky Mountain Books, 1990); *At Your Service*, especially 174–205.
9. On the space devoted to residential and commercial uses, see the excellent map, ca. 1963, in file 6200.4, box 227, series V, Board of Commissioners Papers (hereafter cited as Commissioners Papers), City of Calgary Archives.
10. Marjorie Norris, *A Leaven of Ladies: A History of the Calgary Local Council of Women* (Calgary: Detselig, 1995), 198.
11. Memorandum on the River Bank Development Scheme, 3 Dec. 1959, file 856, 170-2; Report of the River Bank Development Committee, 15 Dec. 1959, file 855, box 62, series 3, Engineering and Environmental Services, City of Calgary Archives.
12. Urban Renewal Report No. 2, Dec. 1961, City of Calgary Archives.
13. This phrase was in common usage. For an example, see the letter from a group of ratepayers complaining that "the iron curtain [will] continue in perpetuity," in file 4200.4, part 2, box 225, series V, Commissioners Papers.
14. Mayor Hays to N. R. Crump, president, CPR, 24 June 1959, file 6200.4, pt. 1, box 225, Commissioners Papers, probably enclosing the undated memorandum in the same file, "Calgary Land Use Study: Benefits and Costs to the City of Calgary Consequent upon Canadian Pacific Railway Right of Way Development."
15. Commissioner Steel to I. M. Pei, 5 Oct. 1962; Minutes of luncheon meeting, City Council and CPR officials, 14 Sept. 1962; Minutes, Downtown Study Progress Report No. 1, 9 Nov. 1962; CPR Economic Base Study of Calgary, 1 Nov. 1962; CPR Downtown Study Meeting, 30 Nov. 1962; G. J. Greenhalgh, director of planning, to Commissioner Steel, 1 Mar. 1963, sending estimates for proposed "South Bank Arterial Road," file 62000.4, box 225, series V, Commissioners Papers.
16. *Herald*, 5 Apr. 1963, *Albertan*, 6 Apr. 1963.
17. Heads of Agreement, 5 Apr. 1963, file 6200.4, box 226, series V, Commissioners Papers. The first three clauses set the overall policy:
 - A. Canadian Pacific intends to divert its railway to follow the south shore of the Bow River, from 9th Street East to 14th Street West, in order to make available for commercial development the downtown land lying between 6th Street East and 14th Street West now occupied by the railway: Canadian Pacific further intends to prepare a comprehensive Master Plan for the future commercial development of the said area, and, thereafter, to implement the plan.
 - B. The City considers it in the public interest that the Canadian Pacific plans for relocation of railway trackage and development of downtown property be carried out, and will co-operate to the fullest extent of its powers in assisting Canadian Pacific to further such plans.
 - C. The City intends to acquire right-of-way land, paralleling the proposed diverted railway to be constructed on the South shore of the Bow River,

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to provide for the development of a parkway and distributor roadway contiguous to the railway.

18. File 6200.4, box 225, series V, Commissioners Papers. A spreadsheet of costs accompanying the Heads of Agreement indicated the CPR share to be \$1,995,000, and \$1,644,000 for the city. These two figures do not add up to \$4,296,500, even if an otherwise unaccounted for sum of \$977,000 attached to the city share is to be added. Imprecision and confusion marked the enterprise from the beginning.
19. Kathleen M. F. Worrall, University Women's Club, to Commissioner Steel, 6 Apr. 1963; Mrs. J. Reinders, Calgary Local Council of Women to City Council, 14 May 1963; Memorandum, 6 Sept. 1963, for engineers' views; H. Boothman, superintendent of parks, to Commissioner Steel, 26 Apr. 1963, Council Minutes, microfiche 1088; letter 14 May 1963, file 6200.4, box 225, series V, Commissioners Papers.
20. Talking Points Memorandum; Commissioner Steel's reply to Mrs. Worrall, 10 Apr. 1963; Ian Sinclair to City Commissioners, 7 June 1963; J. R. W. Sykes, Memorandum, 10 June 1963; Question and Answer Sheet; Sykes to Mrs. W. Barker, 11 July 1963, replying to hers of 4 June 1963, summer 1963 undated, file 6200.4, box 225, series V, Commissioners Papers.
