
© École d'architecture de paysage

Toute reproduction ou représentation intégrale ou partielle, par quelque procédé que ce soit, faite sans autorisation de l'auteur est interdite. Seules sont autorisées, d'une part, les reproductions strictement réservées à l'usage du copiste et non destinées à une utilisation collective, et, d'autre part, les courtes citations justifiées par le caractère scientifique ou d'information de l'oeuvre dans laquelle elles sont incorporées.

Creating Alberta's urban parks, the history of the urban parks program

Sara-Jane Gruetzner

Alberta Association of Landscape Architects

Alberta's cities, with only a few exceptions are typically located on rivers. The potential to develop these river valleys as major park systems was enormous and fortunately with the combined vision of Premier Peter Lougheed and Prime Minister Trudeau all of these river valleys have been preserved and developed as major urban park systems.

Premier Lougheed recognized in the early 1970's that Alberta's cities were growing and their role was changing. Prior to the 70's and the impact of the oil industry, Alberta's cities were primarily service centres to the largely agricultural hinterland. Lougheed recognized that increased urbanization and the "new urban pioneers" had new requirements for city living. Interestingly, Lougheed at the same time initiated some major traditional park initiatives in rural settings. Fortunately, Lougheed also recognized that the Rocky Mountain parks were not accessible to everyone and the demand for outdoor recreation was a legitimate daily urban requirement. He was also cognizant of the pressure that urbanization was making on urban natural environments and recognized the need to protect them in the context of rapid urbanization. An increased awareness of the need for physical activity heightened the demand for accessible outdoor environments that could be accessed on a daily basis.

Lougheed's response to this urban evolution was the creation of the "Urban Parks Program". Over the last 20 years, the Alberta Government has invested \$263 M in original dollars, to 18 municipalities, across Alberta, solely for the development of urban parks. The current value of the contribution is estimated to be over \$500 M in 1998 dollars. Lougheed described the Urban Parks Program as "the most exciting and novel approach to assuring the quality of life for families in metropolitan centres yet proposed for Canadian cities."

So where does Prime Minister Trudeau enter the equation.? (I might add that you don't often hear this story in Alberta.!) During the late 60's, Alberta's economy diversified from agriculture and tourism to include a healthy oil and gas economy. The resulting sharp increase in provincial revenues, through royalties, substantially changed the provincial balance sheet. By the early 1970's Trudeau recognized that these major increases would dramatically impact the federal transfer payments. Trudeau convinced Lougheed that Alberta should establish a mechanism for benefitting from these royalties

so that they were not accounted for as revenues, therefore decreasing the federal transfer payments. It was particularly significant if the oil and gas sector experienced major swings and as we now know this proved to be true. Originally, one third of the royalties were skimmed off into a capital account therefore sheltering them from the equalization payments formula.

This capital account was entitled "The Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund" and in hindsight substantially changed the economic picture in Alberta. The current value of this fund, including assets, is currently estimated to be over \$40 billion.

The Urban Parks Program was funded by the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund as an investment in Alberta's natural heritage. It is unlikely that without the Heritage Fund the Alberta Government would ever have initiated a program of this nature.

Over the past twenty years, the Urban Parks Program has included four major phases. While each phase was slightly different the goal and objectives of the program essentially remained the same.

The goal of the Urban Parks Program was :

" The establishment of significant areas of open space to ensure that urban populations have easy access to natural environments and the development of these areas to enable their sustained and unimpaired use for outdoor recreation"

Specific objectives included:

- To provide for a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities
- To allow people of all incomes to participate in these opportunities
- To have easy access to surrounding urban areas
- To preserve natural landscape features and provide recreational facilities in harmony with these features.

The Urban Parks Program granted funds in three categories; Planning and Design, Land Acquisition and Construction. Up to 15% could be used for planning and design, up to 40% could be used for land acquisition and up to 100% could be used for construction.

There have been four phases to the Urban Parks Program. Beginning in the early 1970's the Alberta Government announced that they would spend over \$45 M on the development of Fish Creek Provincial Park on the southern limits of Calgary. The announcement was fully supported by Calgary City Council and the numerous interest groups that had lobbied to preserve this area as parkland.

Fish Creek Provincial Park includes over 1200 hectares of natural and historical resources along the southern Bow River and Fish Creek. It has remained a provincial park within the municipal boundary of Calgary, and is owned and operated solely by the Alberta Government. In the early 1970's , Lombard North, Calgary, under the project management of Jim Taylor was retained by the Alberta Government to plan and design Fish Creek Provincial Park.

