

Edmonton Activates

Inspired Community-
Driven Solutions: **People,**
Place and **Potential**

A Canadian Urban Institute
Collaboration, June 2021



Introduction

The Canadian Urban Institute (CUI) is the national platform that houses the best in Canadian city building, where policymakers, urban professionals, civic and business leaders, community activists and academics can learn, share and collaborate from coast to coast to coast. CUI believes that it is by growing the connective tissue within and between cities of all sizes that we can together make urban Canada all that it can be.



Canadian Urban
Institute Institut
Urbain du
Canada

Our **CUI x Local** series shines a spotlight on community-driven responses to some of the most pressing challenges in Canada's large urban regions. In collaboration with local leaders, we're on a cross-Canada listening tour to seek out the very best ideas that can inform and be adapted by city builders across the country. And what we're seeing are solutions that demonstrate creative, sometimes risky, yet ever-inspiring approaches that haven't received enough national attention — yet.

In this spirit, **Edmonton Activates** reports on what Edmontonians involved in the arts, social services, economic development, neighbourhoods, urban planning and other sectors told us is happening today. Through meetings with a diverse cross-section of Edmonton leaders, we learned a lot about the contemporary experiences of the city's populations, including its Indigenous Peoples, roots and influence. We listened to the unique conditions that are driving amazing made-in-Edmonton solutions to the city's challenges, and for local perspectives on its future as an inclusive, sustainable and vibrant city that builds on its assets and potential.

Edmonton Activates introduces city builders to the people, place and potential of this city. It reflects some of the best guidance Edmonton can offer to Canadians who are seeking inspiration and new ways of doing things to improve the quality of life in our cities. Here is what we heard.

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Land Acknowledgement

Welcome to Amiskwaciy-wâskahikan ("Beaver Hill House")

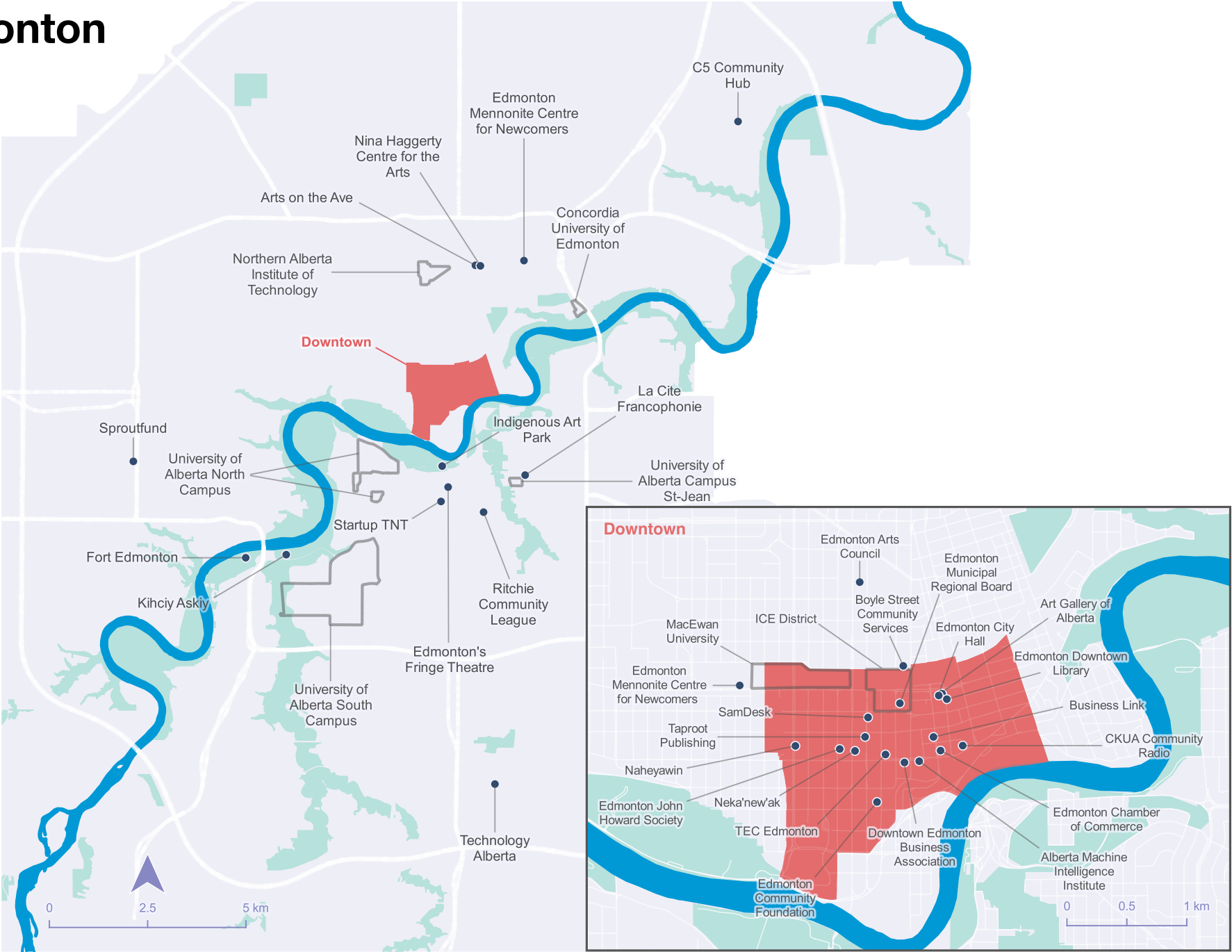
Edmonton is situated on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, on what was a Pehonan (a "gathering place") for more than 5,000 years before European settlers arrived. It became Alberta's capital city in 1906, and today is home to more than 1 million people.

We acknowledge that present-day Edmonton was built on the land of the First Peoples. The city is situated on Treaty 6 territory and is home to diverse Indigenous Peoples including the Nêhiyaw (Cree), Dené, Anishinaabe (Saulteaux), Nakota Isga (Nakota Sioux) and Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) peoples. We also acknowledge this as the Métis' homeland and the home of one of the largest communities of Inuit south of the 60th parallel.

We thank Indigenous leaders for taking part and for allowing us to listen, learn and reflect on the past, present and future of the city.



Edmonton Map



Summary

Edmonton Activates introduces city builders to the people, places and potential of this city. It reflects some of the best guidance Edmonton can offer to Canadians who are seeking inspiration and new ways of doing things to improve the quality of life in our cities.

With a population of 972,000 people, Edmonton is North America's northernmost big city. Situated on the North Saskatchewan River, it has the nation's highest per capita parkland. The city also has the second highest household income in Canada. Edmonton is a young city, with almost one-third of its population under the age of 25. Its post-secondary institutions attract 90,000 students.



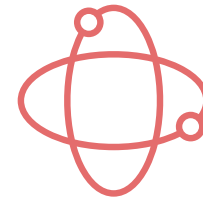
People

The people of the city, their connections with each other, their networks and their strengths. Edmontonians have a strong sense of community, as seen in the arts and culture community, in the city's determination to address homelessness and in efforts to build a new economy. The arts community infuses culture and heritage into every aspect of the city's civic fabric. The innovation economy ecosystem tackles clean energy alternatives, artificial intelligence and supports the start up economy. Residents contribute through community leagues, something unique to Edmonton. Volunteer organizations are neighbourhood-based, addressing city-building needs. Wherever they are, community members bring a "get it done" spirit to their work.



Place

The place describes the formal parts of the city, its institutions, built form and wider landscape. Edmonton is a hotbed of festivals supported largely through private fundraising. The City of Edmonton has made housing and homelessness a key priority, permanently housing more than 9,500 people over the past ten years. The City is also focused on making downtown more livable and inclusive, greening former parking lots, eliminating parking minimums city-wide and using concepts such as the 15-minute city and gender- based analysis to inform planning and zoning.



