

Leaders Urge Urban Designers to be Bold

Wednesday, May 7, Guelph: The Urban Design Summit was held in Guelph, Ontario, this last Monday, May 5, and Tuesday, May 6. The Summit brought together urban design professionals from across Ontario, as well as leaders in the field, some from as far away as Texas and North Carolina to share their experiences and expertise. Urban design professionals and the citizens of Guelph were urged to tackle the challenges facing their cities by being innovative, willing to experiment and embracing bold visions.

Monday night started with an event in the River Run main auditorium, where members of the Guelph public were in attendance, along with the Summit participants. Tuesday, the urban design professionals gathered for panels and workshops that explored new tools and approaches to urban design, as well as lessons learned from tackling difficulties facing the discipline. The last event of the day was a series of mobile workshops, with walking tours of some of Guelph's key neighbourhoods and an invitation from all participants to offer their own ideas on how to design for the future for Guelph.

The opening message from Mayor Farbridge at Monday evening's event was that despite today's increasingly global and Internet-connected world, place matters more than ever. "People have a need to come together in common spaces to connect," she said, setting a theme that was common to the conference. David Miller, reflecting on his time as Toronto's Mayor, urged the urban designers and other members of the audience to "be bold", a theme picked up by many of Tuesday's presenters, including City of Guelph CAO, Ann Pappert, in her introductory remarks to open the day.

A common motif throughout the two-day event was that urban design in North America is at an inflection point. Cities are facing serious issues related to environmental sustainability and carbon footprint, economic rejuvenation and youth unemployment, as well as continued pressure to grow their populations without expanding their boundaries. All of these challenges come at a time when governments are under pressure to reduce spending and taxes. Finding solutions to these challenges is putting urban design in the spotlight.

Joseph Minicozzi, Principal of Urban 3 and the former Director of the Asheville Downtown Association (North Carolina), started Tuesday's sessions addressing the taxation challenge head on. Celebrated across the U.S. for his paradigm-shifting analysis of municipal finances, he put forward a detailed, data-driven analysis based on evaluating tax-performance per acre and how it relates to urban form and design. Cities that have a denser pattern are utilizing land more effectively and creating more resilient communities. Urban3's 3D visualization allows communities to see where their high-performing lands are and provides new insight into where public investments would yield the highest return. As land becomes more scarce within urban boundaries, this holistic view is a crucial new discussion in government policy and financial decision making.

While not always popular in mid-sized cities such as Guelph, intensification of the urban fabric, when done well, is being understood as a way to increase the local tax base and provide resiliency for the community to continue funding of valued municipal services. Mixed-use densification is also a key to lessening our dependence on the car, making cities more walkable and urban transit more effective. It can also bring other benefits, especially when designed with care and consideration for creating public spaces that support civic engagement and community uses.

A thoughtful presentation by architect Ralph Giannone on his designs for the award-winning Port Credit Village, showed that many of the early fears about creating density along the waterfront in Port Credit turned out to be groundless. The development not only opened up the lakefront to the public, but created both public and privately owned public spaces that have become important civic gathering spaces. It also rejuvenated and reconnected the main street of Port Credit by integrating retail along Lakeshore Boulevard.

The most engaging speaker both Monday and Tuesday was Andrew Howard, co-founder of Build a Better Block and an evangelist for community-led urban design. After a decade or more working in traditional land use planning, he and his partner Jason Roberts, started a successful community-led initiative to bring back streetcars to their neighbourhood in South Dallas. Following on this success, they have been involved in over 60 community-based interventions across the U.S. that have improved neighbourhoods and, as important, involved citizens in designing their own cities.

Howard's message for both urban designers and citizens, echoed those of mayors Miller and Farbridge: be bold, embrace innovation, and remember that bringing people together is both the means and ends of great urban design.