There are some obvious operational difficulties and duplications with two jurisdictions providing essentially the same service within one municipal boundary. Therefore, the second phase of the Urban Parks Program, announced in 1975, by Premier Lougheed, was structured slightly differently. Edmonton's Capital City Recreation Park was developed by the Alberta Government in association with the City. On completion, the park was turned over to the City of Edmonton with on-going operation and maintenance funds from the Alberta Government.

Capital City Recreation Park was planned and designed by Roman Fodchuk.

Phase Three of the Urban Parks Program announced in 1980, again by Premier Lougheed and was largely the result of the popularity and success of the parks in Calgary and Edmonton. Smaller cities in Alberta lobbied the Alberta Government for continued investment by the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund in Urban Parks and were successful in securing an additional \$57.0 M for five (5) Alberta cities; Grande Prairie, Lloydminster, Red Deer, Medicine Hat and Lethbridge. In order to retain the original value of the program the original funding commitment was increased to \$89.0 M, over the five year life of the program. I'm sure that this one of the few government grants ever designed to keep up with inflation. Lougheed 's cabinet fully supported the annual increases to ensure that the original "Vision" was achieved.

Another unique aspect of Phase III was that it included ongoing operation and maintenance funding calculated as a percentage basis of the amount spent on construction.

In this phase of the program the Alberta Government released conditional grants to the cities who had direct responsibility for the planning, design and construction of the parks within the program guidelines. The parks are owned, operated and maintained by the individual municipalities, with financial assistance from the Alberta Government.

- Grande Prairie's urban park was planned and designed by Marie Kipen.
- Lloydminster's urban park was planned and designed by EDA Collaborative Inc.
- Medicine Hat's urban park was planned by Lombard North, and was designed by Lombard North and Carson.McCulloch Associates Ltd.
- Red Deer's urban park was designed by Len Novak, Earthscape Consultants, Lombard North, Brian Dodds,
- Lethbridge's urban park was planned by Lombard North and designed by Lombard North, Earthscape Consultant and Brian Dodds.

Phase Four of the Urban Parks Program has had a somewhat rockier ride than the first three phases. Announced in 1989, by Premier Getty, its fate was determined by Premier Klein's first budget. The original announcement included \$ 52.0 for nine small municipalities. The program also included an additional \$15.0 M each for Calgary and Edmonton.

Unfortunately, in the February 1994 budget speech Premier Klein announced that the program would be terminated immediately. Fortunately, some of the smaller cities were near completion, but because of the disproportionate amount of time required to

prepare their Master Plan many larger cities lost a substantial portion of the funds. (Calgary lost \$12.0 M) Very clearly, the program lacked any vision on behalf of the Getty and Klein government.

Numerous Landscape Architectural firms were involved in Phase Four of the Urban Parks Program and include but may not be limited to: EDA Collaborative Inc., Kipen Gibbs, Len Novak, Earthscape Consultants Inc., Carson McCulloch Associates Ltd., Lombard North, Matrix, Landplan Associates Ltd. SJG & Associates.

The impact of the Urban Parks Program on the quality of parks in Alberta's cities goes without saying. While it is legitimate to discuss the planning and design merits of each park, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact that the program had on the profession of Landscape Architecture in Alberta.

This was certainly not the only significant period in the history of Landscape Architecture in Alberta, but it certainly was an important phase in the evolution of the profession. Jim Taylor in his profile of the 25th anniversary of the profession in Alberta termed it the "Design with Nature" period.

Let's go back to the funding formula and discuss it in 1998 dollars. Up to 15% of the grant could and was used for planning & design. While not allocated specifically to Landscape Architects the majority of these funds by nature of the work were allocated to Landscape Architects. In 1998 dollars the design fees would be valued at approximately \$75.0 M.

There were obvious financial implications to the profession of landscape architecture, however, one of the most significant impacts would be the impact that the program had in exposing Landscape Architects to a large number of Albertans. The first phase of the program was announced when the profession was essentially in its infancy in Alberta. The way that the Alberta Government structured the Urban Parks Program almost guaranteed that Landscape Architects would have to be involved. Prior to any release of funds, each municipality was required to submit a comprehensive Master Plan that outlined the scope of the project. Biophysical assessments, detailed analysis as well as conceptual design decisions were all requirements for these Master Plans. These plans established a standard for park planning and design that continues to be the benchmark for the continued park development in every urban park city.