Potential

The potential offers the promise of more. As the city with the second highest Indigenous population in Canada, the city and its people are taking steps towards reconciliation. It has a long way to go. As one participant pointed out, "If you are an Indigenous man, you're more likely to be living on the street than to be over 60." First Nations leaders and Indigenous-owned businesses are putting forward bold ideas and Edmonton's civic leaders are beginning to respond. The city is thoughtfully working towards improved equity, sustainability and quality of life for everyone.

This document
does not need to be
read in sequence.

Dip in and out to
discover more about
Edmonton.

Letter from Mary W. Rowe

Canadian Urban Institute
President and CEO

In 2020, CUI planned a series of tours to Canadian cities. Through these visits, we have the opportunity to experience these vibrant places through the eyes of the people who call them home. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we switched to week-long virtual visits, organizing roundtables with key local stakeholders and a final public session. We take everything we've learned and compile them into a report to showcase the best on-the-ground local solutions with the rest of Canada. These are the stories of what makes urban Canada tick: the pulse of livability and resilience across the country, the risks and the hardships, the new voices, the local heroes and the bright spots that others need to hear about. This report is an invitation to visit Edmonton, to dip in and out, visiting its corners and its main streets, to hear how the city is moving.

For our first CUI x Local collaboration with cities across Canada, we worked with Edmonton's local leaders to organize more than two dozen virtual meetings, working group sessions, workshops and public meetings with over 60 organizations and more than 100 individuals.

Edmontonians told us what's special about their city, and how they've been able to achieve successful, inspiring outcomes. They also told us about the challenges the city is struggling with — some unique to Edmonton, and others more familiar to city builders across the country, including chronic systemic issues like poverty, homelessness, inequity and reconciliation with Indigenous, Métis and Inuit Peoples.

We listened to the unique conditions that are driving amazing made-in-Edmonton solutions: what's working, but also where the roadblocks are.

Edmonton Activates reflects the people, place and potential of the city, providing some of the best guidance Edmonton can offer. While it's not an exhaustive catalogue, what follows are the community-driven initiatives and approaches that Edmontonians told us reflect where Edmonton is right now and is helping to lay the groundwork for a healthy, inclusive future-ready city.

And a final note about us: As CUI enters its 31st year, the critical importance of Canada's cities is clear. Our collective ability to achieve the highest environmental, social and economic goals — at all levels of government and internationally — depends on how well our cities can manage local and systemic challenges, create and build on community-driven solutions and take steps to secure their future well-being. We are focused on driving those linkages that accelerate innovation, hasten reform and direct investment. We want to ensure local realities and experiences are integrated into government policies, plans and programs at all levels. We believe urbanism involves everyone and solutions must be grounded in the local.

We will continue this journey together, and we look forward to hearing and sharing your stories. Please check in with us at canurb.org/cuixlocal as we travel across Canada together.

Mary W. Rowe (she/her)
President and CEO
Canadian Urban Institute
@rowemw



Canadian Urban
Institute Institut
Urbain du
Canada



**“Edmonton
is the biggest
small town
you’ll ever live in.”**

**Marc Carnes,
CKUA**

**“There’s a community of
communities here. People are
trying to create community. They
want to work together. You can call up
people and say, ‘Hey, I’ve got this problem.
What are you working on?’ And there’s
an entrepreneurial spirit that we can get
things done and get things done together.
Walking downtown you’ll run into four people
you know and have five new ideas.”**

**Stephanie McCabe,
City of Edmonton**

Edmonton At a Glance

\$94,447

2015 median household income second highest in Canada

22.6%

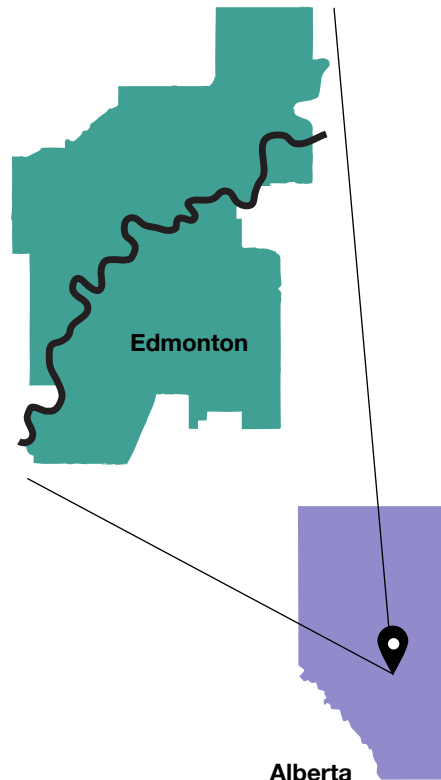
Percentage of income needed for average mortgage payment for a house

10.9%

percentage of low income earners (14.2% Canada)

26 minutes

average commute time the lowest of Canada's largest six cities



Highlights



Highest per capita parkland in Canada



Straddles the North Saskatchewan River, expanse the size of 18 Stanley Parks



North America's most northern big city and Alberta's capital



First city in Canada to develop a carbon budget and remove parking minimums, first big city to achieve results in reducing chronic homelessness



160+ Community Leagues running sports and recreation activities and serving as the primary speaking body for the neighbourhood



A robust arts sector contributing \$78M to the local economy, 1,540+ jobs and \$59M in income. Fringe 2019 boasted 1,900 live shows with 1,600+ artists and 150,000 tickets sold

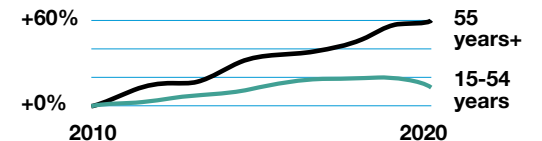
A Young City

31%

under the age of 25

But fastest growth in labour force in people 55 years and over

Change in Labour Force Since 2010



Urban Indigenous in the City



2nd

largest population among Canadian cities

1 in 19

people identify as Aboriginal

An Arts City



1st

Oldest and largest Fringe Festival in North America

1st

consumer of arts in Canada among 9 biggest cities

A City of Learners



90,000 student and six post-secondary institutions

University of Alberta rated the second school globally for artificial intelligence and machine learning



Home to 394 tech companies including DeepMind, Google's AI research firm

5,000 graduates are leaving the region every year

A Changing City

2nd

highest office vacancy rate in Canada, doubling over past 10 years

1st

in population growth among big Canadian cities 2011-16 (15%)

2nd

highest median household income growth 2005-2015 (27%)

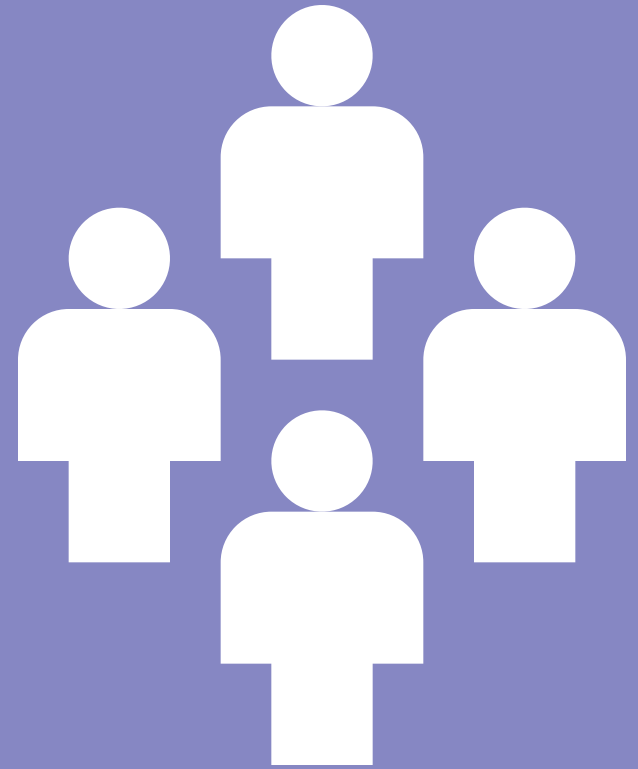
Inspired Community-Led Solutions: Connecting People, Place and Potential

This report is presented along three lines, and captures the elements that create the urban spaces where we live. The first is the people in the city, their networks and their strengths. Then, we need to know the place, as it is shaped by its built form, its institutions and the landscape. Combined, these foretell the potential ahead for the city.

