

## Concluding Remarks: Heritage, Innovation and Livability

- *Alice Major*

*Address to “Heritage, Innovation & the Livable City”. Edmonton Heritage Council Community Symposium, October 2nd, 2010*



Thank you to all the organizers of this symposium. It has been a stimulating day and I'm honoured to be the one asked to wrap it up and put a bow on it. So much has been shared and it has given me fascinating glimpses into this place. Who knew about the historic Arrowsmith Map? I love the idea of a map that depicts the northern half of the province in great detail, but leaves everything south of the North Saskatchewan River more or less blank. And I also loved Tyler Dixon's quote: "We're caught between progress and nostalgia, but both can be beautiful."

In preparing for today, I've been trying to think how to wrap up these very diverse words: heritage, innovation, and livability. We've been talking about how the concepts fit together in many different ways, and I'd like I'd like to take yet another angle on the combination. Let's think of how heritage relates to something distinctively human – the process of memory in our brains.

We can't remember everything. All of the raw data that streams in on us would be overwhelming, even paralyzing. Instead, we process what we need immediately into short-term memory and then, over a period of days, weeks, even years, we transfer the important things into long-term memory.

How do we decide what's important? It's not a logical process – we don't decide what to remember because there might be some sort of exam on our life history and we'd better have the facts right. We remember things because they have been tagged with emotion.

Emotion is, as the cognitive scientists have discovered, our mental filing system. It's how we make sense of the world. We stamp a combination of sensory inputs – a particular place, a time – with emotional significance, using the whole range of human emotions – love, lust, fear, anger, anxiety – as seals to impress on what we have experienced. In other words memory is a process of caring about something, whether positively, or negatively.

A human memory is very idiosyncratic. We don't remember just the big important things. In fact, those sometimes go curiously blurred. Instead, very minor things 'stick' and we each end up with a deeply personal landscape. This is true, in fact, for any animal. My little dog also has a map of her territory marked with emotional tags. When we drive down Groat Road and turn into Government House Park, she's practically electric with

emotion. She knows she's going on one of her favourite walks – she *recognizes*.

But for humans, that relatively simple capacity for recognition is expanded by our facility for language. Our territories are held together with a web of narrative that extends over time: That's the ravine where we dug a fort and nearly buried my little brother. That's the corner shop where I used to buy jellybeans in elementary school. That's the house that used to frighten me because the witch lived in it. That's the Legislature Building and the whole family went down to it on Canada Day and my brother swallowed a plum pit the wrong way and my mother hung him upside down by his heels and it came out – and I was so embarrassed. (My little brother had a somewhat dangerous early childhood.)

We treasure our personal territories. They turn up in our dreams, they form the backbone of our stories. There's nothing like the flash of recognition you get from an old photo – say the shopping centre I hung out at in Scarborough in the 1950s. That photo would mean nothing to you. For me, it's an instant flashback to the very cute guy who bagged the groceries in Pickering Farms grocery, where I did the shopping for my mother every Saturday. Forty-five years on, I can remember *his* name and face, when so many faces or names I encounter all the time go 'phht.'

When you think of this process of creating memory, you can see how a city's heritage might be analogous. Certain things in our environment – a building, a particular site – get stamped with significance. Sometimes the relics are rather accidental, but they become important, marked. They're the particular photos that get pulled out of the archives and put on a pillar downtown, and in that process somehow become more 'official', more noticed, than all the other images.

However putting together a city's heritage goes further than the creation of individual memory. It calls on another central human capacity – something that's an equally natural part of our brains. This is our capacity for empathy, the ability to enter into the minds of others. Empathy is structured at such a deep level in our brains that if I see you hurt, the same part of *my* brain will light up. Empathy isn't a fuzzy 'nice' quality made up by poets. It's essential to how we've evolved as mammals for hundreds of millions of years.

Now the interesting thing is that, in humans, we can trigger empathy not only by direct observation, but through representation. If I see a picture of someone in pain – or laughing – my brain lights up in the regions that would register personal pain or laughter. And stories trigger this response too. We enter into the stories of others as if we identified ourselves with the teller of the tale, and take on that narrator's emotions. In fact, this appears to be the reason that we can re-read a novel with anticipation, even if we know how it ends.

