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Sense of Place—Alberta, Canada

Beverly Sandalack, Ann Davis, Len Novak, and Bob Sandford



According to the latest census, Calgary is now the fastest growing metropolitan area in Canada. Fueled by twenty years of growth in Alberta’s oil and natural gas industries, it has become a magnet both for migrants from other parts of Canada and Native peoples leaving tribal lands and immigrants from all over the world—a reflection Canada’s national policy on immigration, largely regarded as one of the world’s most liberal.

Today, as housing starts keep pace with population, major issues related to growth have prompted questions about the changing sense of regional character. In the introduction to *Sense of Place: A Catalogue of Essays*, Brian Sinclair writes: “Current debate rages on the question of a Canadian national identity. And if the debate extends to the city, to Calgary, is there any substance to be found? Is there an architectural character that might capture this

place where the prairies greet the mountains? Is there a design quality that emanates from the landscape where the Elbow and Bow Rivers join?”

As a way of celebrating the centennial of Alberta, a year-long effort known as Sense of Place, attempted to answer these questions and explore the range of difficult issues involved in understanding place and placelessness. Organized by the Urban Lab at the University of Calgary and the Nickle Arts Museum, with assistance from the Department of Canadian Heritage, the effort eventually grew to include a museum exhibition exploring the intersection of nature, culture and form in Alberta; a three-day symposium on urban design with a special focus on Calgary; ongoing film and video screenings on the topics of place and placelessness; university classes; two book-length publications; and guided excursions to five typical Alberta set-

Sample Juror Comments—Sense of Place

Ahrentzen: This was a rich understanding of the history of place, the sense of place from both inside and outside, bringing in different perspectives to help them eventually in doing something. So for me it’s a planning study.

Hull: We could move it over.

Jones: It could be our third planning award.

Hull: Talk about memorializing space and place! But are they leading up to something?

Ahrentzen: It seems to me its outcomes are principles that can serve as a guide for future development.

McNally: They really tried to understand sense of place and how you experience things.

Ahrentzen: It also has a strong educational component. To be able to take all these excursions with experts...It was really powerful in drawing people to ask what directions they should go from here.

tings—aboriginal lands, mountains, foothills, prairies, and urban Calgary. Through such efforts, the project explored such differing “views” of Alberta as a thousand-year-old meeting place for the Blackfoot Confederacy, a highway grid laid over the prairie, and the Bar U cattle ranch.

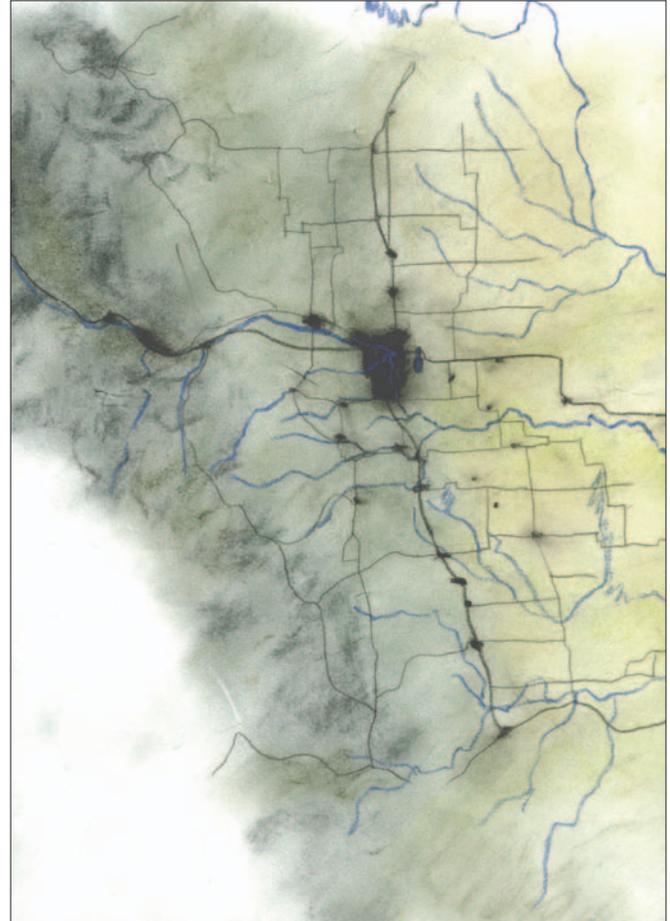
The jury praised the project’s commitment to understanding an entire regional cultural landscape as the type of groundwork needed to produce sensitive public policies. According to one juror: “The real strength of this project is the developing of public imagination and appreciation of what makes Calgary and Alberta special. This tends to show that planning can be far more than just drawing on paper. It has to deal with public conscience and awareness, and prepare the way for zoning, planning, site planning, and natural planning.”

From the very beginning, those involved with organizing the work also saw it as an opportunity to create a methodology useful to other regions struggling with similar issues of meaning and memory, and with powerful forces of economic, environmental and demographic change.

Growth of an Idea

Typical of the groundswell of interest in Sense of Place was that it began as a plan for a simple museum exhibit, but expanded through five years of planning and discussion to encompass such a broad range of products and activities. Ann Davis, Director of the Nickle Art Museum, initially invited local representatives of such disciplines as art history, Canadian history, architecture, urban design, landscape, and education to plan the exhibit. Almost immediately, the group decided something far more wide-ranging was needed if the effort was to do encompass the province’s physical and cultural diversity.