Edmonton Activates showcases the people, places and potential of the city. In the overlap and intersections among these three, you'll find the messiness of a city: what works, what to watch and what's next. We invite you to wander through these pages. Read about Edmonton's local heroes, hear about its emerging and established networks, learn from its innovative institutions and join together with the visions and passions that drive change in Edmonton.

People

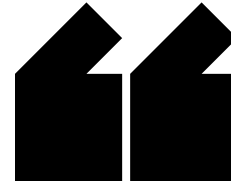
We start first with the people. The people of a city are quite literally its life force and it is the level where change often starts. It is individuals who work informally or within organizations, on their own and with others, who drive us forward. In Edmonton we met and heard about those who are taking the lead.



People

A Vibrant, Energized Centre of Arts and Culture

Edmonton is a city with a rich history of supporting and celebrating local arts and culture. Residents are creators and consumers of art, as well as motivated participants, like in the Fringe Festival — the first and largest of the international Fringe Festivals. The city provides an environment where artists can create a life practicing their craft, despite challenges that exist, like accessing stable funding. People describe how over time, the linkages among creators have become mutually supportive and contributed to the strength of the sector.



“... A unique thing that happens in Edmonton is that it’s not just about the elite practice of elite artists and us getting to experience what elite people can do, but that there’s lots of opportunities for anyone.”
Steve Pirot,
iHuman





There's a strong sense of community in Edmonton. We have a massive art community that is very welcoming and kind of rag-tag. On the same page, ready to help each other.”
Shima Robinson,
spoken word poet and
community activist





It started with the University of Alberta's art programs that provided a training ground for artists. The campus radio station played a role in providing extension programming across the province, which developed into the Banff School of Fine Arts. This lays the groundwork for Studio Theatre at the University of Alberta, which lays the groundwork for a training program for playwrights, directors and actors. People from across the country start coming to Edmonton to get that training and then stay here. And so you have a lot of theatre practitioners here. And then you have this idea for a Fringe which takes off because the ground has already been set for it."

Steve Pirot,
iHuman Youth Society

Steve Pirot is a born and raised Edmontonian (aka Amiskwaciwâskahikan), an arts administrator, actor, director, playwright, spoken-word aficionado and ukulele enthusiast. He was an Artistic Producer at Azimuth Theatre and was Festival Director for Nextfest. He is now the Artistic Director of iHuman Youth Society, a non-profit organization focused on the pillars of creativity, authenticity and caring, and employing harm-reduction strategies. iHuman is a trauma-informed environment in which individuals between the ages of 12 and 24 work to promote a sense of belonging, self-worth, identity and purpose. While the extended staff cohort includes social workers, counsellors, outreach support, and mental and physical health providers, the core of iHuman is based in creativity and expression. The iHuman Artist Collective includes hundreds of young people, some of whom regularly contribute to many artistic platforms across Edmonton.

People

Solving Chronic Homelessness

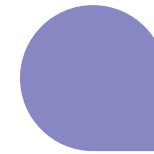
Through the hard work and dedication of the many people and organizations committed to eliminating chronic homelessness, homelessness has decreased across the city by 45 percent. Tim Richter from the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) attributes this to a combination of leadership, quality data, community engagement and a culture of continuous improvement. Social service providers also describe using an approach of “relentless incrementalism” — helping one person at a time.

The City of Edmonton has been building on community efforts and advocacy, stepping in to address urgent concerns even when it doesn't have the jurisdictional authority to do so. The City set out its *Place to Call Home* plan to end chronic homelessness by 2022, and the Province, spurred on by advocates, has created a plan to support community-led actions. Today, Alberta is the only province to show province-wide reductions, and the CAEH points to Edmonton and Calgary as the only big cities in Canada that have been this successful.



It's not our jurisdiction and it's not what property taxes were meant to do, but we feel so compelled. It has been unanimously endorsed by city council time and time again... It doesn't matter that the provincial government is responsible, and that the federal government has the money. People expect us to do something about it and we expect ourselves to do something about it."

Julianna Charchun,
Chief of Staff to Mayor Iveson



Homeward Trust is the key agency in Edmonton leading the charge. It works with other agencies to form a homelessness command centre that keeps a current list of people who have connected with 60+ service providers. The partners always have an picture of those experiencing homelessness and use the list to triage and ensure that everyone is being reached.

Profile

Cheryl Whiskeyjack is Executive Director of **Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society**, and helps urban Indigenous Peoples live in two worlds at once: the City of Edmonton, with its particular laws and norms; and the Indigenous world of ceremonies and beliefs that has existed on this land for millennia. Cheryl oversees programming that connects Indigenous clients to the city around them and helps to build skills and resilience that they can use in other parts of their lives. Cheryl believes that ending poverty requires a diversity of voices to ensure better systems and communities for all of us.



People

Collaborating to create new models of support

With their “get it done” spirit, Edmonton’s community service agencies are breaking down traditional ways of delivering services to clients and finding they can do more for their clients by collaborating with each other.

C5 is a community hub in northeast Edmonton, an area that had been a “service desert”. Five agencies (Terra, Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society, Boyle Street Community Services, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers and Norwood Child and Family Resource Centre) identified the need and jumped in, pooling their resources to establish the hub. C5 now serves 30,000+ clients and collectively supports advocacy, policy and systems change in the sector.

While many community service organizations work together, the way C5 was created, and its ability to provide wraparound supports for clients, is exceptional. Families are supported holistically and seamlessly across the five organizations, making it easier to meet their service needs. C5 has found that by collaborating in this way, it can better address complex needs arising from intergenerational cycles of trauma and poverty, overcome hurdles and create the kind of change needed for children and families to thrive.



Edmonton is a northern city in the heart of Canada in a resource economy that the country relies on... We’re a gateway to western Canada. But we don’t tell the Edmonton story enough. The wonderful things happening here don’t get the press they deserve.”

Mack Male, Taproot



Our sector is good at holding roundtables and talking endlessly about things. A group of us came together to *do something*. A coalition of the willing...We’re no longer caught up just in emergency services and short-term solutions, and we’re not competing [with each other] for grants.”

Corinne Saad, C5

People

A Unique Network of Social Infrastructure

Edmonton has an extensive network of community leagues for residents to participate in civic life, providing a unique social infrastructure that is not found in other Canadian cities.

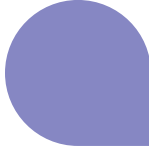
These volunteer, membership-based, non-profit organizations are formed to meet the needs and interests of residents within a defined neighbourhood. There are more than 160 community leagues across the city, some of which are new, and some of which have been active for a century. They are recognized by the City of Edmonton and function as the primary speaking body for the neighbourhood on everything from sports and recreation to planning applications and community services. The Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues helps by providing resource guides, planning advice, accounting services and advocacy.

Community leagues support public engagement and are often the first entry point for residents to volunteer or speak up on issues in their neighbourhood. They provide a training ground for grassroots civic participation, a foundation for some people who have entered public life for the first time. They also provide an effective way for people to access local government staff and elected representatives and work with community organizations.

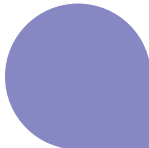


Community Leagues have enormous untapped potential with important social capital.”

Mark Cabaj,
Here to There Consulting



Abundant Community Edmonton works through community leagues to help neighbours organize to take action and achieve shared community goals through a Block Connector network, activating new volunteers and neighbourhood assets.



Mustard Seed offers a range of programs and services to help people experiencing poverty and homelessness. It works with community leagues to gain support for neighbourhood-based initiatives.

