



SUSTAINABILITY MATTERS: PROSPECTS FOR A JUST TRANSITION IN CALGARY, CANADA'S PETRO-CITY

by Noel Keough with Geoff Ghitler

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A Culture of Sustainability



In this chapter, we present an eclectic set of essays that leverage seemingly modest issues to invite us to think more deeply about cultural beliefs and attitudes in relation to sustainability. In 1958 Raymond Williams wrote his classic *Culture and Society*. In it, he famously defined culture as “a whole way of life” and as having to do with the arts and learning.¹ Williams argued that culture is not, or should not be, an elitist pursuit and that, at that time, culture was being used as a means of “perpetuating and shoring up social inequality.” He proposed, alternatively, that the “cultural worth of all human activity is socially equalizing.”²

French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu contributed to the cultural debate with his influential concept of “habitus”—the physical embodiment of our cultural capital, such as ways of carrying our bodies, the clothes we wear, the products we consume, our tastes and credentials. Our habitus defines who we are and can foster inclusivity or exclusivity.³

Williams’ work preceded the contemporary debates about sustainability, of course, but his ideas are still important for our understanding of a culture of sustainability. Culture is the matrix of norms and meaning within which politics, economics, and technological change are immersed. Broad access to cultural institutions and to the process of cultural production is essential to sustainability. In this chapter, we exam both the exclusive and inclusive tendencies in culture, both its conservatism and its change-compelling nature.

In the first essay, we write in defense of Calgary’s Peace Bridge. What does the bridge, and the debate that it sparked, say about creating a walkable city? Does a city just serve a utilitarian purpose, or do we aspire to a vibrant city that values beauty and that brings people out to recreate and celebrate in public spaces?

In “I and We,” we take on the “me first” posture that our neoliberal free market economic model promotes, but we do so with a discussion not of economics but of culture. The big question we ask is, What kind of society promotes sustainability? Is it the “I” culture made famous by arch-conservative author Ayn Rand and encapsulated in Margaret Thatcher’s infamous statement “There is no such thing as society”? Or is it a “we” culture, where citizens recognize their interdependence and act in the spirit of compassion and good will toward neighbours?

In a sustainable society, all citizens should have the right and the means to education and the information they need to participate fully in the life of their community. In this chapter, we argue for the unique role that libraries play in making that possible.

The chapter also includes an essay on dandelions. It may seem a trivial issue with respect to sustainability, but it does open a window for us to reflect on how we orient ourselves culturally toward the wider community of life. Surprisingly, dandelions, by their very ubiquity and familiarity in our lives, offer a chance to reflect on bigger questions.

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

Probably no piece of Calgary's infrastructure has generated as much press per dollar of spending as the Peace Bridge. Despite the furor, for its utility and its aesthetic quality, it was money well spent. It has, in fact, become an iconic symbol of Calgary, constantly drawing tourists and Calgarians alike to its unique beauty and functionality.

There was much gnashing of teeth about the price tag, but \$25 million, it turns out, is not out of line with similar footbridge projects.⁴ The Peace Bridge cost about \$30,000 per metre. The Fort Edmonton Bridge and Winnipeg's Esplanade Riel Bridge were built for about \$34,000 and \$50,000 per metre, respectively.⁵

Another bone of contention was the sole sourcing of the design to Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. This bridge had some unique and demanding design considerations—no suspended overhead towers, to avoid conflict with the heliport; no mid-river piers, for environmental reasons; and of course, the aesthetic “wow factor.” For his structural engineering expertise, design reputation, and proven ability to deliver the goods, the invitation to Calatrava was prudent public policy.

Still others complained that we didn't need another bridge. With the Peace Bridge, we now have nine bridges within five kilometres. In Florence, Italy, the famous Ponte Vecchio sits in the middle of eight bridges in a 4.4 kilometre stretch. In our opinion, Calgary's pedestrian network across the Bow River could use yet another bridge connecting the north shore with what will eventually be a densely populated West Village. The combined cost of three existing footbridges—the Elbow River Traverse (at the confluence of the Bow and Elbow rivers), the Peace Bridge, and the George C. King bridge to St. Patrick's Island (known as the Skipping Stone Bridge)—plus a future fourth bridge at West Village is less than the price of one suburban vehicle interchange.