21. Meeting of 27 June 1963, microfiche 1354; Commissioners Report on the City of Calgary–CPR Development Proposals, microfiche 1369; Amended Rail Line Parkway Design City Council Minutes, microfiche 1363.
22. For a full account of Alderman Leslie's determined fight against the proposal at every stage, see his wife's memoir, Jean Leslie, *Three Rivers Beckoned: Life and Times with Calgary Mayor Jack Leslie* (Bragg Creek: Fay-Mar-K Publishing, 2004), 165–218.
23. Grant MacEwan, a laconic archetypal westerner, enjoyed considerable personal popularity. During a varied career as professor of agriculture, rancher, newspaper columnist, historian, raconteur, municipal politician, and leader of the provincial Liberal party, he developed a reputation as a frugal but generous, independent, down-to-earth populist. In time he became something of a symbolic grandfather figure, especially during his term as lieutenant-governor of Alberta following his career in municipal politics. For brief accounts of his mayoralty—not the high point of his career—see Donna von Hauff, *Everyone's Grandfather: The Life and Times of Grant MacEwan* (Calgary: Grant MacEwan College, 1994), 130–147, and R. H. Macdonald, *Grant MacEwan: No Ordinary Man* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1979), 205–215. A small portion of his published journal, *Grant MacEwan's Journals*, ed. Max Foran (Edmonton: Lone Pine Publishing, 1986), 121–130, covers this period.
24. Commissioner Nicholson to Mr. Van Ginkel, 26 Aug. 1963, and Calgary Real Estate Board, 9 Dec. 1963, as well as letters from other interest groups, file 6200.4, box 225, series V, Commissioners Papers; Minutes of meetings 29, 30 Aug. 1963 with CPR; details of negotiations Aug.–Dec. 1963, file 6200.4, parts 1 and 2, box 2, series V, Commissioners Papers; City Planning Department, Downtown Study No. 3, file 51, vol. 6, 1, Land Department Records, Calgary City Archives; E. C. Harvey, Stanford Research Institute Report 25 June 1963, microfiche 1373, City Council Minutes, City of Calgary Archives; Van Ginkel Associates Report, 24 June 1963, microfiche 1380, M8773, R. H. Barron Fonds, Glenbow Archives.
25. Special Meeting of Council, 4:12 p.m., 22 Jan. 1964, microfiche 185; Special Meeting of Council, 8:00 p.m., 22 Jan. 1964, microfiche 187, City Council Minutes. See file 6200.4, box 225, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers, for the contract and a memo titled "Aspects of the Scheme Which Could Be Executed More Successfully from the Viewpoint of the City."
26. Report by M. R. C. Coulson, D. B. Johnson, and J. G. Nelson, 4 Dec. 1963, file 6200.4, box 225, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers. There is another copy in the Barron Fonds.
27. D. Styliaras, "CPR Redevelopment Proposal," *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Journal* 41, no. 3 (Mar. 1964): 53–56.
28. J. B. Barron to Commissioner Steel, 15 Jan. 1964, file 6200.4, box 225, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers. J. B. Barron was the father of R. H. Barron. They owned the Mobil Oil Building at 606–616 8th Avenue West. For Robert H. Barron's critique see "How Much Will the CPR Pay in Taxes?" *Albertan*, 4 Feb. 1964. See also Address to the Men's Canadian Club of Calgary, 13 Feb. 1964, Barron Fonds. Barron collected a comprehensive archive of clippings, reports, letters, and municipal documents pertaining to the contract, all preserved in this collection. I am grateful to Don Smith for sharing his understanding of the Barron objections.
29. Ruth Gorman, "Time To Call a Spade a Spade," *Albertan*, 25 Jan. 1964. For city council documents, see file 106, box 10, M5841, Calgary Local Council of Women Fonds, Glenbow Archives. For press clippings, see file 107, box 11; for the February public meeting and for the quotation, see file 108; and for the report of the LCW Special Committee, see file 109. See also Norris, *A Leaven of Ladies*, 197–211, for a much fuller account of the campaign based on this documentation. See also pt. 3, file 6200.4, box 226, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers, for a fifteen-page response to Ruth Gorman's twenty-two specific questions. Letter from the Calgary Local Council of Women, 11 Mar. 1964, microfiche 530, City Council Minutes.
