



OPINION

Can you really plan a renaissance?

It feels like Cambridge is ready to take the current that looks to rebuild the city's heart

JAN DEAN

EDITOR'S DESK



There has been considerable investment. Downtown Brampton now features several condo buildings, and some heritage buildings like the old Dominion building have been lovingly renovated and restored.

But the story doesn't yet have a happy ending in Brampton. Apparently tenants are not beating a path to the door to set up businesses there.

An upscale French bistro and a piano bar planning to cater to the theatre crowd in downtown Brampton opened to much acclaim, did okay for a while, suffered during the recession, and finally closed last year.

The beautiful but very expensive Rose Theatre that was supposed to operate in the black, doesn't.

The Brampton Downtown Development Corporation is still touting the benefits of doing business downtown, but you don't see many people walking around, and there isn't

a lot happening.

The City has agreed to jumpstart that longed-for rebirth yet again with a massive public project - this time the rebuilding of a city block that will also provide City Hall with a needed extension.

Again, everyone is hoping this time, the investment will pay off by attracting new private investments and a new lease on life for the core.

We'll see.

I don't think that Cambridge is going to suffer that fate.

The Cambridge Theatre is being built to city-scale as befits Cambridge, rather than attempting to compete with theatres in Toronto or even Kitchener's Centre in the Square.

And the Cambridge Theatre will be operated by Drayton Entertainment - a theatrical company with a track record of fiscal responsibility.

And the buzz that's happening in Cambridge is coming from all kinds of different directions.

Just as important, those talking about the downtown are ready to ante up their investments.

Shakespeare had it right:

There is a tide in the affairs of men. Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

It looks like Brampton missed the boat on their downtown development. Assumed that the theatre would do it. Didn't put into place the other strategies that would encourage downtown development.

Which is why yet again that city is trying to figure out what to do next. Will a City Hall extension be the ticket to bringing the downtown back to life?

The City of Cambridge is in a very different position.

That Shakespearean quote continues:

On such a full sea are we now afloat, And we must take the current when it serves, Or lose our ventures.

Feels like Cambridge is ready to take the current that looks to rebuild the city's heart. Not just because there will soon be a new theatre downtown, but because downtown is attracting money and energy from a range of investors. Like Shawky Fahel whose Waterscape on the Grand River Condominiums is just another example of the downtown potential being developed in Cambridge by a man dedicated to preserving heritage buildings.

Maybe the mistake in Brampton was in the big scale of public investment without large scale private investment to match it.

Not enough developers who specialize in heritage buildings willing to put their money into an entire block. John Cruzozola of Inzola Construction has shown a gift for restoration of old buildings in Brampton and other cities, but Brampton doesn't seem to be attracting other renovators of similar mind.

Cambridge is.

And it's not just attracting investment to the downtown, Cambridge has become a hot property when it comes to ICI real estate.

A few years ago, the city outskirts seemed awash in industrial and commercial space that had been built on spec that was sitting vacant.

Guess what?

That space has been taken.

It's not absolutely clear what the end result will be but when the smoke clears, downtown will be an important part of the life of Cambridge.

Brampton?

Not so much.

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United Way has inspired many for the past 70 years

In 1941, two years into the Second World War, a dozen community and business leaders gathered to consider an urgent problem: how to raise money for K-W's war support efforts.

The timing hits home for me personally; my father, who recently passed away in his 92nd year, was a member of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. An optometrist, he served his country with great pride for the duration of WWII, holding the rank of sergeant in charge of vision care.

While Dad and more than a million Canadians served their country in war, the organization now known as United Way of K-W and Area was born in a quiet boardroom at Mutual Life of Canada.

Although the cities of Kitchener and Waterloo were experiencing an economic and manufacturing boom, war-time rationing was a reality for many households. The Twin Cities were deluged with pleas to donate to the war effort and to local charities. School kids rallied to raise funds for a trainer aircraft at Waterloo-Wellington Airport, the KW Sales & Ad Club ran a "buy a tank" campaign, and countless women rolled bandages and knitted socks for soldiers.

Our community was gaining a national reputation for its war fundraising leadership.

JAN VARNER
UNITED WAY



This new charity -- then registered as Kitchener-Waterloo Federated Charities -- was created to take things a step further, coordinating the war fundraising appeal. The approach was an immediate success: the first

campaign raised \$99,500 in just three weeks.

John Thompson worked at United Way for 28 years, retiring as CEO in 2005. He has witnessed considerable change in our community but says that the sentiment and sense of urgency that inspired United Way's creation remain the same today. "This charity was the inspiration of business and community leaders and the original concept was that it would be more efficient and cost-effective to campaign together than to campaign separately," John explains.

Business played a crucial role from the beginning. Unions and employee groups became immediate contributors, creating workplace campaigns similar to those still run today. Companies like B.F. Goodrich, Krug Furniture, Mutual Life of Canada and Zehrs Food Markets were among the early supporters. "Our founders applied a business approach to charity," reflects John, "and businesses made giving a key part of their workplace culture."

Their foresight proved invaluable: when the troops returned home in 1946, the demand for social services greatly increased. Service men and women needed support to rehabilitate and re-integrate into a post-war society and community. We were there to

help. For example, there was demand for a post-war "home for the blind", which was established by Canadian National Institute for the Blind, partly supported through Federated Charities funding. (Given my dad's role in the war, the irony is certainly not lost on me.)

As we celebrate our 70th anniversary, there's one thing that strikes me more than anything else: while our strategic priorities and community outcomes are relatively new, United Way was a community problem-solver even back in 1941. We might measure success differently now, and we may face different issues in our community, but we can take a lesson or two from our war-time founders. This organization has always relied on forward-thinking community leaders and generous donors and volunteers. As we conclude National Volunteer Week and United Way begins early preparations for our fall campaign, we thank you KW.

Special thanks to John Thompson, former United Way CEO, and author Cathy Williams, whose book "Fifty Years of Caring and Sharing" greatly informed this column.

I'm taking reservations for this column. If you're interested in a breakfast chat about community change, you can reach me at jvarner@uwaykw.org or @janvarner on Twitter.

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