Early on, the media decided that the Peace Bridge was a bad news story. Look back at the headlines. Phrases like “Celebrate Government Waste,” “Notorious Peace Bridge,” “Controversial Piece of Infrastructure,” “Plagued by Further Delay,” and “Cost Overruns” peppered the coverage.

It is instructive to look at Calgary's rival city, Edmonton, and its iconic Fort Edmonton footbridge. The cost was slightly higher. It, too, suffered

delays due to technical problems. In the case of the Peace Bridge, it was faulty welds. In Edmonton, technical delays occurred with the main suspension cable. But a quick Internet search suggests that cost and delays did not result in an avalanche of mean-spirited negative press in Edmonton. Quite the opposite, in fact. One headline carried by the *Edmonton Journal* read “Has Edmonton Hit a Home Run with Its New Footbridge at Fort Edmonton Park?”⁶ In this op-ed, the author wrote, “Some folks don’t mind plain and ugly. But I mind. . . . Count me in as one taxpayer who is glad that our city council has decided to buck up and pay a bit more for design, to start creating public infrastructure that doesn’t just serve us, it delights us.”

So why heap so much scorn on the Peace Bridge? It seems that in Calgary, the default position is that any government spending is out of control, wasteful, and incompetent. Or perhaps it was simply another opportunity for the reactionary media to attack Druh Farrell, one of the city’s most progressive councilors.

Immediately after the Peace Bridge opened, the construction of the Ring Road around Calgary began soaking up \$4 to \$5 billion in taxpayers’ money, and Council reaffirmed its commitment to subsidize the suburban development industry to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars annually with little or no sign of concern from mainstream media, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, or supposedly tight-fisted taxpayer-avenging councilors.⁷

Through processes like imagineCalgary and Plan It Calgary, citizens have spoken loud and clear that they want a city where walking is safe, convenient, and pleasant. But you don’t get a walkable city without building infrastructure for walkers. Compared to the spending on more roads for more cars, the health care costs of sedentary lifestyles, and the cost of injury and death due to automobile accidents, spending on pedestrian infrastructure is a bargain.

That brings us to our final point. There has been no more dogged and diligent champion of a walkable city than Councilor Farrell. Yet no other elected official received so much vitriol and nasty comment as she for her support of the Peace Bridge. Instead of throwing darts, we should be throwing a bouquet to Councilor Farrell for her diligence and determination to build a more sustainable and beautiful city.

Calgary will never be the great city it aspires to if, collectively, we cannot support bold and visionary local government efforts to create a sustainable, vibrant, and beautiful city. The Peace Bridge is a step in the right direction.

I AND WE: THE CASE FOR SOCIAL COHESION

In the climax of Ayn Rand's cult classic *The Fountainhead*, the hero, architect Howard Roark, dynamites a building of his own creation because its design had been subverted by a scheming partner.⁸ Embodied in Roark, as well as other of Rand's literary characters, are the characteristics that inspired and reinforced the myth of the virtuous individual and the evils of "big" government. As Margaret Thatcher, a powerful devotee of the credo, infamously proclaimed in a 1982 interview with *Women's Own* magazine, "There is no such thing as society."⁹

Closer to home, the "rugged individual" was at the epicentre of Premier Ralph Klein's (1992–2006) revolution: the mythical westerner shaping the "Alberta Advantage" by virtue of his or her own will and effort to achieve wealth and prosperity. Those failing to take advantage of the Advantage, as Klein notoriously remonstrated time after time, had only themselves to blame.¹⁰ Small government, "free" markets, low taxes, individual property rights, and low levels of social services are all policies stemming from Rand's self-adoring ideology. After an easing of the ideological rhetoric through four successive provincial governments, Premier Jason Kenney has turned the clock back once again.

Rand hated the word *we*, writing bluntly in *Anthem*, "It is the word by which the depraved steal the virtue of the good, by which the weak steal the might of the strong, by which the fools steal the wisdom of the sages. . . . I am done with the monster of 'We', the word of serfdom, of plunder, of misery, falsehood and shame." In its place, she saw "the face of god," a "god who will grant them [humans] joy and peace and pride. This god, this one word: 'I.'"¹¹

Scary stuff!

