

The struggle for the soul of Alberta Avenue: how 118 is shaking off its bad-neighbourhood stigma – one little revolution at a time

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The Struggle for the Soul of Alberta Avenue

How 118 is shaking off its bad-neighbourhood stigma –
one little revolution at a time

By Tamanna Khurana



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HE CARROT is everything you would expect of a coffee-house built almost solely to promote artists. There's a piano in the corner with a polite sign explaining that it's to be used for open-mike nights only, and lined across the wall behind it are paintings showing off a local artist's work. The glass cases by the counter are filled with jewelry and pottery – locally made, of course. The tables, chairs, and couches are mixed and matched, and by the time it opens at 9 a.m., the volunteers that run the place have already been working for an hour.

Almost lost among the visual art, community information board and coffee menu is one canvas that quietly speaks for the entire building. Painted on it is a carrot. Just a carrot and a quote: "A time is coming when a carrot, freshly observed, will trigger a revolution."

When he said that, 19th century post-impressionist painter Paul Cézanne was implying that the simplest of objects can start a revolution if only we see it clearly for what it is, free from the stigma we have already imposed on it.

The Carrot is one of many things that sits somewhere you would not expect: on the corner of 118th Avenue and 94th Street, right on the main road that divides Edmonton's inner city neighbourhood of Alberta Avenue. It's only a block away from the Nina Haggerty Centre for Arts, and down the street from Battista's Calzone Co., recently named one of Edmonton's top restaurants. The street also hosts two large festivals, Kaleido and Deep Freeze, and 10 other multicultural festivals throughout the year.

Even today, it is shrouded in its inner-city reputation, but as early as a decade ago, it was blighted, known mainly for the notorious Cromdale Hotel.

In the late 1950s, the Cromdale was the place to be. Close to Edmonton Gardens, it was where you could run into stars or, at the very least, enjoy a drink and dance. That didn't last long. By the late '60s, Edmonton was booming, the crowds moved on, and the building became a symbol of decline. It eventually became Ground Zero for the central problem that organizations like Arts on the Ave (which runs The Carrot), Alberta Avenue Business Association, and the city-led Avenue Revitalization Initiative were fighting.

Prostitution and drugs were the specialties of the area. Whether stigma or truth, that reputation stopped many Edmontonians from visiting, let alone moving in.

Christy Morin grew up on the South Side and, after getting married 21 years ago, she and her husband bought a home on Alberta Avenue – with the intention of flipping it and moving back across the River Valley. But the neighbourhood grew on them, and they ended up staying.

“A lot of homes were vacant,” says Morin, who is now executive director of Arts on the Ave. “They weren't owned by the people that lived there. There were a lot of renters. I think the actual community was very transient 21 years ago. I think that was part of the

problem, that it wasn't people who lived and owned and took pride in their neighbourhood."

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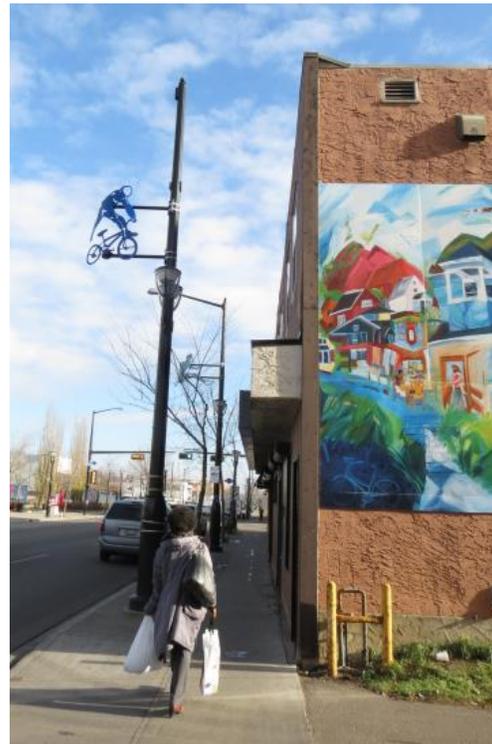
ORIN STARTED a meeting group for artists in the area through her own home.