Profile

Avnish Nanda is a lawyer, community leader and a powerful voice for the most marginalized Edmontonians. As President of the **Ritchie Community League**, Avnish is working with local residents to care for their unhoused neighbours and support the creation of a local homeless shelter. **As a lawyer**, Avnish advances human rights and Indigenous selfdetermination. He is advocating to extend the age of youth receiving benefits as they transition out of the child intervention system, and is working to extend a pilot program that helps people receive support for severe opioid use. With the values he upholds for the communities he supports, the future of city building in Edmonton is one to look forward to.



People

Investing in the Innovation Economy: Beyond Oil and Gas

Edmonton's contribution to Canada's innovation economy is big. It's a growing hub for research and technology, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI), life sciences, gaming and information tech. There are many influential companies and startups, particularly downtown. The city is host to Canada's preeminent centre of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine intelligence (MI), the [Alberta Machine Intelligence Institute](#), ranked second in the world for AI/MI research. The sector has a long history here and is closely aligned with the University of Alberta, which trains some of the best AI researchers in the world.

Smaller-scale, locally-driven initiatives are being actively pursued and nurtured here, leaving a footprint on the sector. People describe it as a grassroots ecosystem where they can self-organize, cooperate and take leadership. For instance, when the [Edmonton Regional Innovation Network](#) offered \$250,000 to help entrepreneurs access capital, the independent [Edmonton Advisory Council on Start-ups](#) (EACOS) brought in a volunteer subcommittee with members from the tech community. Zach Storms of Startup TNT told us, "We didn't just take their recommendations; we went through the whole RFP process together. It was like a form of participatory budgeting. As a community, we're deciding what to do and what to invest in."

Canada's largest construction company (PCL) and architecture firm (Stantec) were launched and keep their head offices in Edmonton. Running Room, Bioware and many of Canada's most successful restaurant concepts started here too.

While the city's economic base is more diversified than in the past, it still remains a major centre for jobs in oil and gas. However, Edmonton has faced a lot of cyclical challenges and is still recovering from the last downturn, prior to the pandemic. [Innovate Edmonton](#), a new non-profit funded by the City of Edmonton, intends to help companies make significant advances in clean energy, decarbonization and green buildings, and will support the resource economy's "just transition, where no opportunities are left unchecked."

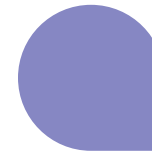


We're a very boots on the ground, get it done, make it happen kind of people. The voice of entrepreneurs at the table is stronger than ever. You often see politicians trying to guide how a city should evolve and what kind of businesses should evolve there and not always tapping into what the true strengths of that city are. But in Edmonton, we have a history of constantly evolving — and that next phase is right around the corner. Five years ago, we were talking about hemp and lithium, and now I'm seeing those things come to the forefront more and more."

Barbara McKenzie,
Business Link



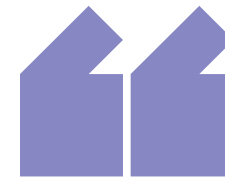
Jobber is an Edmonton-based tech company that provides management software for small home-service businesses. It recently raised \$60 million USD in growth financing to help fund research and future growth. It plans to add more than 200 employees in Edmonton.



Innovate Edmonton is supporting Edmonton's entrepreneurs, businesses, universities, cultural organizations, First Nations and other groups in growing the innovation economy and positioning Edmonton on the global stage.

“AI represents an opportunity and a challenge. [The] Alberta Machine Intelligence Institute represents an underleveraged asset in our community ... the world is talking about it, yet sometimes people here in Edmonton and Alberta don't even know what we're talking about.”

Ashlyn Bernier, SamDesk

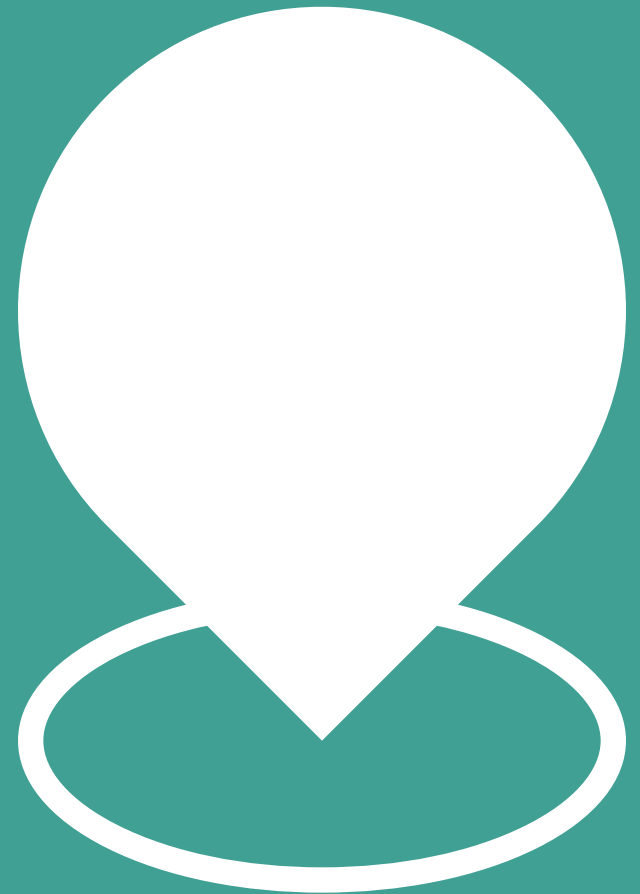


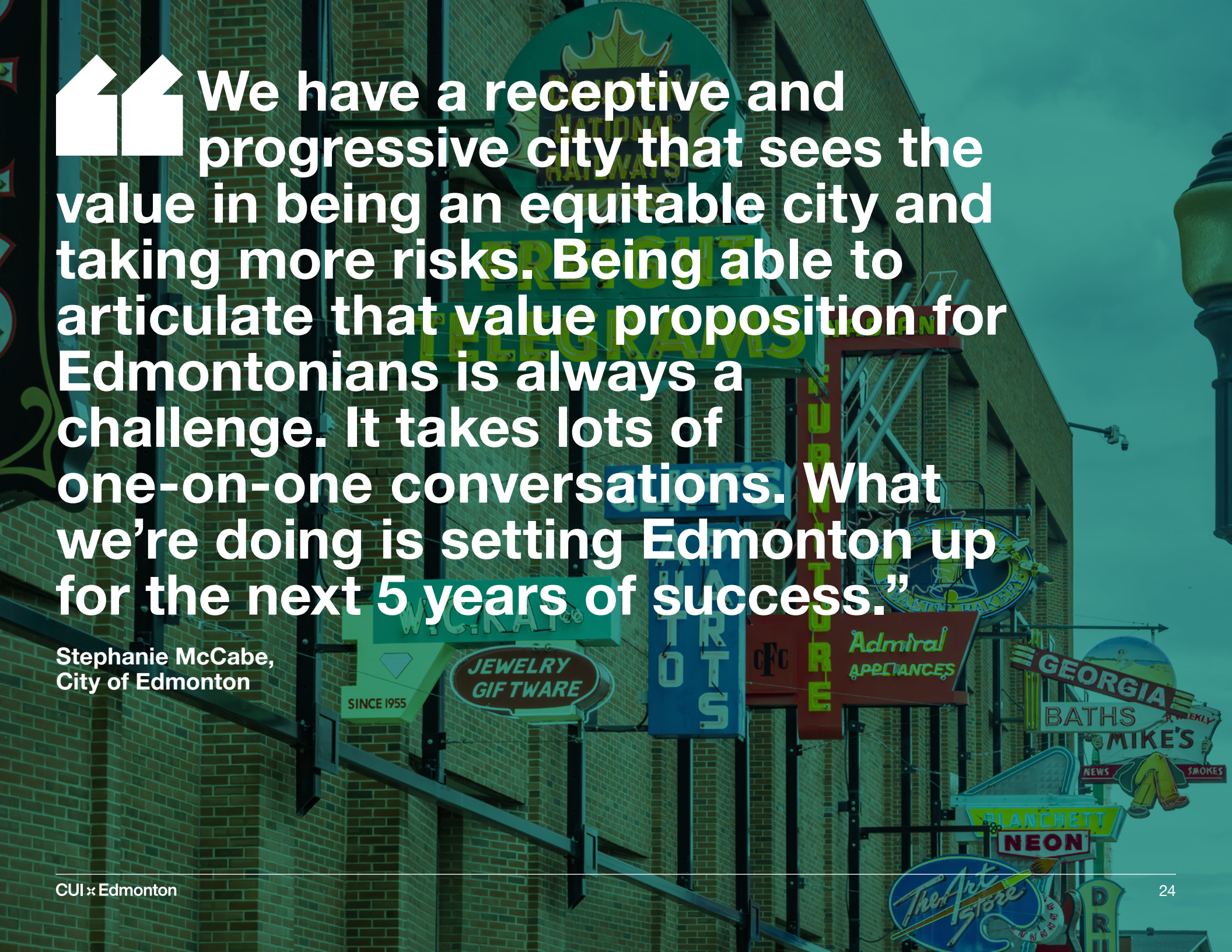
There's still a lot of work left to do, but I think Edmonton is well on its way to being the first big city in Canada to end chronic homelessness and the first city in Canada to end all homelessness."