As both the 2015 and 2019 provincial elections demonstrated, the starkest difference in values in our cities is between inner cities (we) and suburbs (I), particularly in Calgary and Edmonton and their metropolitan

regions. For at least a decade, voting patterns have resulted in success for centre and left-of-centre MLAs and MPs in the inner city, with right-of-centre candidates achieving success in the suburbs. Philippe Fournier, founder of 338Canada.com, looked at this phenomenon ahead of the 2019 federal election. Using population density as a proxy for city centre districts, he found that the fifty-three densest electoral districts were all likely to vote either Liberal or NDP. In districts with densities above four thousand people per square kilometre, the Liberals led the Conservatives by a whopping 26 percent.¹² What accounts for this polarity?

Research by University of Toronto geographer Alan Walks confirms that this phenomenon—progressive inner city voting and conservative suburban voting—holds across Canada. As Walks delved into the reasons for this pattern, he found that suburban voters tend to believe that government is too big, taxes are too high, and the economy should be left to business. In broad strokes, suburbanites live a privatized, consumption-oriented lifestyle characterized by car-dominated transport, big box mall shopping, and the desire for private space in big suburban homes. They tend not to see a political dimension to that lifestyle; it is simply natural. Inner city dwellers, by contrast, seem to be much more deliberate in aligning their politics with their lifestyle and housing choices. They choose the inner city for its perceived sense of community, they support public transit, and they trade off larger homes and yards for easier access to public spaces like plazas, art galleries, museums, and theatres.¹³

Walks observed that these voting patterns began emerging in the early 1980s, coinciding precisely with the era in which Rand enthusiasts—including Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Brian Mulroney, Alan Greenspan (a primary architect of the 2008 financial meltdown and once the world's most powerful central banker), Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, and others who drove America to war in Iraq—began retooling society toward Rand's vision.

Rand and her disciples made careers from demonizing “we,” but logic and evidence tell us reality is different. As Canadians and Calgarians, our most successful endeavours—our legal, education, and health systems; our inherent inclination toward social justice and equality of opportunity; and, most dearly, our open form of democracy—all came about through

people of vision in the service of a greater good. Our individual successes are, in large measure, a consequence of these community investments.

“We” is crucial because—as contemporary urban research, such as that reported in *All-In Cities* by PolicyLink, argues—the successful, sustainable urban places of the future will be those that best leverage the power of community to overcome mounting social and environmental challenges.¹⁴ Wherever great urban developments are happening, you can be sure that behind them, there is a community of “we”—enlightened, engaged, and usually unselfish individuals.

The reasons inner city voters vote the way they do are complex and not necessarily tied to selflessness, but whatever the reason, they have it right and Rand had it wrong. There is a political sweet spot out there where “I” and “we” are not opposites. It’s important that we find it, because in the end, “we” is much more resilient than “I.”

LIBRARIES: WHAT ARE THEY GOOD FOR?

At times, our world seems headed for the new dark ages that urban sage Jane Jacobs warned about. Here at home, we are confronted with a variety of challenges—the erosion of our country’s image as compassionate honest broker and environmental leader among the community of nations, economic uncertainty, growing inequality, half-hearted attention to reconciliation with First Nations, and the ethical challenge of tar sands development.¹⁵

In *Dark Age Ahead*, Jacobs identifies the public library as one of the indispensable assets of any community—as important as water and sewer systems, fire protection, and public health.¹⁶ The public library, sometimes called “the people’s university,” plays an essential role in providing an inclusive place for citizens to engage in lifelong learning, ensuring that all have access to the information they need to participate in community life.

Calgary’s new Central Library gives physical form to what is already one of the most successful public library systems in North America. It received more than fifty thousand visitors the first weekend it opened. From 1994 to 2009, total uses of the library system grew from 13.8 to 35.5 million. Between 2014 and 2017, the per capita use increased by 22 percent. Since 2013, the Calgary Public Library (CPL) has maintained an annual

circulation of more than fifteen million items. It consistently has more visitors than the Stampede, Calgary Zoo, Heritage Park, Science Centre, recreation arenas, and all professional sporting events—combined!¹⁷

The library is much more than a source of books, magazines, videos, and music. The CPL provides low-income Calgarians with tickets to arts and recreational opportunities, including dance, music, theatre, festivals, and rodeo. In 2009 over eleven thousand kids improved their reading skills through the library's Summer Reading Adventure. Between 2013 and 2019, the library hosted more than 170,000 participants in its programs.

