

‘EXCITEMENT, ENERGY AND INNOVATION’

Calgary has begun to embrace a new way of thinking about its commercial spaces



One day soon, the halls of the once-dormant former energy company headquarters at 150 9th Ave. S.W. will again reverberate with excitement.

Full of new life and newly renamed The Edison, the building long

known as Encana Place will enjoy a significant renaissance.

In the tower's amphitheatre, a new product announcement or an insightful TED Talks event will have the audience buzzing with fresh ideas.

Here and there, workers will unwind for a moment or two by the fireplace or over a board game with colleagues, while baristas slide espressos over the bar top. At mealtimes, the restaurant will fill up with people from elsewhere in the city as well as those who work in the building.

A few floors up, Fido will spend the day with furry friends playing in a well-maintained dog park.

Outside, people will stop to appreciate the dramatic statement made by *Emergent*, the 7.6-metre-high outdoor sculpture that defines the building's new streetscape.

“The two kinds of things we think about all the time with our building

are community and culture,” says Rob Blackwell, senior vice-president of investments and asset management with Aspen Properties, which has owned the 28-storey, 446,227-sq.-ft. building since 2015. “How do we develop a community and a culture of excitement and energy and innovation?”

It's a variation of a question Calgary has been asking itself in the wake of tumbling oil prices and rising commercial vacancy rates: how does the city attract new companies to a city that's been almost synonymous with oil and gas?

While the downtown vacancy rate hovered at nearly 24 per cent in the first quarter of 2017, up from 17.6 per cent a year earlier, Avison Young says overall the market seems to be reaching a plateau, taking “first steps in stopping its downward trend.”

But the city isn't targeting oil and gas companies to fill the gap. Calgary Economic Development is pursuing agribusiness, financial services, transportation and logistics and even creative industries.

The result is the beginning of a slow but very real shift, a reimagining of Calgary's downtown with the buildings that make up the city skyline taking centre stage. And frankly, says James

Stauch, director of the Institute for Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University, the process is necessary if companies want to keep the city's young, motivated workforce.

“We know about what millennials want in terms of urban lifestyle,” Stauch says. “They want pedestrian-friendly, they want green and they want culturally alive, particularly at night.”

In other words, they want the lively, bustling office-tower life that Aspen is creating.

Stauch is one of the driving forces behind Vivacity, a collaboration between the city and post-secondary students to come up with more creative ways to use underutilized spaces. This year, the focus was empty office space, Aspen loaned three floors of the building that Encana had left when it moved into the Bow tower in 2013.

The creativity driving the students' projects—including a mock business where people would come and brew their own beer—influenced Aspen's redesign plans.

“We're far more open to interesting ideas than we were before,” Stauch says, adding that the energy and enthusiasm helped Aspen “to think about the space differently.”

That shift is already helping trans-

are
unch.

Coming Winter 2017



Rob Blackwell of Aspen Properties stands beneath the sculpture *Emergent* in front of The Edison, 150 9th Ave. S.W., formerly known as Encana Place.

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Rob Blackwell on undeveloped floor of The Edison, showing the wide-open space that sparked ideas like a dog-friendly environment. Left: an artist's rendering of the lobby space being developing in The Edison.



form Calgary's downtown. In May 2017, Aspen announced that Silicon Valley-based tech incubator RocketSpace was moving into 75,000 sq.-ft. of The Edison.

RocketSpace, which operates "technology campuses" in Europe, Asia and Australia, picked Calgary for its Canadian launch after a pitch from Calgary Economic Development.

Calgary "offers everything that RocketSpace startups are looking for in a headquarter city," the company said.

"It is a city of solutions-first thinkers, engineers, and entrepreneurs."

Aspen helped sweeten the pot: the main-floor amphitheatre of the Edison building, Blackwell says, is a modification specifically made for the company. The area that RocketSpace will occupy is being remodelled by global design firm Gensler.

Beyond being drawn by unique features like pool tables and dog parks, RocketSpace and companies like it are expected to play a big role in making downtown more vibrant just by moving in. While oil and gas companies tend to have about one employee per 300 sq. ft. of space, Blackwell says, RocketSpace is closer to one person per 90 sq. ft.

He says that will mean "real activity in our building, so you don't walk through the space and think, 'where is everybody?'"

RocketSpace's decision is a huge win for the city, says Deana Haley, vice-president, client services with Calgary Economic Development (CED). Haley was a key part of CED's global push to coax new businesses to the city's downtown, work she is continuing to do. "Having (RocketSpace) move in is exciting for us," she says, "because it's a reimagining of how our buildings can be used."

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One of the Calgary advantages, she says, is that the business community is so open to making changes to better suit new companies' needs. Another is price: downtown Calgary is home, she says, to "modern, affordable real estate."

Indeed, Avison Young has advised companies to take advantage of rental rates that are down in the last two years by as much as 60 per cent.

Andrew King, associate vice-president of downtown office leasing at Barclay Street, says the Calgary advantage is significant for start-ups with big ambitions.

"As your start-up grows, there's enough space downtown to accommodate for that," King says, "One of the biggest things I'm talking to all my clients about now is the ability to structure growth in the deal—and landlords are open to it." ■



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