

## **The Inner City and Light Rapid Transit: What Hillhurst/Sunnyside's fight was all about**

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Ironically, the area north of the Bow river now known as Hillhurst/Sunnyside did not develop into a residential community until 1909, when the municipal streetcar system crossed the Bow, making affordable transportation available through the area. Initially a large tract of farmland owned by Ezra Riley, the land was annexed to the city in 1907 and subdivided into 25 ft. lots selling for \$100 each. Along with the development of a thriving commercial district on 10th Street, the area developed into a self-sufficient, family-oriented community.

The scale and social mix changed very little until the 80s, when the community's stability and proximity to downtown made it a desirable residential area. A federal residential rehabilitation program to upgrade older homes to current building codes provided the impetus for upgrading the community's housing stock. A little later, a downzoning of Sunnyside in favour of single family units rather than apartments led to increased land values. This resulted in the expensive development of in-fill, duplex and condominium properties appealing to affluent professionals and middle-management couples.

This upgrading of residential property was welcomed by the residents, but its affect on the demographics of the community has been drastic. It is now very difficult, if not impossible for low and middle income families to live in the community. The Hillhurst/Sunnyside Non-Profit Housing Association (HSNPHA) was formed to deal with this problem. However, the low per-unit qualifying cost, as determined by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation which subsidizes the mortgages, along with escalating property values, meant that bachelor and one bedroom units were the only affordable options. Today the HSNPHA owns only 116 units out of a housing stock of more than 4,000, and no more than a dozen are big enough for family occupancy.

Today, in spite of the development pressures it has faced, the community retains important connections with its past, having many of the original residential and commercial structures intact and in use. The preservation of older buildings in the community is important, as they remain a tangible reminder of the value of a human-scale environment. Only one of these buildings is classified as a heritage property and few have architectural merit, but the Area Redevelopment Plan will at least ensure that the scale of buildings in the community will be maintained.

As the community evolved, through an acknowledgement of and respect for its past, a unique character and flavour developed. Residents appreciated what was valuable from the past because they had a very clear understanding of those forces which threatened the stability and continuity of the area they had chosen to live in. While there were differences of opinion, the inevitability of new development had to be managed within strong controls in order to preserve those positive aspects of community life which had developed over the previous eight decades. Residents of the community held strong feelings and fears regarding the closeness of the downtown core and the threatening aspects of its encroachment across the river and into the community. In the 80s, residents developed confidence through the establishment of community committees and technical support teams drawn from residents, including young professionals moving into the area. There was a general consensus that the community should develop according to the residents' wishes, and the community was fortunate in having many residents who were prepared to express this view, forcefully if necessary. Many residents chose to live in the community because of certain neighbourhood qualities, and had a vested interest in working for their preservation. Many members of Calgary's cultural community had settled there in the late 70s and early 80s, since the area was, at that time, affordable, and close to downtown, the college of art and the university. Spokespeople emerged from this and other groups, who advocated controlled development of the community, its human scale, its history and its riverbank environment. Outside pressures, particularly land speculation and insensitive transportation planning, created a climate where residents perceived a need for organized collective action. There was also a large number of residents who had lived in the community for decades, and, as senior members of the community, were doing much to stabilize its family neighbourhood quality. This group was as active as any, representing a large component of any community meeting.

A community cannot expect to preserve its cohesiveness simply by rallying support at critical points in its history. Since crises are thrust upon a community from without, a certain facility for dealing with such threats on a 'crisis management' basis is essential. But a continuing program of events and services is equally essential in order to develop a clear sense of identity for residents. The Hillhurst/Sunnyside Community Association, by responding to the needs of residents, has always been able to rally community support in

times of crisis. Although this sense of identity grew naturally over many years, it was reinforced through the development of community-oriented services such as co-operative and non-profit housing initiatives, a senior citizens complex, a multi-service and information centre and the establishment of outreach, handyman and other social programs. It was this sense of identity which established the community's relationship to the rest of the city and, more broadly, to the world in general. It was the strength of this identity which prevented the community from being overpowered by unsympathetic influences from without. Furthermore, this sense of identity was strengthened by threats made against its perceived values,. People identifying with these community values and finding them in Hillhurst/Sunnyside, continued to move into the area with a strong and active commitment to the community. In spite of this, the influx of relatively affluent singles and childless couples, increased property values, threats of school closures, development pressures, the loss of community oriented businesses and the expansion of existing transportation corridors proved to be a major threat to the existing fabric of the community.

Transportation has played a key role in the history of the community. It was the introduction of the streetcar which opened up the area to residential development, and it was the alignment of the northwest Light Rapid Transit system (LRT) which threatened the community's balance more than any other issue. The intense speculative interests which made inroads in the community in the early 80s could not be isolated from worldwide financial interests which contributed heavily to Calgary's growth as a city. The comparatively recent recognition of Alberta as an economic area of national and worldwide significance, the dramatic increase in the price of oil, the development of new technologies within the industry, and the subsequent oil rush, resulted in a dramatic increase in Calgary's population. At the time of the boom, large suburban subdivisions were put in place to accommodate this influx of people, and it was this urban expansion and the need to provide transportation networks to service it which had such a negative impact on Calgary's inner city communities. It is acknowledged that individual communities have a responsibility to the city at large, but it is essential that an equity be established in terms of losses and gains which is in the interests of everyone, including established inner city communities. The destruction of inner city communities at a time when a lack of housing was and still is destroying Calgary's downtown as a social and cultural environment whilst servicing, as cheaply as possible, outlying suburbs, showed a contempt for, or at best an indifference to those very communities which established all that was and is good about Calgary as a city. The community association, in association with the Planning Department, attempted to combat these pressures on the community by producing a community design brief. The design brief, whilst not a legal document, was endorsed by city council and laid down guidelines for future development in the community. This document was replaced in the late 80s by an Area Redevelopment Plan. The community environment committee reviews all applications for development, both commercial and residential, to ensure that they conform to this plan. These two documents and the natural barrier of the Bow river, which defines the southern boundary of the community, have helped prevent rampant development from encroaching from the downtown core.

In the mid 70s, the Transportation Department proposed widening the 10th Street corridor by creating a couplet system: southbound traffic would be carried along 10th Street and northbound traffic would be carried along 9A Street. This couplet would not only divide the community physically, but would isolate a large part of the business community between two major transportation carriers. Bridgeland, a riverbank community to the east of Hillhurst/Sunnyside, was drastically affected by a similar couplet system at Edmonton Trail. The community association fought this short sighted proposal successfully.

In a study commissioned by the City of Calgary, (January, 1980), Toronto transportation consultant James Harris noted that Hillhurst/Sunnyside was "an island of sanity in a sea of chaos." Mr. Harris stated in his report to the Transportation Department that "worthwhile community values in physical and sociological terms will be better served by an underground route..." and "the end results, while representing a new dynamic force in the community, will not unreasonably bear down on the aesthetics and environmental system of the community." In referring to the additional cost of a subway system, Mr. Harris pointed out that "the contribution that downtown and outlying areas of the city will make towards this extra inner city cost is part of the equity relationship amongst the various urban interests... and the consequences of the lack of such investment should not be visited solely upon this mature and vital community."