Among the city's constellation of cultural institutions—to take nothing away from our thriving arts community—the library is uniquely important to Calgary's vitality and sustainability. In a city where economic inequalities dictate access to the benefits our city has to offer, the library is a pillar of social inclusion. In a world where the ability to purchase access to knowledge and even social connection defines our ability to participate in society, whether via university tuition or the latest technological gadgets, the library is almost alone in its promise of universal access. For example, according to the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, an international group that assesses access to the foundational information-processing skills required to participate in the social and economic life of advanced economies, 45 percent of adults in Alberta do not have the literacy skills to function effectively in society.¹⁸ These functionally illiterate Albertans are far more likely to live in poor households, to have served jail terms, and to have misinterpreted medical instructions.¹⁹ For Alberta to be at the forefront of realizing the dream of universal literacy, we need public libraries.

But as the new Central Library matures and the creative class rallies its support, we have to be vigilant to avoid potential dangers. Big shiny projects in the “cultural districts”—like libraries—are a centrepiece of “creative cities,” but let's not make the mistake of assuming that creative cities are necessarily inclusive cities.²⁰

Serendipitously, our new library is situated on the threshold of East Village. Its location is a symbolic opportunity for Calgarians to embrace the twin promise of a public library as both a celebration of the best of our culture and a symbol of a caring, inclusive society. East Village faces

the challenge of reinvigorating itself without gentrifying and driving away “undesirables” to the point of making East Village and the Central Library an exclusive place enjoyed by the cultured classes but where the “uncultured” and the disenfranchised are alienated. If you have bad teeth, a tattered jacket, or Safeway bags holding your belongings, do you still feel comfortable stepping inside our new Central Library?

As Jacobs writes, community institutions like the public library encourage us to “deal civilly with people whose upbringing, cultures, and personalities are at odds with the traditions and customs of one’s own nuclear family and [to] teach children to be both cosmopolitan and tolerant.”²¹

It is hard to overstate the importance of a library. In 2002, after almost two thousand years, the world’s most important library of the ancient world—the Great Library of Alexandria, in Egypt—was resurrected from the ashes and officially inaugurated as Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The Alexandria Declaration of 2004 recognized the new library’s mission to advocate for reason over ideology, cultural expression over censorship, and social justice over oppression. The founding director of Bibliotheca Alexandrina spoke of it being “in the eye of the storm” of the Arab spring by fostering the “deep currents” of cultural change, and the emergence from a dark age of one of the world’s great civilizations.²²

In 2018 Calgary’s Central Library was recognized by *Architectural Digest* as one of the nine most futuristic libraries in the world, along with the most recent addition to the world’s great libraries—the Helsinki Central Library Oodi.²³ But beautiful design will only go so far. We need our new Central Library to foster compassion, wisdom, learning, understanding, and the deep currents of change that can create healthy and creative communities, a better Calgary, and a more just world! Calgary Public Library is on the right track with its 2019–22 *Strategic Plan*: “We engage in open, meaningful dialogue and deepen our understanding to inform Library practice and create an environment that is inclusive of all.”²⁴

ON DANDELIONS: SPEAKING TRUTH TO FLOWERS

Every spring, a yellow carpet covers the city, particularly infesting closely mown lawns and untended grassy or disturbed areas. And every year,

about ten minutes after it appears, the squabble over toxic treatments to destroy it reignites. Alas, the poor dandelion. Has ever a more innocent, beneficial, and beautiful creation of nature been as embattled as this fecund little flower?

Officially, the province delisted the dandelion as a noxious weed in 2010, relieving local authorities from the obligation to keep it under complete control. The City has not sprayed for aesthetic purposes since 1995, and now only a small number of sites are treated with toxins—sites where dandelions are deemed out of control or where they present a danger (dandelion flowers make playing fields slipperier). However, obsessed lawnistas, who froth when waves of parachuting invaders waft over from a neighbouring cabbage patch, are under no such restrictions.

To our neatly manicured sensibilities, dandelions are weeds, perennially popping up where they're least desired. But the definition of "weed" is subjective. As one dandelion admirer put it, "If dandelions were hard to grow they would be welcome on any lawn."²⁵ Indeed, there are numerous benefits from this marvellous plant, named for the distinctive shape of its leaves (from the French *dent-de-lion*, 'tooth of the lion'). Dandelions have been gathered throughout human history, and the plant's medicinal properties documented since at least the tenth century.