30. See the illustrated brief by Calgarians for Progress, 3 Mar. 1964, in file 6200.4, box 228, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers. Other copies can be located in the Barron Fonds and the Local Council of Women papers at the Glenbow Archives.
31. "January 20, 1964. Third night meeting with .P. This afternoon we received anonymous letter bearing threats against nine members of council, including myself. The letter, lavishly smeared with human excrement, shows exactly where each of the victims will be shot and how many .303 bullets he'll get. I'm slated for three." MacEwan, *Journals*, 128.
32. The MacWilliams affair is documented in file 6200.4, box 226, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers. See in particular A. C. MacWilliams to the mayor, 12 Mar. 1964, explaining himself. See also City Council Minutes, microfiche 578–9, 581.
33. Premier Manning seemed to use the hearings mainly as an opportunity to press his campaign for the removal of the CPR's tax exemption in the West. For a summary of the proceedings see file 6200.4, box 226, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers, for a report prepared by a city official. The briefs submitted can be found in box 228, as well as in the Barron Fonds. The Manning Papers in the Provincial Archives, Acc. #69.289, contain two files of correspondence relating to the hearings (198a–b, 199), mainly letters from Social Credit supporters who opposed the development. In a personal communication Professor Coulson remarks that he gained the impression at the time that Premier Manning likely opposed the development but he was too shrewd to take the heat for cancelling the project. He preferred to let the blame fall on the city.
34. Estimate of Costs, file 6200.4, box 227, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers. The combined land acquisition and costs for the parkway and bridge re-alignment added up to \$6,170,675 for the city and \$2,062,825 for the CPR.
35. B. H. Graham, vice-president of CNR, to mayor, 5 June 1964, file 6200.4, box 226, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers; N. R. Crump, president of CPR, to mayor, 23 Apr. 1964 and subsequent correspondence. Commissioners' Report, 28 Apr. 1964, microfiche 990, City Council Minutes; microfiche 1001–15, 28 May 1964, City Planning Report on South Bank Parkway.
36. Professor Coulson, who was a participant in these debates, argued in a personal communication following a public lecture in Calgary that elite support for the project in the city had rapidly faded following the revelations of the extent to which the CPR had negotiated such a one-sided deal. In his view, the CN obstacle was a pretext.
37. MacEwan, *Journals*, "June 22, 1964. Committee from the East reported to council and saw the majority of aldermen vote to refuse to re-execute agreement. It looks like the end of the scheme for the present. It would have succeeded if the C.P. had not been so damnably greedy and had others doing their negotiating." Special Meeting, 22 June 1964, microfiche 1077, City Council Minutes; Report of the Committee, microfiche 1078.

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38. File 6200.4, box 228, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers, contains a thick folder of newspaper clippings. A complete chronology of the affair was published by the *Albertan* on 24 June 1964.
39. A. H. Nicholson, 10 July 1964, Canadian Pacific Downtown Planning, file 4200.4.1, box 91, sec. 5, Commissioners Papers.
40. On the history of planning in Canada see Jill Grant, "Planning Canadian Cities: Context, Continuity and Change," in *Canadian Cities in Transition*, 2nd ed., eds. T. Bunting and P. Filion (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), 443–461.
41. See City of Calgary, *The Future of Downtown Calgary* (Calgary: Planning Advisory Committee, 1966), 1, 9, box 1, RG 1501, Town Planning Commission, City of Calgary Archives, for the critique and the tables and maps purporting to show the "health" of the downtown. There is a brief account of the history of zoning and planning in Calgary, pp. 11 and 76. For redevelopment of the Eau Claire site and the riverbank, see pp. 65–66.
42. Bow River Beautification Committee for correspondence on the Underwood McClellan study and the study itself, file 15, box 1, M 6072, Colin Campbell McLaurin Fonds, Glenbow Archives. For correspondence on his unsuccessful attempt to turn this committee into a more permanent, incorporated Calgary Beautification Foundation, see file 16, box 2.
43. See in particular box 1056, file PG0009, 1968–1970, Prince's Island Files 1969–1979, Parks and Recreation Papers, City of Calgary Archives.