Tim Richter,
Canadian Alliance to
End Homelessness

Place

In this section, we enter into the geography of Edmonton and the way it shapes how citizens live, connect and move through the city and its spaces. In this context, place is defined as the wider environment, the city's formal organizations, residents' access to economic and institutional resources, urban transportation and local infrastructure and services. Here is what we found in Edmonton.





“We have a receptive and progressive city that sees the value in being an equitable city and taking more risks. Being able to articulate that value proposition for Edmontonians is always a challenge. It takes lots of one-on-one conversations. What we’re doing is setting Edmonton up for the next 5 years of success.”

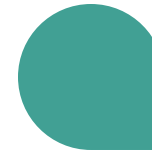
Stephanie McCabe,
City of Edmonton

Place

A Self-Sustaining Home for Arts and Culture

Edmonton is a city of the arts, credited by locals to factors like its geographic isolation, a university with a strong fine-arts focus, local leadership, residents who support the arts and a grassroots system of artists. At any given time, there are hundreds of theatre productions in operation. Edmonton is also a hotbed for festivals, including the Edmonton International Fringe, Flying Canoe Winter, Deep Freeze, Collido, Edmonton Folk Fest and many others.

Leaders of local arts organizations told us that when people see a need, they act on it. Private fundraising has built most of the arts and cultural facilities of the last 30+ years, alongside public funding that was available at the time. Many of these facilities are owned or leased by the non-profits that also raised the funds to build or update them. Recent examples include the Art Gallery of Alberta, the Varscona Theatre, the Roxy Theatre rebuild and the expansion of the Winspear Centre. The local government is supportive by providing grants. Places like the Jubilee Auditorium and the Royal Alberta Museum were funded by the Province of Alberta.



The CKUA Program Full Circle, hosted by Celeigh Cardinal, celebrates Indigenous music from around the world.




Most cities have municipal art buildings; buildings built and run by the municipality; this is not the case in Edmonton.... When we want something built, we build it ourselves; we look for help, but we don't rely on the City of Edmonton to put it together. Every facility is there because the people in Edmonton put in the effort to make it happen. This is an important differentiation to make."

**Julian Mayne,
Edmonton Arts Council**

Edmonton Fringe is a theatre festival that unexpectedly became the largest in North America. Launched with a \$50,000 grant in 1982 by theatrical entrepreneurs and playwrights, its success has led to the creation of over 200 Fringe festivals across Canada and the United States.





 There isn't a CKUA anywhere else. We cover the province like no one else does in Canada and act as a voice for the province's arts and culture community. At 93 years old, CKUA is Canada's first community broadcaster, born at the University of Alberta, that shares Alberta music, and Alberta content. We have listeners and donors on six continents. There's nobody in media telling the Albertan arts and culture story on the scale we do. Nationally, it's mostly what gets in the headlines from politics."

Marc Carnes, CKUA

*Marc Carnes has lived all over Canada but planted roots in Edmonton over the last 15 years working in the creative sector. Marc is CEO of **CKUA Radio**, the voice of Alberta's music, arts and culture. A community-driven station, CKUA has more than 500 volunteers. In the summer of 2020, with music festivals cancelled, CKUA launched Festival Radio, where they collaborated with partners to host on-air programming during the originally scheduled festival weekends. The first program featured was the CKUA Indigenous Peoples Week that celebrated Indigenous musicians and artists from Alberta and beyond. Under Marc's leadership, CKUA has a listener and donor base across six continents and is breaking fundraising records!*

Place

Prioritizing Supportive, Affordable Housing

The City of Edmonton has approached chronic homelessness with a sense of urgency and thoughtfulness that mirrors local disaster response plans. While providing immediate safety through shelters, it concurrently focuses on housing people as quickly as possible. Edmonton doesn't just manage the crisis — people are working to solve it from the roots.

Between 2009 and 2019, Edmonton housed more than 9,500 people using this approach.

Edmonton doesn't just manage the crisis — people are working to solve it from the roots. Permanent supportive housing is a key part of the City's plan to end homelessness and a priority in the City's [Affordable Housing Investment Plan](#). Residents are provided a lease, pay subsidized rent and receive health and life skills support. The plan calls for the construction of 2,500 units by 2022.



It's all about problem solving. you have strong leadership, you adapt for the people who are here, you bring in the stuff that you know works. Homelessness ends in cities. Cities can lead the whole thing or be a partner in it, but no matter what, local leadership is the secret sauce."

Tim Richter,
Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness



It's an Edmonton thing. People are willing to roll up their sleeves and help. We want more than just your money. We want your ideas for how to reshape our economy so everyone can benefit."

Erick Ambtman,
End Poverty Edmonton

“If any city can solve poverty, it's Edmonton, because it can connect sectors. We have a culture of taking care of your neighbour, building the fence together.”

