

## Noel Dant

*Profile in support of his nomination as an “Edmontonian of the Century”*

*Decade of primary activity: 1944 – 1953*

The type of housing you inhabit. The street where you live. The character of the neighbourhood around you. How close you are to parks, schools, stores and offices. How you travel from A to B. So many aspects of the quality of your life in Edmonton are influenced by the legacy of Noel Dant, Edmonton’s first city planner.

Dant was born in 1914 in England, where he studied architecture and town planning before emigrating to North America. Armed with degrees from Harvard and Yale, he worked as a Senior City Planner for the Chicago Planning Commission until he was offered, in 1949, an opportunity he could not pass up: establishing and becoming the first head of Edmonton’s planning department.

Edmonton in 1949 was an exciting place. The discovery of oil at Leduc two years previous and the post-war baby boom were rapidly pushing a timid provincial centre onto the centre stage of urban growth. Major industries were setting up in and around Edmonton. Workers were flocking to the city. Hammers were flying. Downtown was being flooded with cars. The school boards needed dozens of new schools. Entrepreneurs were dreaming up housing and commercial developments of a scale that would have amazed Edmonton’s pioneers.

Into the frenzy, at the age of 35, stepped Dant. According to P.J. Smith, professor emeritus at the University of Alberta, the timing of Dant’s appointment was fortuitous. Rapid growth meant that plans could be realized before being weakened by changing conditions. Edmonton’s establishment, eager to avoid the excesses of wild land speculation and the expense of inefficient infrastructure, had a positive new attitude towards planning. And the municipal government owned much of the vacant land at the edge of the built-up portion of the city, allowing it to control new urban development from the initial planning to the eventual sale and construction.

But Noel Dant did more than slide into an easy job and keep up appearances. By boldly championing new ideas about how the city should grow, he quickly became a leader in Edmonton’s development. He established the practice of “neighbourhood unit” planning that continues unabated (though somewhat altered) to the present. Before Dant, Edmonton’s growth was grid-like, block upon block of identical streets, any of which could become a shortcut for drivers seeking to avoid the traffic congestion that was increasing every year. Dant’s new neighbourhood unit plans kept through-traffic out of residential areas, ensured that schools would be within walking distance of children’s homes, were well endowed with park space and had clear, identifiable boundaries. Dant publicized Edmonton’s planning achievements in professional publications. Soon

planners across Canada were looking at designs of Sherbrooke, Parkallen and other Edmonton neighbourhoods and trying to do likewise.

While some people think of Dant as merely the father of Edmonton's traffic circles, he was much more. He set a high bar for excellence in community design that his successors keep struggling to reach. One specific example will suffice. When Dant arrived in Edmonton, the south-side districts of Strathearn and Silver Heights, which had remained largely empty since being subdivided before World War I, were starting to fill in with houses. A developer from eastern Canada wanted to build a mammoth apartment complex with 500 units in dozens of buildings. Noel Dant developed an elegant neighbourhood pattern that curved streets around existing houses, carefully integrated different land uses, masked the bulk of the apartment complex and provided a view of downtown and the river valley that is second to none. People today who study Strathearn and Dant's other neighbourhoods continue to be impressed by the skill of his craft.

Dant built upon his accomplishments in Edmonton by moving into a larger arena. In the early 1960s he became the Provincial Planning Director with the Department of Municipal Affairs. In this capacity Dant presided over the maturing of the urban planning system in Alberta and created innovative provincial legislation governing its work. In 1977, Dant was recognized for his professional contributions by being named a Fellow of the Canadian Institute of Planners. He worked as a private planning consultant and was a member of the Alberta Planning Board for many years. Outside of the office, rugby was a major passion for the former Londoner. Noel Dant died in Edmonton in 1993.

Edmonton's history is replete with people who have made a significant contribution to its development, but few have had such a widespread and lasting impact as Noel Dant. Some might say that Dant had an advantage in this regard because his work was hardwired into the physical form of the city. But the opposite is also true. If he had done poorly, large tracts of our city would have been a monument to his mediocrity.

Noel Dant shone, and because he shone Edmonton continues to glimmer.

*Noel Dant was named one of 100 "Edmontonians of the Century" in May 2004. On 6 Oct 2004, AACIP President Wayne Jackson accepted the honour on behalf of Dant.*