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New planner has vision for Vancouver

He's the Calgary urban designer who has been hired to weave his magic on the West Coast. At 36, Brent Toderian has youthful exuberance and a promising track record

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CALGARY -- His energy overflows the too-small channel of the day.

As Brent Toderian drives and talks his way through six hours and a circumpolar tour of Calgary to explain who he is and what he's done, thoughts splash and spill along the way: About how cities have to be a combination of rational structure and creative chaos, about the impact of the business-rules culture of Calgary, and about the importance of the way buildings and sidewalks meet. And about how his work is invisible in a way, as it should be, because his job is not to do the detail work but to change mindsets, to create a climate of creativity and flexibility for others to do their best.

Not that he's a rambling or incoherent gabber. It's more like being on a river that looks smooth on the surface -- no flashy whitewater or visible whirlpools -- but that carries you inexorably along in its powerful current.

Toderian is the up-and-coming Calgary planner whom Vancouver has hired to replace the city's outgoing chief planners Larry Beasley and Ann McAfee. He knows he's the subject of considerable speculation in Vancouver.

So young. And from Calgary! What can someone from the Temple of Sprawl do for Vancouver?

Then, of course, people are wondering about the politics of his hire. Architect Bing Thom suggested in a public debate about the new planner last spring that the hiring process seemed designed to ensure that a bureaucrat, rather than a visionary, was chosen. (A head-hunting firm gathered names and shortlisted. A selection committee of four top city managers, including the head of engineering and the head of human resources, picked Toderian. Councillors were presented with him as the committee's choice only a short time before they voted). Others murmur quietly about how much influence Beasley may have had.

Yes, he's young, Toderian agrees. He turns 37 on Aug. 30.

But he's been considered "too young" for most of the jobs he's had in his life. He was the youngest adjunct lecturer ever at the University of Waterloo, where he started teaching some classes while he was working on his master's in planning there. He took over as the head of subdivision planning in Calgary when he was 30, and became the head of centre-city planning when he was 34, both times succeeding people who had been there decades.

And, because of Calgary's explosive growth, he's had more experience in his six years than some planners get in a lifetime.

For sure, he sounds assured and knowledgeable, a man comfortable with performance and persuasion. The only time he's taken aback is when he's asked what his new salary will be when he begins his new job Sept. 14, a question he declines to answer, saying it's not appropriate and he's not supposed to say.

(For the record, it's \$151,192, according to the city's communications office. That's \$14,000 more than Beasley was making, but \$120,000 less than what Beasley and McAfee made together running the two departments Toderian will now head alone).

As for what a planner from Calgary can do for Vancouver, well, for one, Calgary isn't as different from Vancouver as you might think. It's exploding with development downtown. It has actively discouraged people from driving downtown by refusing to build road capacity for the past 10 years and by limiting parking. And it has more homeless people in its central core than Vancouver, with one shelter alone housing 700 people a night.

Toderian is frank in saying the city of Calgary hasn't come anywhere close to Vancouver when it comes to demanding excellence in building design from local architects and developers.

"Calgary's always had a culture that says 'Don't force the industry to do anything,'" says Toderian. "Vancouver has been good at using the threat of the answer 'No' to achieve exceptional design. Calgary has been used to saying 'Yes'."

Developers such as Bosa have done far superior work in Vancouver, compared to what they've done in Calgary, just because the city has demanded it, he notices.

In travelling with Toderian around Calgary -- from the pedestrian mall that forms its downtown spine to subdivisions on the border between city and country -- it's clear he is a very urban guy of the 21st century.

He's a fan of contemporary architecture; he spends his spare time visiting great cities.

He lives in a renovated heritage building in Inglewood, the city's oldest neighbourhood, which is now an enclave of historic houses and ultra-hip galleries and bistros. Toderian can walk to work from there in 13 minutes, along the border of the troubled East Village, the base for the city's homeless shelters and services.

His condo is a tiny 700 square feet. He doesn't need more space, because he spends his weeks at work and his weekends making tracks to the outdoors in his Subaru Outback so he can hike, bike, and ski. But then, what else would you expect of a boy who grew up in small-town Ontario, the son of parents in a country-music band where he played the drums and sang, but someone who longs for the big city?

Although he admits suburbs aren't his natural habitat, he takes pride in what he did in Calgary's. He shows off MacKenzie Towne and Garrison Woods, two subdivision projects that have achieved some fame for their design on New Urbanist principles: main streets that bring people together, alleys, a mix of housing forms, suites over garages, central squares, and roads narrowed from the usual highway-sized suburban roads.

Toderian is careful to emphasize, as he does throughout the day whenever he shows off something in the city, that he can't take credit for the original work. It takes 10 years for planners' work to start showing itself in city fabric.

But he does take pride in his work negotiating with other departments to allow small and creative adjustments: narrowed roads that create an intimate feel; the preservation of houses that don't have a street front; insistence on not allowing developers to build houses that turn their backs on a street or green space.

Look at this, he says, jumping out of the car to stand in a narrow boulevard that's been turned into a small park in what looks like an English square. It took months of wrangling with the parks department to get that irregular space classified as a park and treated like one, with benches and a walkway.

"In most city halls, conventional is easier than innovative," he says. He sees his job as making it as easy to be creative as it is to follow the rules.

There is no doubt he is a protege of Beasley's, albeit using the language of his generation. (Ugly buildings are "harsh" and a lacklustre stretch of the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall is "deadass").

Toderian first contacted Beasley six years ago to get advice about planning and his career future.

They hit it off and have spoken frequently since then. Beasley says he has been a "general mentor" to him.

Both men are part of a small circle of Canadian planners with similar world views -- Toderian jokingly called the group the mutual-admiration society -- and are forming a Canadian urban design council.

When it came time to choose a new planner for Vancouver, Beasley gave the head-hunting firm three recommendations: Andrew Altman, the former head planner for Washington, D.C.; Alicia Berg, the head of planning and development for Chicago, and Toderian.

"I work in lots of Canadian cities and I don't see much talent out there," Beasley said in an interview recently. "He is as sophisticated as anyone I've seen his age in the country."

Unsurprisingly, neither Altman or Berg were available. That left Toderian.

"The most important characteristic, I said, is not facility within the bureaucracy. The most important is that the person had to be a sophisticated urbanist, had to have a very high quality of urbanistic principle."

Toderian fitted that bill, Beasley said, "because he understands how cities work. He understands that it's not just esthetics." Like several others, Beasley dismisses the concern that Toderian is young for the job.

He points out that he himself was 39 when he took over the downtown; the city planner who originally set the direction for Vancouver's downtown development, Ray Spaxman, was also 39 when he was hired.

"I think his age is an advantage. It gives a chance for continuity."

There will certainly be continuity from Beasley's era.

As Toderian drives around central Calgary, where he has been in charge for two years, he has an assessment of every building with the same kind of focus on detail and urban fit that Beasley has. This one is horrible, with its blank, reflective windows. That one is great -- it's the first Vancouver-style building, with a podium of townhouses at the base.

But he also says he won't be another Beasley. His focus will be on the Vancouver beyond the downtown peninsula.

And, although he understands the reason for the "cult of Larry" that sprang up in

Vancouver, he feels his job is not to be another cult, but to make it possible for many others to create a great city.

"It's not enough to be a voice for urban design if you don't have a community of people supporting you. My job is to empower groups rather than control anything from city hall."

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