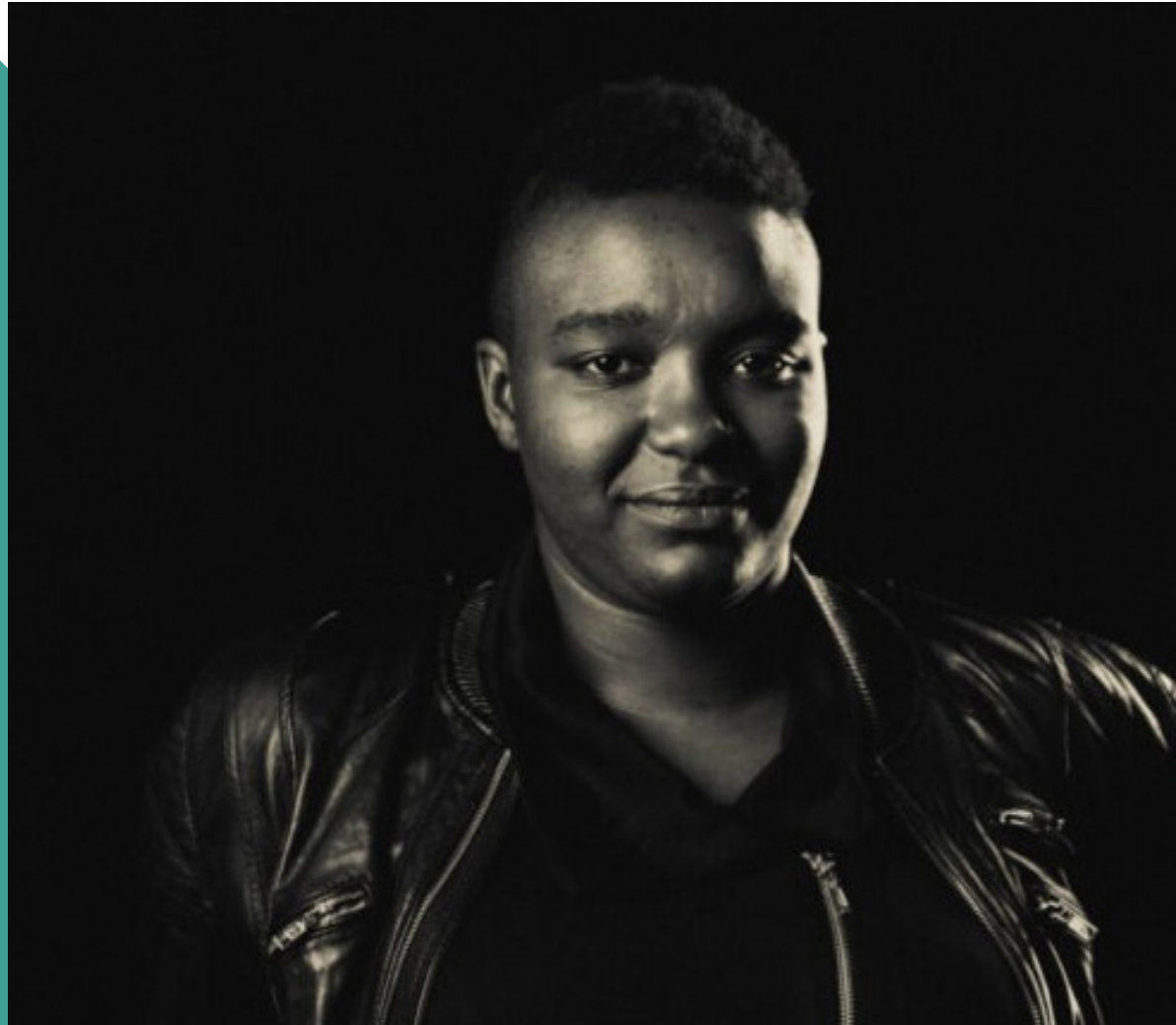
Erick Ambtman,
End Poverty Edmonton



Profile

Shima Robinson has been a driving force of transformative change and social impact in Edmonton.

Shima is an organizer and media liaison for **Camp Pekiwin** — a space where those who are unhoused received support, safety and security. Shima works on the frontlines of supporting the camp and managing the public voice of the movement to media outlets across the country. At its peak, Camp Pekiwin supported 300–400 people per day. Shima also organizes with **Black Lives Matter YEG**, which drew the support of 20,000 people in the summer of 2020. She also helps University of Alberta students in their pursuit of social justice initiatives on campus through her role as the Working Group Programming Coordinator at the **Alberta Public Interest Research Group**. Shima is inspiring a generation of activists, organizers and students to create a more equitable, just and inspired city. She is also a spoken word artist — look for her poetry in this document!



Place

Downtown and the 15-Minute City

While the areas around downtown Edmonton are largely suburban, the City of Edmonton is investing in a transformation of the downtown by encouraging new businesses, facilitating new development and investing in new public spaces. The City is also taking steps to guide the growth and development of the city in ways that are more connected, people-centred and sustainable.

- In 2020, Edmonton became the first major Canadian municipality to eliminate parking minimums city-wide. This will allow for more efficient use of Edmonton's existing parking spaces and support its people-focused objectives.
- The City of Edmonton has also based its new official plan alongside "15-Minute City" principles, providing a blueprint to guide future housing, transit, jobs and infrastructure, so that all residents can access amenities through a short trip by car, transit, bike or on foot.
- In addition, the City is converting old parking lots into green space. It has acquired a site larger than two football fields in the Warehouse District to build a major new park as a "catalyst project" for the area's redevelopment. The park will provide much-needed public space to address the needs of current and future residents, students and workers.

Edmonton's downtown core has many of the components that entrepreneurs in research and technology seek when considering where to locate: an urban experience that attracts talented, skilled workers; great spaces to operate from; a culture of collaboration; and resources to help with scaling up. Three major universities are also downtown, providing a pool of graduates, and to date, 28% of the city's tech companies are spinoffs of academic research. Also located downtown is the Alberta Machine Intelligence Institute, one of only three AI hubs in Canada. In 2017, Google's high-profile AI research firm, DeepMind, opened its first facility outside the U.K. here.



The City of Edmonton is using AI developed in the city, for the city. A new tool is helping its Safety Code Unit shift to a risk-based inspection process of plumbing and HVAC systems in new homes. Since October 2019, over 1,500 inspections have passed through the AI tool and in 2020, the project won an international Smart 50 award. This tool allows the City to focus staff resources on more complicated inspections that pose a higher risk to public safety while also shortening timelines for builders. The City partnered with the University of Alberta to create this tool and credits the success of this initiative with putting different kinds of people in a room together to solve problems.



Downtown is a crossroads of innovation activity for the region."

Mayor Don Iveson



A GBA+ and Equity Toolkit is being developed to advance and promote the City of Edmonton's equity objectives and to explicitly remove barriers that perpetuate inequity in the city. The Toolkit will provide planners with guidance on how to (1) identify social inequities in the zoning bylaw through a gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) lens and (2) remove and/or prevent these social inequities through equity measures.



[There's] growth in housing; now Edmonton is a place where people want to live and have the option of places to live; so at 5 p.m. the city doesn't just shut down. The city and downtown is progressive and fiercely entrepreneurial; big enough to be a major player and small enough for business to succeed ... you will run into someone you know and that's what's great about downtown."

Stephanie McCabe,
City of Edmonton

Profile

Puneeta McBryan is a marketer, business strategist and visionary executive director of the **Downtown Business Association of Edmonton**. She believes that the downtown is the ‘heartbeat of the city’ and took on this leadership role during a critical time as main streets and downtowns grappled with the new realities and challenges created by COVID-19. A talented connector, Puneeta is working towards Edmonton’s economic recovery efforts through collaborative efforts with local stakeholders and businesses to create a renewed and vibrant downtown.




Place

Indigenous Placemaking: Learning to “See With Both Eyes”

The Recover project is creating safe spaces for people to bring their Indigenous cultures and ways of being to inform what a transformed city looks, feels and acts like.

Recover goes beyond the physical needs for housing, food and basic support to acknowledge the human need for connection as foundational as well. Its wellbeing framework is designed to help people “feel more connected to themselves, the land and others, to build healthier communities and safe, vibrant public spaces.” Recover applies small scale interventions and prototypes in the community as a way of testing collective learning. In 2017–2018, it generated over 200 “what if” ideas and incubated 13 of them as prototypes.

The City of Edmonton has also put in place an Indigenous Relations Office to fulfill the objectives set out in its Urban Aboriginal Accord, which involved 1,800 people from Indigenous communities in its development. In February 2021, the City released its co-created Indigenous Framework, providing roles and commitments to guide City staff. Edmonton is also the first city in Canada to adopt Indigenous names for its wards, in response to a community-based effort. Some have been critical of the initiative, calling it a performative gesture, but it is also seen as an important first step in recognizing the reconciliation that must come.




Fort Edmonton’s Indigenous Peoples Experience is recording First Nations and Métis people recounting their history in their own voices.



Neka’new’ak is a walk of honour for Indigenous artists who have blazed trails in the film industry, run by the Dreamspeakers Festival Society.



The **Indigenous Art Park** features permanent Indigenous artworks on exhibit.



Kihciy askiy (“Sacred Earth” in Cree) will provide a natural setting for Indigenous peoples to host spiritual ceremonies, sweat lodges, cultural camps and talking circles, as well as grow medicinal herbs and facilitate intergenerational learning in an outdoor learning space.



“How do we help people see with one eye, with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and with the other eye, with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and use both of these eyes together? The Recover project can become an integral part of our journeys as Edmontonians towards a stronger and more deeply rooted city moving towards finding a better path.”

