



URBAN RENEWAL

BY VIVIAN ZENARI *∞* PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN STEEL

Rush-hour traffic rumbles down Jasper Avenue. One after another, cars and trucks clang over the loose manhole cover near Dick Barr's Boyle Street apartment. Barr has lived in the walk-up for 35 years, and he has learned to block out most of the street noise. Besides, he is preoccupied with showing off his garden.

He crouches in front of his favourite bed, which features red snapdragons, white petunias and purple pansies. "I like the colour," he says. "There's the size, too." He cups a plump pansy in his hand. "You see?"

ABOVE: Dick Barr beside his favourite bed on the east side of his apartment building. Cosmos, snapdragons, petunias and pansies cheerily greet Jasper Avenue commuters who pass by. FACING: A Partners in Parks bed on Jasper Avenue near 86 Street tended by the Edmonton People in Need Shelter Society featuring marigolds "Safari Bolero" and "Disco Mix," and petunias "Plum Madness" and "Pink Madness."





A stone-faced teenaged boy strides by and nods at Barr. “Hello there, young fella,” Barr says. A few beats later a passing vehicle honks, not an unusual occurrence at this time of day, but unexpectedly Barr waves back. He explains that drivers often honk or flash the thumbs-up sign at him, for the same reason that the teen and other neighbours know him: his garden.

Most people associate downtown either with the glinting highrises and monumental architecture of business and government, or with their antithesis, empty lots covered in refuse or crumpled rooming houses, haggard men sitting on the front stairs. But once you notice Barr’s garden, you begin to see other things: pink and cream petunias lining the green belt on Jasper, rows of corn sprouting along the edges of a gravel parking lot. Approximately 50,000 people live in Edmonton’s core, and of these, many have found some way to express their love of gardening. Indeed, the will to garden is responsible for expressing—and even generating—community-mindedness in a part of town many assume lacks such cohesion.

Two community programs further the interests of gardening in downtown Edmonton. One is the Partners in Parks program. Begun in 1983, the program stretches the city’s beautification budget by involving residents in the maintenance of roadside flowerbeds and parkland. Individuals or groups approach the city’s community

TOP LEFT: Castor bean plants (centre) tower above the snapdragons. TOP RIGHT: A Partners in Parks bed across the street from Barr’s apartment. ABOVE: Downtown highrises look down on a Partners in Parks bed on Jasper Avenue at 86 Street.



services department and identify an area in their neighbourhood they would like to see landscaped. Participants sign a contract, renewable annually, that entrenches their commitment to a site. The city prepares the site with shrubs and bedding areas, and the partners plant annuals and keep the flowerbeds free from weeds and litter. In this way, flowers adorn areas of the city that might never receive attention. In 1999 Partners in Parks had 143 participants.

The impact of Partners in Parks in Barr's neighbourhood is striking. Several Partners in Parks beds punctuate the stretch of Jasper Avenue running along the river valley ridge from 92 Street to 82 Street. Residents of the Edmonton People in Need Shelter Society, which provides downtown housing for people with mental health problems, maintain garden beds at three riverview look-outs. The other beds are tended by area residents, including Barr.

Barr started gardening 10 years ago when his building's owner, who lived and gardened on the premises, sold the

apartment and moved out. Barr had assisted her with the gardening, and when she moved out he became the sole caretaker of the building's east-facing garden beds. Three years ago, when a cul-de-sac bed was built near his apartment as part of a Boyle Street development project, Barr eagerly applied for Partners in Parks responsibility for the bed. Now retired from the federal human resources department, he walks up and down the Jasper Partners in Parks strip every day, pulling weeds and picking up garbage, tending the northernmost bed that is officially his and keeping his eye unofficially on the others. His involvement with Partners in Parks is an extension of his personal streetside garden, making his private, personal garden and the public, community garden almost indistinguishable.

