



BY PARKER GRANT

The look and feel of downtown Calgary is a subtle but dramatic evolution. “The biggest trend is the evolution of projects which address the urban realm of downtowns through new street types and public spaces for people,” says the creative and respected architect Keith Hlewka at KaBeN Design Group Inc., the Calgary-based collaborative architecture firm that focuses on sustainable design and the built environment. “The trend of downtown streets is multi-modal and contemporary spaces which blend art, a variety of street furniture, landscape and places for people.”

Flying over Calgary, it's much easier to view – the four quadrants, the Bow River, the Deerfoot, Crowchild and Bow Trails, and the sprawling cluster of big and bigger buildings – and grasp how downtown Calgary is a dazzling work-in-progress. Driving or walking the logical but convoluted four quadrant streets and avenues, it's also impressive that downtown continues to be a clean and manoeuvrable area and a place for people, not just the clichéd mountains of glass and steel.



ABOVE: KEITH HLEWKA, KABEN DESIGN GROUP INC.



Only city hall and archives keep the actual tally but there are 56 buildings that stand taller than 100 metres (328 feet). The tallest building (for now) is The Bow, with 58 storeys at 236 metres (774 feet). It is the tallest building in Canada outside of Toronto. The second-tallest building in Calgary is the 53-storey, 215-metre (705 feet) Suncor Energy Centre. The third is Eighth Avenue Place at 212.3 metres (697 feet) tall and 49 storeys.

The tallest development that is now under construction in Calgary is Brookfield Place East. At 247 metres (810 feet) and 56 storeys, it will officially become the tallest building in Calgary. The Telus Sky will actually have more storeys at 58 but (by design) it will stand “only” 222 metres (728 feet) tall.

Oh sure! The Calgary Tower stands out as a visual on the Calgary skyline but it is not ranked as a building because it is not “habitable.”

Surprisingly, aside from the specific nitty-gritties of the Alberta Building Code (ABC) and reams of environmental and other officialdom and regulations, there are not many “rules” when it comes to the look and design of Calgary buildings. Just about the only “rule” that is sacred for Calgary architects is the city’s height restrictions that prevent any building from casting a shadow over the Bow River and city hall with winter months excluded from this limit. The Bow Tower was originally rumoured to be at least 1,000 feet tall but was reduced to comply with the rule.

“The current look of the Calgary skyline is mostly a combination of postmodern glass and stone-clad buildings and more contemporary glass curtain-wall office and residential buildings,” Hlewka explains. “But the Calgary skyline will evolve in several ways. While the safe trend of decorated glass-clad office buildings will continue, foreign investment and architects will influence more adventurous sculpted projects.

“No matter what,” he adds, “the city context and the river will continue to be a big influence on the skyline, allowing for taller buildings near the centre and shaping buildings which step down to the river.”

Only architects and developers notice the specifics and subtleties of buildings. “In the past five years or so, two trends have developed,” he says. “The first is the evolution of residential and mixed-use buildings into the core of the city. The other trend is office towers that are sculptured and fully skinned in glass-curtain walls. It’s very ‘in’ and will continue for years. What’s ‘out’ are buildings with hats and towers which incorporate punched window-clad in stone and stucco.”



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“CALGARY AND CALGARIANS, IN GENERAL, SEEM TO BE VERY OPEN-MINDED RELATIVE TO OTHER CITIES AND COMMUNITIES. THEY WELCOME PROJECTS THAT ARE UNIQUE AND FORWARD-THINKING, WHICH IS VERY ENCOURAGING FOR ARCHITECTS.”

~ TONY WAI

Architect Tony Wai, associate with IBI Group Architects, says there is a definite Calgary uniqueness to the look and feel, especially in downtown architecture. “I don’t think today’s architecture is driven so much by particular trends, but rather by unique ideas specific to the project’s site and ambitions. Calgary and Calgarians, in general, seem to be very open-minded relative to other cities and communities,” he says from experience. “They welcome projects that are unique and forward-thinking, which is very encouraging for architects.”