**Jacquelyn Cardinal,
Naheyawin**

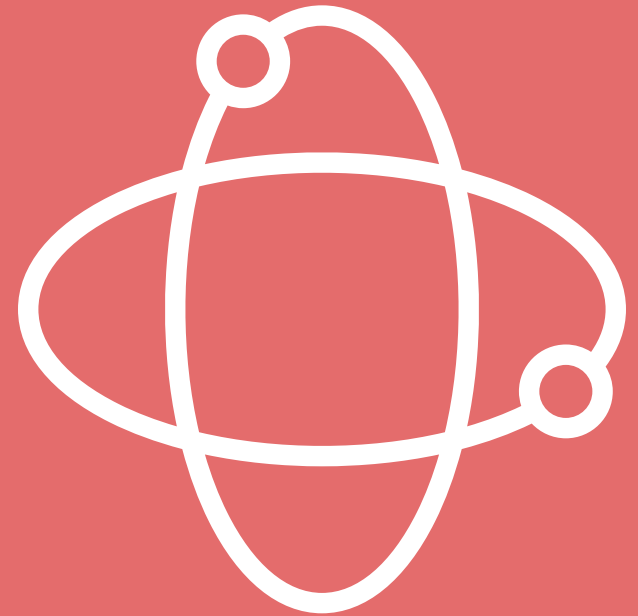
Profile

Jacquelyn Cardinal is a serial entrepreneur equipping communities to support themselves and each other while walking together on a shared path, a sentiment passed down to her through generations. As co-owner of the Indigenous-owned and operated **Naheyawin**, Jacquelyn fulfills her duties as a Treaty person by searching for and creating tools to assist Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in an effort to reclaim the spirit of the Numbered Treaties. Jacquelyn uses her skills in community engagement, strategic planning and communications in service of seeing Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples into a good future by working together.



Potential

This section focuses on the progress and potential that lie ahead. A great city offers its residents and businesses the opportunity to achieve success and a good life. Jane Jacobs said that cities hold “the seeds of their own regeneration.” These are the areas to watch for growth.



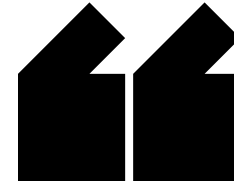
Potential

The Arts Scene Seeks More Recognition

Many people involved in Edmonton's arts and culture feel that their contribution isn't fully recognized as an asset to the city. They told us that increased recognition of the city's artists and organizations could generate more financial support, particularly from national organizations like the Canada Council for the Arts, that is comparable to those living in larger cities.

Others pointed out the value of the arts to people's mental health and well-being, as well as its economic benefit to the city and suggested this should be conveyed more directly by individuals and organizations when seeking support.

Edmonton's isolated location was identified as a reason for the sector's vibrancy, but it also means that people can feel overlooked by those outside the city and the province.



“Fringe and other festivals succeed in Edmonton because location is important. We are far away from everyone else. We’re not one of the flight hubs. Our innovation is fueled by that.”
Mack Male,
Taproot







Profile

Christy Morin: “For the love of life, art and all good things”. Known for her endless passion for the arts and a profound commitment to urban renewal and neighbourhood revitalization, Christy is the Founder and Executive Director of Arts on the Ave, an organization bringing art to Edmonton’s 118th Avenue. She is also working on a community-driven flagship project that will bring 76 affordable live-work spaces for artists, alongside retail, market and exhibition space. During COVID-19, Christy hustled to find bakers to bake 30 dozen loaves a bread a day to give to those in need. She also created a pantry hub and an initiative called Families Helping Families, matching families for a six-month commitment to help with groceries and other supports.

Potential A Model for Greater Dignity Around Food

C5 is applying social innovation to food security. Opening in April 2021, the C5 Community Market offers community members a voice and choice in selecting food and daily essentials that fit their dietary and cultural preferences.

Rather than being presented with a hamper of preselected food, community members visit a storefront location to “shop” for items like fresh and healthy food, as well as hygiene items and baby supplies. The Market supports cultural and spiritual needs with smudge kits and appropriate foods during Ramadan. While people are ‘shopping’, family support workers build relationships with individuals and families to connect them to other supports they might need to address the underlying causes of food insecurity. These might include employment, financial literacy, family and early childhood development programming, housing, mental health and substance use supports.

The Market works in partnership with Edmonton’s Food Bank and local businesses invested in minimizing food waste. Most importantly, the Market aims to ensure people are treated with dignity and recognizes their right to food.



Profile

Keren Tang is a public health advocate, community organizer and city builder. She is the Participatory Canada Development Manager with the McConnell Foundation, working with global and local partners connected with thousands of neighbourhood residents to build networks of friendship and continue to co-create large-scale, radically inclusive, practical participatory ecosystems. She was previously the project manager with Recover, the City of Edmonton's social innovation initiative to improve urban wellness. She has also helped communities launch self-sustaining art cooperatives, and wellness, advocacy and educational projects. Keren is driven by the vision of building the spaces and creating the conditions for residents to work together, side by side, for a better life for each other and for the planet.



Potential

Untapped Potential Among Edmontonians

The innovation ecosystem is relatively small in Edmonton. This can make it challenging for companies to retain talent. People move from company to company. Some are leaving Edmonton, while others don't want to live in the city in the first place, preferring to commute or pass on the opportunities. A recent [Downtown Business Association](#) report points out that Edmonton's tech sector needs to attract more senior-level managers and graduates from postsecondary institutions.

Albertan cities have been working through an economic downturn for the last six years. The COVID-19 pandemic doubled the hit. Janet Riopel from the Chamber of Commerce told us, "In Edmonton, we are in deep, and we are in trouble. Our governments are under tremendous strain, as they are across the country. [But what is unique about Edmonton is that prior to COVID-19] we already had a damaged business environment, very slow markets, and six years of a devastating economic downturn. COVID-19 has been a the latest hit; it has emptied our bank accounts and done a lot of damage. Through and beyond the pandemic, we have a lot of work to do."

For the tech and startup community to succeed, people told us there needs to be a greater openness to risk. Some people feel that the Edmonton community needs to transition to more of a risk-taking mindset, and that while the sector is growing, it could be accelerated.

There also remains untapped potential in the city. Today, Black women and men experience unemployment two times more than the rest of the Edmonton population and the rate of child poverty is three times higher. As Morenike Olaosebikan from the Ribbon Rouge Foundation explained, "There are many of us [people of African descent] finding creative ways to be heard and to leave lasting positive impact in our community. I'm optimistic about what that means for people out west pulling together and changing things for the better, together. Watch out for the change we are making."



I came to Edmonton 12–13 years ago. I want to stay. But if my company were to wind down tomorrow, there would be slim pickings for me in terms of organizations that would have roles for my skills, talents, level — we run the risk of losing talent."

Ashlyn Bernier,
Samdesk



It costs our start-ups so much more to recruit because there's not enough density to have people hop from company to company. We are a small ecosystem. It's a big game of monopoly about who's moving where. You have to keep the talent getting trained here and recruit new talent (and we need government support for that), while supporting multiple companies to grow rapidly all the time."

Stephanie Enders,
Alberta Machine
Intelligence Institute



The music stopped and Alberta didn't have a chair. But things are pivoting quickly. COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of technology by 2–3 years. The old way of doing things has been reduced or eliminated. Once the genie's out of the bottle, Edmonton is well positioned to exploit this daylight."

Jim Colvin,
Serious Labs



Profile

Zack Storms is co-founder of **Startup TNT**, a community of entrepreneurs, investors, innovators and startup supporters that gathers weekly to have fun, share stories and improve access to capital for early-stage tech companies. It achieves this through increasing the pool of professional early-stage investors, educating entrepreneurs on fundraising best practices and developing solid relationships among stakeholders. It raises funds through regular investment summits and other events.

Potential

Realizing Better Outcomes for Indigenous People

Indigenous communities in Edmonton are active and diverse. They have different relationships and histories with the city, come from many different places and cultures, speak many languages and practice different traditions.