The group also wanted to depict how places were being transformed, explore how a sense of place is developed, and answer other important questions about awareness of place in Alberta. For example, what made newcomers to Alberta



Above: Alberta and its capital city, Calgary, occupy a transitional landscape between prairies and mountains. Pastel on velum by Beverly Sandalack.

Opposite: Located in the foothills of southern Alberta, the Bar U Ranch, founded in 1882 and now a National Historic Site, is emblematic of a sense of Alberta that is fast disappearing. Photo by Fraser Shaw.

McNally: If you are going to talk about a hundred-year anniversary, there is something to be said for standing back and saying this is a great place, and we are going to experience it together and through different people’s points of view and the whole breadth of the landscape. There is something high-road about that I like.

Kelbaugh: It is about celebration of place. Price of

place, sense of place, history of place.

Ahrentzen: Also about educating about place. And also trying to reinterpret.

Jones: And they did address the connection of the natural and the urban.

Hull: If I was a resident of Alberta I would feel really proud of this effort. If I am a rancher, it would help me realize what a beautiful place we live in.

Jones: It’s a really nice public awareness effort—and it’s ongoing, which is encouraging.

Ahrentzen: I think it will be effective. There are some really good planning models out there that are not master plans and campus designs. This one and Fossil and Habitat together show a range of what good studies can be about.



feel at home? When was it that they could begin to say, “I understand this place and its culture”? What do immigrants bring that can make a place feel more like home? And, most importantly, how might the things that make a place distinctive be preserved and still accommodate transformations and innovations?

Beverly Sandalack, Director of the Urban Lab, a research and consultancy center dealing with urban design, community planning, and regional development issues, put it succinctly: “We couldn’t just talk about sense of place within the four walls of a museum.”

As work progressed, a four-member steering committee composed of Sandalack, Davis, Len Novak, and Bob Sandford became more and more concerned with creating a series of events and publications that would allow a new generation of Albertans to understand the interrelatedness of historic forces. Some of the stories they wanted participants to understand concerned how the city of Calgary had

expanded over the last century, how Alberta’s family farms had been consolidated, and how a certain type of small-town life that once defined the province had now largely faded.

“Like so many [urban] places in the contemporary Western world, many people...do not have the experience of landscape. As a result of this trend, a lot will be lost in the direct understanding of the regional landscape as well as its historical evolution and how places come to be,” Sandalack says.

Involving Students

An important element of the work was the involvement of students at the University of Calgary. Courses were developed that focused on Alberta’s cultural landscapes. Students helped with exhibits, graphic design, and the Sense of Place publications (the book of essays, and an illustrated description of the excursions).

Sandalack, in particular, believes that students may provide the nucleus for a new generation of informed



design professionals. However, she was concerned that at present many had little or no appreciation of Alberta as a region, and much of their conception of the landscape is derived from computers.

One exercise that proved particularly valuable involved students taking a series of self-guided excursions. They would start at a point in the center of the city and follow one of five “transects.” For example, from the city center they could travel east to where the prairies began; or they could travel west to foothills. These trips allowed students to explore the evolving impact of the city on its formerly rural and natural edges. By starting at the center and working outward, they could get a sense of historical evolution.

Such excursions were intended to deal with critical issues about how Calgary should grow and expand. What should the relationship be between the city and the prairie and the foothills? What is the relationship between the city and farmland and ranchland? The students recorded their experiences and presented their findings at the urban design symposium.

In its effort to raise awareness of the need for new growth-planning and management policies, one of its more critical and longstanding benefits, then, may be a new crop of involved citizens: the students involved in these excursions.

Another extremely valuable product was the catalogue, containing a wonderful collection of essays, poems and photos. Many of the pieces start off as simple travelogues, but end up as strong examples of writing about place. As the reader moves through, they unfold an extraordinary range and diversity.

Among the tales of experience and encounter with land-

scape and the city is Sanford’s “A Sense of a Mountain Place,” about the Canadian Rockies as a focus of imagination and substance. Davis contributed a detailed exploration of the problems of curatorial practice and the limits of the museum in shaping collective consciousness of place.

Developing Methods to Understand Place

In addition to the EDRA/*Places* award, Sense of Place has received a Canadian Society of Landscape Architects Honor Award, and the City of Calgary Heritage Authority Lion Award.

It is important, however, that the EDRA/*Places* award specifically commended Sense of Place for the valuable methodological lessons it held for all who seek less franchised, more authentic, and more memorable places.

The exercise of looking at the potential loss of place—at a time when places worldwide are becoming more homogenized, and being reformed and rebuilt as a result of often-extreme demographic and economic pressures—provides a set of much-needed tools for examining what is place, how we remember places, and what is critical to understanding and conveying a sense of place.

—Lisa Sullivan

Left: The architecture of Calgary combines local pioneer heritage with a new global awareness. Stephen Avenue photo by Mackenzie Stonehocker.

Right: Photo of C-Train leaving Olympic Plaza station by Francisco Alaniz Uribe.

Opposite: Prairie agriculture is part of Alberta’s longstanding heritage.

Mossleigh photo by Beverly Sandalack.