Prior to the Urban Parks Program, park planning had not been a municipal priority. Most of the cities were shaped by engineering objectives. Park visions were not valued or demanded as legitimate municipal objectives. Park development had largely evolved from an ad hoc, non-resource based perspective and was typically the result of efforts made by Park Superintendents, with a horticultural background. In many municipalities this was the first time that Landscape Architects had played the primary role with any projects let alone park projects in their community. As a result, many firms have had on-going working relationships with the firm and firms that were involved in their park.

The Alberta Government required that the Master Plan's for these parks be prepared through a public planning process. For many citizens this would be the first time that they had any exposure to the profession.

The point of profession profile is only valid in this discussion due to the tremendous success that these urban parks have been in these communities. Every municipality is extremely proud of "it's park. !" At last year's CSLA congress, the member for St. Albert made the point that their urban park was indeed "The best in Alberta" . She spoke very highly of the role and profile of the park in the community and recognized the role that Landscape Architect's had played in achieving the vision.

These parks have never remained stagnant and continue to evolve in times of restraint, because of public demand. Amenities such as the trail systems, which are common to all of these parks continue to expand into the communities and along the river valleys as the cities grow. The program established an open space standard in Alberta which simply perpetuates itself based on it's own success. For example, when the Alberta Government canceled the fourth phase of the program, due solely to public pressure, over the last four years, Calgary's City Council has allocated over \$30.0 M from a variety of sources for specific projects, identified in Urban Park Master Plan as priorities. Landscape Architects continue to take the lead role in the expansion of these park systems.

Alberta's cities would be very different without these park systems. In addition to providing an unparalleled recreational amenity, to a large extent the image of these cities has been shaped by these landscapes. The landscape defines each city and is in many respects the defining element for that City. People refer and compare these cities on their river valley park system, sooner that they would discuss the new subdivision in each centre. The quality of life in these cities has been greatly improved and these parks and their pathway systems show up consistently show up on citizen surveys as one of the most highly rated municipal amenities. Landscape Architects should be very proud of the contribution that they have made in shaping Alberta's cities.

Over the years, I have been continually asked to quantify the impact of these parks. While I am not sure how you would go about it, their impact is best left as a qualitative commodity.

The Alberta Government essentially left the Master Plan decisions up to each city with a few straightforward and clear objectives. One of the objectives was "the protection of urban natural environments." Without question, this was probably the most significant aspect of this program. One of the Master Plan requirements was to identify natural areas and illustrate how they would be protected. Many of these natural areas were valued in the community, but only fully understood by a few people in the community. Many of these areas were only protected by the fact that urbanization had not yet put pressure on them. The timing was right for assembling and protecting these areas as parks and preserving them in perpetuity.

The priority to protect the natural areas was fully understood and supported by all of the Landscape Architects involved in the project. Their commitment to the protection and

their understanding of how to design the system to protect them and still use them is the true meaning of the Urban Parks Program. The vision that Landscape Architects had in achieving this legacy is the real contribution that the profession made to the development of Alberta's urban parks and cities. Alberta's parks and cities would have evolved entirely differently in the hands of other professions!

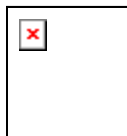
The Alberta Government hired me to manage the urban park development in Grande Prairie, Lloydminster, Red Deer, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat. When these parks were completed, I went into private practice and worked on several more urban park master plans and implementation projects. The City of Calgary then contracted me to coordinate the development of their Urban Park Master Plan which lead into a position with the city to manage the capital development section of Calgary Parks & Recreation. My opinion may be biased! And I would invite you to discuss the program with people like Jim Taylor who were involved in the early stages of the program. It would be difficult to be critical of the Urban Parks Program from any perspective. These parks will remain as reminders of Alberta's milk and honey days that unfortunately may never return.

One of the things that occurred to me while I was putting this brief overview together was that the history of this program should be fully documented. It is impossible to really discuss the creation of Alberta's Urban Parks in a 10 minute overview and do the topic justice. It is an important chapter in the history of Landscape Architecture and the history of Alberta.

The Alberta Government may feel that the success of these parks was a result of their investment and to a large extent that is true. However, their vision and success would not have been achieved without the careful and talented input of every Landscape Architect who has worked on one of these projects.

Please note that this paper is intended to be speaking notes, not an exhaustive history of the Alberta's parks or a piece of literature!

[session4session4](#)



[Histoires d'architecture de paysage au Canada - Histories of Landscape Architecture in Canada](#)

[CONGRES AAPC/CSLA 98](#)
[Version française](#)

[CSLA/AAPC CONGRESS 98](#)
[English version](#)