Edmonton has the second largest number of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and the city is a major hub for Indigenous, Métis and Inuit peoples in western Canada. And yet, health and educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples are dire and those living in Edmonton are three times more likely to have low incomes than those who do not identify as Indigenous.

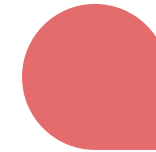
Erick Ambtman from End Poverty Edmonton explained, “In Edmonton, if you are an Indigenous man, you’re more likely to be living on the street than to be over 60. Of the 2,000 people on the streets, 16% are Indigenous. Indigenous kids graduate high school at a 40% rate. This reflects our incredible failing.”

In response, business and economic development organizations have established mandates and programs to support Indigenous communities. Large companies are developing Indigenous inclusion policies. There are also emerging opportunities for new tourism initiatives, encouraging others to experience Indigenous ways of life while respecting culturally sacred traditions. But of course, the best ideas and initiatives come from Indigenous leaders themselves. For example, Rocky Sinclair of AKSIS told us about Enoch First Nation, which borders the west side of Edmonton and benefits from its location in the city. He raised the compelling idea of establishing an urban economic hub within the city’s boundaries, telling us, “If you dedicate an economic zone to Indigenous businesses and interests, it would encourage Indigenous-owned business development and economic opportunity for Indigenous people.”



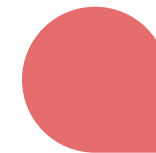
The Alberta Indian Investment Corporation runs a boot camp that teaches Indigenous

youth the basics of small business start-up and operation and business financing. In addition to the hard skills that are imparted, the camp provides an opportunity for youth to learn about their place in community and how they might use business skills to give back.



Naheyawin is an indigenous-owned consulting firm that works with government and

community to offer sustainable, practical, Indigenous-based solutions.



Aksis, the city’s Aboriginal Business and Professional Association, is working

with chambers of commerce and other business associations to support their members and grow an Indigenous economy. The aim is to make Edmonton the regional and national hub for Aboriginal businesses and professionals.

The background of the slide features a scenic view of a city, likely Edmonton, with a river in the foreground and a light rail train crossing a bridge. The city skyline is visible in the distance under a sky with soft, pinkish clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The train is blue and white, with the words "ESSENTIAL TO ALBERTA" visible on its side.

“There is an Indigenous entrepreneurial community, not involved in the innovation side of the ecosystem. [They] don’t feel they can connect with that. [It’s] something we want to encourage [and we are]. Working with start-up Edmonton on innovation technology and Indigenous entrepreneurs; we talk about barriers and access to capital.”

Barbara McKenzie,
Business Link



There are still so many Indigenous people, not by any fault of their own, who can't function within the colonial system and get further marginalized by the structures we have. That's a huge barrier, because we often miss out on the knowledge that these people bring when they are left out from these conversations. The current systems also interfere with our cultural practices as far as kinship is concerned. For example, leaders were [chosen] based on their ability to help others. I've trained myself to live by the rules and navigate these structures."

Doris Gladue,
Fort Edmonton Park




Potential Local Government Leads the Way

The City of Edmonton leads in the use of Community Revitalization Levies (CRLs), which allows it to borrow against future property tax revenues to pay upfront for the public infrastructure that is needed to encourage new development in a specific area. Today, a \$2.5 billion CRL is financing downtown Edmonton's ICE District, anchored by a large arena and home to some of its most sought-after retail and commercial spaces.


The City of Edmonton is embedding equity into its Zoning Bylaw review, recognizing that zoning rules have had disproportionate legacy impacts on some vulnerable and marginalized communities. It includes looking at ways to remove regulations that may be regulating *people* rather than *development*, create more flexibility for affordable housing and address unjust processes.

Edmonton is also a global leader in transitioning to low carbon and greenhouse gas reduction. This includes being the first Canadian municipality to include a carbon budget within its municipal development and transportation master plans, and creating a Corporate Climate Leaders program to take action on the management of greenhouse gases.




**Edmonton is
a place for
builders — people
who want to work
together and get
stuff done.”**


Mayor Don Iveson



Blatchford is Canada's first and largest carbon-neutral neighbourhood. It is being built by developers on land owned by the City of Edmonton. Located on a former city airport 10 minutes from downtown, it will eventually house 30,000 residents.



Edmonton's **WinterCity Strategy** is an internationally recognized ten-year plan to work together and think differently to create a city that is inviting, vibrant and exciting throughout the winter months. It supports Edmonton's identity as a winter city through its infrastructure, design, events and economy.



New zoning rules let city-wide businesses and homeowners share parking or lease out spaces to nearby properties. Removing parking minimums is a means of reducing car trips and encouraging transit, cycling and walking to get around, and opening up new public and green space for other priorities.

Profile

Linda Hoang's parents own a Vietnamese noodle shop in Edmonton's Chinatown near downtown. When COVID-19 hit, she became concerned about the fate of businesses in Chinatown and across the city. She started **#AdoptAShopYEG** to rally community support for local businesses affected by the pandemic. The concept: sign up to "adopt" a small business in the Edmonton area and support them by spending at least \$20. In July 2020, 173 people collectively spent more than \$8,000 at 50 "adopted" Edmonton small businesses. In November 2020, nearly 250 people spent over \$17,000 at 64 small businesses. In February 2021, Linda ran her third event, resulting in 100 people spending \$10,000 to support 50 downtown businesses. She manages to make these initiatives fun and inviting and uses food and drink to bring people and communities together. In addition to #AdoptAShopYEG, Linda's blog houses guides for Black and women-owned businesses.



Bellows
By Shima Robinson

To spend an unbearably hot day
a heat in sleep,
tracing
cool toes slender feet
over knees shins and soles
Staring open eyes in the back of my neck
and to hell with heavy whispering
of little minstrels
from just another cold extremity
their tired songs tumble sick
from brass gilded instruments
would rather hear tell the best stories felt
remote possible fragments of immortal
illogic
vivid real to reach
eagerly forward
for fingertips touching warriors'
rock faces
bellowing reliefs
and stifling treacherous depressions
in these strange lands I've missed
curled
up against
un-parted lips

Acknowledgements

CUI x Local is the result of an inspiring contribution from a diverse cross-section of partners in Edmonton. We reached out to our trusted network of Edmontonians to help us set up meetings and roundtable discussions throughout the week and could not have done it without them.

Martin Garber-Conrad, CEO of the Edmonton Community Foundation, was most helpful in ensuring that we understood issues of poverty and equity. He connected us with many of the social service agencies, the housing and homelessness sector, and arts and culture leaders.

The City of Edmonton, through the Mayor and City Manager's offices, helped us to understand the numerous municipal initiatives, in addition to sharing their own insights.

Brent Francis and **Janet Riopel** with Edmonton's Chamber of Commerce helped to organize meetings with the startup and tech community, downtown businesses, and the development sector.

Keren Tang of the McConnell Foundation was invaluable in helping us set up meetings with the University of Alberta, Indigenous city builders, people involved in community journalism and radio, and peace camps supporting people experiencing homelessness.

We also appreciate the efforts of **Jacquelyn Cardinal** and **Hunter Cardinal** of Naheyawin in putting together the Urban Placemaking by Indigenous Peoples roundtable; and **Linda Hoang**, an influential marketing professional who facilitated a student workshop.

To those organizations and individuals who participated throughout the week: Thank You. We could not have undertaken this work without your valuable time, energy and commitment.

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62 Organizations

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Improvement Areas and
economic development
organizations across Canada**

CUI x Local is a virtual listening tour to gather interpretations, data, assessments, priorities, bright spots and stories from on-the-ground voices to help deepen our collective understanding of the interconnected and interdependent issues facing urban Canada. Alongside local partners, we are organizing week-long residencies involving a combination of public and invitation-only meetings and activities. By looking at local issues and connecting them nationally, CUI x Local will strengthen the connective tissue within and across communities from coast to coast to coast.

More at:

canurb.org/cuixlocal