This melding of the individual and the social also characterizes the city's community gardens. In a community garden, a coalition of people divide a section of private or public land into individual plots, often with the support of a charitable community group, to make gardening

ABOVE: The raised beds of Our Urban Eden Project community garden. Gardeners employ bio-intensive and organic gardening techniques.



possible for those who would not otherwise have the money or land to do so. The gardens sustain themselves with combinations of corporate, non-profit and government funding, which each group must raise on their own. In an effort to create more co-operation, community gardeners formed the Edmonton Community Gardening Network in 1998. John Helder, the city's principal of horticulture and a co-ordinator of the network, says the organization aims to facilitate rather than control the gardeners' activities. For example, the network has helped provide free plants and seeds. The city does not have a direct role in the network, which is volunteer-run, but the community services department provides support with such tasks as community liaison and grant applications.

Each of Edmonton's dozen or so community gardens has a unique genesis and governance. The Boyle Street Community Garden, for example, arose from a development program founded jointly in 1993 by the city and the Boyle Street Community League. The Oliver Community Garden uses land donated by a local restaurant. The Central McDougall/Queen Mary Park Community Garden occupies land owned by the downtown campus of Grant MacEwan Community College and is administered by the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers.

Downtown gardeners have different horticultural difficulties than average suburban backyard gardeners do.

Participants in Partners in Parks and community gardens are usually apartment dwellers without private land of their own. Many are recent immigrants and low-income earners who need land, seeds, bedding plants and tools at low or no cost, making partnerships with community groups essential. According to Mary Jane Buchanan, spokesperson for Our Urban Eden Project community garden on Bellamy Hill, soil in downtown lots has been "a dumping ground" and is too poor for direct cultivation; many community gardens solve this problem by constructing raised beds with trucked-in dirt. All gardeners on city land must use organic horticultural methods, since the city does not permit them to apply herbicides and pesticides on municipal land. Some gardens have also resorted to fencing to keep out thieves and vandals. Such complications, Buchanan says, result in a special attitude toward the soil: to these gardeners, "every piece of land is precious."

Despite these challenges, the benefits of gardening downtown are manifold. While for most downtown cultivators the vegetable gardens are simply a way to cope with limited food budgets, there are other cultural and psychological rewards. Recent immigrants, for instance, can cultivate vegetables they were accustomed to growing in the old country. Buchanan says Our Urban Eden improves "mental health" and confers the opportunity to get involved in the natural world. The gardeners at Central McDougall/Queen Mary Park listed reasons why

LEFT: This bed features shrub roses, marigolds and petunias. RIGHT: Being apartment dwellers Bonnie and Evelyn had nowhere to plant their Arbour Day lodgepole pine. Barr placed it in a Partners in Parks bed surrounded by African marigolds.



their garden is important that ranged from acquiring horticultural skills to relieving stress to practising English.

Also on their list are many references to building community. Everyone associated with public downtown gardening agrees that these inner-city oases create pride and comradeship in their neighbourhoods. Glen Delancey of the Edmonton People in Need Shelter Society says his organization's Partners in Parks beds along Jasper "give clients some sort of satisfaction with being involved with the community, some sort of sense of accomplishment." The garden has successfully attracted a diversity of people, from well-off urbanites to immigrants to recipients of AISH (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped). According to Buchanan, a member of the city's community development branch, before the Urban Eden Project there had been "no way for residents to connect, no school, none of the usual mechanisms to build communities." Our Urban Eden provides an open area where residents meet, interact and work toward a collective

goal. The garden has become so popular there is a waiting list for a spot.

"The inner city gets a bum rap," Barr says, "that there's crime, it's a terrible or dangerous place to live. But it isn't." He says his neighbours have adopted his garden as their own and help police it. His gardens rarely suffer vandalism; one neighbour told Barr the gardens make the area feel safer. Barr hopes his garden has a positive influence on children, who seem to appreciate the flowers and a general love of nature that the garden represents. Barr planted an Arbour Day tree for two children who attend Alex Taylor School; as apartment dwellers they had nowhere to plant it.

For Barr, the distinguishing feature of his downtown garden is that, like all community-based horticulture, it ends up belonging to everyone. Unlike exclusive, private-home gardens, "people get to see it." ✂

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ABOVE: Cosmos in Barr's Partners in Parks bed next to his apartment. Dick Barr gathered cosmos seeds in Charleston, S.C., during a walking tour in 1995. The plants return loyally every year.