A city's heritage is created not just through a memory-like tagging-with-significance but also through empathy. Heritage is a web of *shared* stories/memories. By making those stories conscious, by *noticing* them we can enter into the lives and minds of others who have shared this place, then and now. Our personal territory takes on other dimensions.

Our individual memory-making is largely an unconscious process. We're not aware of the connections and tracks we're laying down in our brains. But it takes conscious effort to assign narrative and communicate the memories, as we do when we take our kids to see the farm where we grew up or we tell them stories about their grandparents.

This kind of conscious community memory has been terribly important to humans. We survived because we could convey the significance of our environment to new generations: This is where you find food. This is how we hunt that animal. This is where the ancestors are buried.

We carried out this transfer of information this by creating memorable artifacts, mnemonic devices to help us. I often think that the first map was likely a poem – something light and portable, that could get you to the hunting grounds and safely home again.

And here is where I finally get back to those two words, 'innovation' and 'liveability.'

An object, a place in space, is essentially mute. However much it means to you, the individual, with the memories and emotions that you link to it, it can tell the rest of us nothing about its significance until we give it a story. And humans are multi-modal creatures. We take in 'story' in many ways, through sight, sound, touch, movement. These senses are the tools we use in making art. And art is essentially innovative – not in the sense of "creating something absolutely new from nothing," but in the sense of "Here, look at this combination of things. Bet you didn't think of putting those together before."

It's art in all its various forms that maps our shared territory, helps us to enter into each other's stories. The more ways we use to create the narrative of this place, the more innovative we are, the more effective that sharing will be.

And finally, liveability. We have a deep need to feel rooted in our environment. Above all, humans do want to care. And this is ultimately what makes a place liveable. You can be in the most beautiful city of Europe, but if you don't care about it, you're lost, rootless.

We make a city liveable by noticing it, being attentive to it, creating maps of its significance, seeing it in context through innovative and artistic ways. Which all comes back to – heritage.

So, to conclude, I'd like to share a poem about the heritage of Edmonton. It is from a sequence of poems based on an ancient ritual used for founding cities – originated with the Etruscans, elaborated by Romans. This ritual gave us the word's 'contemplate' and 'inauguration.' The 'templum' was the sacred enclosure of space that the city would inhabit, and in a series of well-defined steps, an augur would identify the key components and boundaries of that space. As part of that process the augur would identify the north-south and east-west axes that would become the foundation of the city's grid of streets.

I took the steps of that ancient ritual and laid it over my experiences of Edmonton. Bet you didn't think of putting those together before ...

### ***Envision the outline***

*To found a city, call upon a seer.  
The augur who will call its pattern from the sky  
and place it on the earth. Who contemplates  
the found site and finds – in hovering stars,  
a trail of clouds, a skein of birds  
flung downwind like a lariat – the shape  
it is meant to be.*

From this viewpoint, looking south  
the valley sinks its verdant basin  
of aspen and evergreen.

A glimpse of river gazes back at sunset,  
accepting its colours, as the cursive stroke  
of a character takes the shade of ink.

Brass letters rim a nearby fountain –  
“From this ragged handful of tents and cabins,  
a city will arise.” Thus the brash  
commercial visionaries of 1880  
surveyed the future.

Already, in a short century, a succession of cities:  
Handsome turn-of-century stone  
squared off at corners. The small dry houses of the thirties  
torn down to throw up glass towers.

That ragged encampment  
is now a formless scrawl over farmland.

Water laps the brass letters, smudges  
their shiny confidence to bronze.

I keep an augur's eye out for birds  
and the cuneiform of cloud. The new moon  
is a fine arc drawn precisely  
by a silver compass.

*To find a city's outer shape,  
first locate its centre – the axes that cross,  
cardo and decumanus.*

The river is the city's hinge, its east-west line.  
Crossing it from south to north  
geese make their high way overhead,  
a silent, migrant beat  
from the heart.

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