44. City of Calgary, *The Calgary Plan: A General Plan Prepared on Behalf of the Civic Administration by the City of Calgary Planning Department*, May 1973, 800.004, City of Calgary Archives. The black-and-gold design symbolized the oil and wheat foundations of the local economy. Section 5 deals with Parks and Recreation.
45. City engineer to commissioner of operations, 2 Oct. 1969, 1969, file 3359 Bow River, box 144, Engineering and Environmental Services Papers, City of Calgary Archives.
46. Montreal Engineering Company, *Flood Plain of Bow River in Calgary*, vol. 1, MOO 3967, City of Calgary Archives. In vol. 2, twenty air photos covered with Mylar transparencies show the flood plain and much wider floodway in detail.
47. Brief to the Lombard Group, Bow River Beautification, 1973–1978, file 104, box 10, Calgary Local Council of Women Fonds, Glenbow Archive.
48. Lombard North Group, *The Bow River Impact Study* (Calgary: Lombard North Group, 1973), GB 1230 A5B66, University of Calgary Library; pt. 1, "Summary and Recommendations"; pt. 2, "Overview"; pt. 3, "Analysis and Impact Assessment" (see especially pp. 69–78); and pt. 4, "Public Participation." A follow-up survey conducted a year later reinforced these conclusions. Public opinion strongly supported the idea that the riverbank should be retained for park purposes, but it also insisted that it be cleaned up and landscaped. Upstream improvements deemed desirable included wildlife preservation, swimming areas, boating access, and picnic facilities. Through the city, the landscaping of driveways, removal of industry, planting of more trees, paved cycle paths, more swimming areas, separate paths for pedestrians and bikers, and children's playgrounds were high priorities. Downstream from the city, the natural environment could be stressed. Walking and enjoying the scenery were the two most popular activities that the river park should be designed to enhance. "Regarding future river bank planning, the need exists for the development of a policing body which will ensure more stringent river bank development compatible with the natural river environment," the survey concluded. D. Bathory, C. Bray, R. Gore, G. Johannesson, R. Kolibaba, R. Lamoureux, and L. Tyler, *Bow River Community Survey*, January 1975, mimeograph report, PAM 307.33 B 784, Glenbow Library.
49. File PL0012d, box 2864, Calgary River Management Committee, Parks and Recreation Papers, City of Calgary Archives; file PL0012, 1975, box 2864, Bow River Park System.
50. In a personal communication, Bill Robinson, the retired Parks Department official who oversaw the development of the river parks, recalled that up until 1974 the public servants of the city were keen to develop river parks, but the city council was notably unenthusiastic. Small sums of money had to be found through "creative accounting" to do things on an ad hoc basis. As he remembered it, Harry Boothman, his director, asked him to come up with a wish list to present to a private donor who wanted to do something. Along with two other ideas he presented the notion of a river trail system. The donor, who turned out to be Donald Harvie, seized upon the trail idea. Bill Robinson, personal communication, Apr. 2003. Donald Harvie's obituary stressed his role as the founder of Calgary's river parks as well as those in Saskatoon.
51. File PL0012b, box 2864, Bow River Park System, Parks and Recreation Papers, City of Calgary Archives, for the key 1975 documents, and same file, box 2087, for expansion of the program in 1976. Land acquisition and trail development continued into the early 1980s. See also Leslie Beck and Bill Robinson, *Trail Systems* (Calgary: Parks and Recreation, City of Calgary, 1975), University of Calgary Library.
52. City of Calgary, *Calgary River Valley's Plan*, 2 vols. (Calgary: Planning Department, 1984); *The Calgary Plan* (City of Calgary, 1994), pp. 19–29, discusses the trend towards self recreation: "With the recent stress on physical fitness, ecology, and conservation, more and more people are engaging in recreational pursuits such as cross country skiing, biking, hiking, and nature study." See also West Bow Trail Co-ordinating Council Papers, 1971–1980, M5928, Glenbow Archives, especially file 4, box 1. This liaison body linking half a dozen small suburban municipalities to the west of Calgary co-ordinated efforts to push the trail system west.
53. John Thompson et al., *Household Survey Alberta, Forestry Lands and Wildlife, Bow River Recreation Survey*, 1987, vol. 4, GV 181.46 B69, Telephone Survey of Calgary and Region Households, University of Calgary Library.