Each part of the plant, from root to petal, is useful. Taken as tea, the roots treat kidney and liver complaints and act as a mild laxative. Ingested, they are highly nutritious, rich in Vitamins A, B, C, and D. Dried and roasted, they are used to brew a sort of coffee with a mild chicory flavour. The leaves, when young and tender, are delicious raw, and older leaves can be blanched like spinach or endives. When brewed, they are a powerful diuretic, and unlike conventional treatments, they do not leech potassium from the body. The latex in the stalks is effective in treating corns and warts. The flowers—aside from brightening our lives with their brilliantly jaunty yellow—can be boiled for tea and mixed with honey to treat coughs, or used as the essential ingredient in dandelion wine.²⁶

The dandelion is one of the first spring sources of nectar for bumblebees and other pollinators. We hear ever more alarming news of the decline of pollinators. A 2020 article in the journal *Science* warns that population trends point to an extinction event for bumblebees.²⁷ We need to do all we can to ease the trauma that bees (and ultimately, we) are facing.

Strangely, despite their seeming abundance, dandelions are relatively lousy ecological competitors, thriving only in certain specialized habitats. Such sites are rare in nature, and as a result, dandelions do not normally overwhelm local ecosystems; they simply exist and compete as they are able. But in cities, dandelion habitat abounds. Why? It turns out that our preferred “weed”—lawn grass—is an even poorer competitor than dandelions. Extraordinary amounts of care and chemicals are required to keep this unnatural monoculture thriving. Ironically, short, neatly mown grass, particularly the clumpy varieties used on city land, provides the perfect niche for the dandelion’s windborne seeds to settle and quickly establish. As we create something we love—neat grassy lawns—we also create ideal habitat for something we hate—dandelions. As the old comic-strip opossum Pogo astutely observed, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

A better approach to the dandelion is problem avoidance by design, a philosophy standing in stark contrast to the lazy we’ll-deal-with-the-consequences-later approach that we’re accustomed to. It’s simple: the best way to deal with persistently vexing problems is to avoid them in the first place. Unfortunately, the penchant in our culture is for the opposite: wait until problems occur and then look for solutions. You don’t have to ask which approach is more effective or which is costlier.

Spraying dandelions with toxic applications is a blunt and dangerous management practice. A comprehensive study by the Ontario College of Physicians, reported in 2005 in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, found, unsurprisingly, that “exposure to all commonly used pesticides” is associated with adverse health effects.²⁸ Though concentrations have been decreasing, more chemicals are sprayed in Calgary every year as the city spreads. In 2016, 0.23 kilograms per hectare of active ingredients were applied on public green spaces—the highest level since 2010.²⁹

A better solution is to plant, wherever possible, hardy, locally adapted prairie species that work together to naturally resist the flowery yellow horde. There are trade-offs, to be sure. While it is shaggier than our groomed aesthetic demands, such urban landscaping strategies provide an array of benefits, including large cost savings due to decreased maintenance needs. For example, natural grass ecosystems need mowing only once a season, to prevent them from becoming fire hazards.

We are taking steps in the right direction. In 2016 Calgary hired private companies to deploy goat herds as natural weed control in Confluence Park in Calgary's northeast. In 2018 and 2020, the program was expanded, bringing goats to the inner city at McHugh Bluff in Sunnyside.³⁰ New Edinborough Park in Sunnyside was the first Calgary park to go pesticide-free after a strong advocacy campaign in the community. It has become one of the most popular spaces for pre-school play group meet-ups in the city. There are now five pesticide-free parks in Calgary.³¹

Dandelions are just the tip of the iceberg of ecological destruction. A 2019 study in the journal *Biological Conservation* reports that we are facing a worldwide decline in insects, the main cause being habitat loss by conversion to intensive agriculture and an additional driver being chemical use.³² In September 2020, the UN Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity reported that none of the targets set for biodiversity conservation in Aichi, Japan, in 2010 have been met, undermining efforts to address the climate emergency and attain the UN Sustainable Development Goals.³³

Two oft-repeated principles of ecological sustainability are to promote and nurture diversity and to avoid introducing into the environment unnatural substances that nature is unable to assimilate. Lawns violate the first principle, and the use of pesticides to maintain them, the second. If the dandelion's tale were a fable, the moral would be this: if you don't want dandelions, don't create dandelion habitat. The safest and most cost-effective and ecologically defensible way to deal with dandelions is to nurture dandelion-resistant ecosystems.

NOTES

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