Wai and the IBI Group are the designers for Park Point, an exciting Qualex-Landmark development and Calgary’s newest residential highrise. Park Point will be a 34-storey, mixed-use residential condo that will ultimately include two towers and feature top-notch urban luxury.

“I think the trend in exterior finishes for contemporary projects is to finish a building in full-height glass, whether it’s a window-wall or curtain-wall. From the exterior, glass is favoured in the sense that it makes the building appear light and transparent. From the interior, particularly with residential buildings, it is also great for views and allows light to penetrate into the units.

“For construction, it can be installed quickly compared to other forms of construction such as masonry, and reduced construction time translates out to reduced costs for the developer. But, as we become more environmentally conscious, we realize that too much glass is bad for energy consumption as it allows too much heat to escape in winter and too much heat gain in summer. It can lead to

high temperature fluctuations and condensation problems inside the unit, which cause discomfort for the resident and potential problems for the building in the long term.”

He uses the state-of-the-art design of Park Point as an example of design components that take into account environmental and other features that are vital contemporary aspects of downtown architecture.

“We are addressing those issues at Park Point by strategically placing more insulated walls around the window in areas that won’t disrupt views, improving the energy performance of the building and the comfort of the residents.”

Keith Hlewka agrees that, in addition to the many design features, contemporary Calgary architecture has important and new aspects that must be in the plan.

“Our cold climate has had a great influence on the architecture of our city. With low winter sun angles, the city has decided to protect the river. The building heights are limited to control how much they shadow the river system. Over time this will shape the skyline along the north edge forcing buildings to step down to the river system.

“But the biggest evolution in buildings is the need to be more efficient. With energy continuing to affect our expenses, building owners understand that, of course, buildings must be beautiful and unique but they must also understand the impact of the environment and how to conserve energy.”

With residential new home building, a key part of the planning and construction process is the wants and needs of

ABOVE: ARCHITECT TONY WAI, ASSOCIATE WITH IBI GROUP ARCHITECTS.



the new homeowner. On a much more complex and technical scale, architects do discuss and work with the specific wants and needs of commercial developers.

“Some clients are very interested in the look of the project where others are more pragmatic. As architects our role in the process is to shape the needs and wants into a product that meets the clients’ esthetic desires as well as their schedule and budget,” Hlewka says. “I nudge clients toward alternative ways to think about space, which incorporate some sustainables – local building materials, energy efficient building systems or toxin-free interiors. The goal is to create a project which is beautiful, affordable, healthy and delivered on time.”

Wai’s Park Point design focus also incorporates architectural and people place priorities. “Qualex-Landmark is an experienced and sophisticated developer. Since the project is situated in such a prominent site in the beltline area directly across from Central Memorial Park, it was important that Park Point convey an air of modern elegance through this project, to do the site justice.

“Qualex requested that the lobby entry be clad in stone, which continues into the lobby’s floor, concierge desk and

feature wall. At the corner of 2nd Street and 12th Avenue SW, by the amenity space, there is an exterior feature wall that is also clad in stone to give the building a sense of presence at the street corner. The developer takes customer satisfaction seriously and conducts surveys to collect feedback and data which serve to inform and drive the design of projects. For Park Point, storage came up to be one of the most important elements of a unit to residents, so we worked to ensure that every suite has an abundant amount of storage and closet space.”

Wai is upbeat and points out that Park Point’s strikingly unique architectural facade will be the landmark of the neighbourhood, as seen from the park but from downtown too. It will be the tallest building in the neighbourhood.

“Good design and architecture starts with planning and the urban realm. We need the city to continue to allow for diverse zoning and policies which demand dense urban spaces,” Hlewka says with enthusiasm. “When we get to the building’s architecture and design, we must be aware of the site’s context and how to take advantage of our abundance of sunlight while being aware of our diverse climate.” **B**

ABOVE: PARK POINT, A RESIDENTIAL HIGHRISE BY QUALEX-LANDMARK.
PHOTO SOURCE: QUALEX-LANDMARK