"We started realizing – wow, there's something really cool here that a lot of communities don't have. And that a huge amount of artists – whether it was visual arts, ceramics, actors, set designers, light designers, writers – just a whole group of people that started coming out of the woodwork that they all lived and owned homes in the area."

Around the same time, business owners in the area were pushing the city for revitalization funds.

In 2005, the plan for revitalization was in full swing and, by 2007, Ward 7 councillor, Tony Caterina, helped secure \$5.5 million to start fixing infrastructure.

"It was obvious very, very early that just putting money towards the project really wasn't going to work," Caterina says. "We needed community involvement. That meant not just the business revitalization area. It meant the residents, the community leagues, the



Large murals between alleyways down the main stretch of 118th Avenue have helped brighten the area and rebrand it as an arts neighbourhood.

churches. Everybody that was affected by the avenue, living on the avenue or beside the avenue.”

One of the first steps was petitioning to knock down the Cromdale. As much history as it held, it had become a liability too big to fight any other way. After it's prime in the 1950s, it's record breaking beer sales in the '60s, and becoming a community college watering hole in the '70s, many of these crowds moved downtown in the '80s. It was eventually left with a few patrons who brought their reputation to the building, inviting the police to follow.

It was closed in 2004 after failing health inspections, and, at night, it had the depressing, menacing aura common to most abandoned buildings. People avoided walking anywhere near it, for fear of who might be lurking in its doorways. After years of battle, the community itself celebrated the demolition in the spring of 2012.

“The building itself represented everything we didn't want in the area,” Caterina says. “Once the demolition happened and the new tenant came into that site, it felt like a large weight was removed off the entire avenue, it seemed so much different.”

There are few cases where a community has managed to come together the way Alberta Avenue did. Multiple organizations came together under the banner of “We Believe in 118” to physically remove criminal hotspots. One of their first victories was to put pressure on the number of shop owners who sold weapons and drug paraphernalia, reducing the number from six to two in their first attempt.

Everyday members of the community stepped up in other ways.

“They did everything from playing chess on the corner, four, five people at a time, at a corner that happened to be a particular problem,” Caterina recalls. “They showed up, sat there, and all of a sudden the problem started to move.”

It moved, but not completely, and not without some pushback.

This year has seen a spike in the crime rate, after the city reported a drop of 23 per cent after the first round of revitalization. A group home was shut down after a string of problems that led to a drug dealer being murdered at the end of summer. September saw a drive-by shooting that left two people in hospital. In October, a pizza shop on 118th and 97th Street had to close after being caught bootlegging alcohol after hours. In November, an Edmonton Police Service undercover investigation led to more than 400 drug-related charges.

After a decade of slow but consistent decline in crime in the neighbourhood, downtown revitalization has again put the pressure of displacement on the northern neighbourhood. Areas that were once ridden with crime are often more susceptible for it to return when something shifts in the ecosystem of a city.

Alberta Avenue has a hard history and is still a vulnerable neighbourhood. And, as Morin says, there are people in the area who like it seedy and want to keep it that way.

“There’s an underbelly of crime in the community and tried to push me and my family out of the neighbourhood by doing a letter-writing campaign to get rid of us,” Morin says. “That was several years ago, but most certainly, there is a group of people who don’t want to see this neighbourhood turn around, because they own pawn shops and run

drugs on the avenue. They don't want to see this thing change. That would stop their business.”

Whether they want change or not, it's happening – in small steps.



Paul Freeman and his peers at the Nina Haggerty Centre for Arts are actively working to change this neighbourhood's vision of itself and the city's vision of the neighbourhood.

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AUL FREEMAN is the artistic director at the Nina Haggerty Centre for the Arts, which opened on the Avenue 12 years ago –

one of the first new buildings built in the neighbourhood after a long time. The centre helps adults with developmental disabilities hone their art skills. The centre management emphasizes that the people they work with are artists, and that this is not just a day home.

While it's not technically a part of the revitalization movement or business association, the non-profit has made an effort to be part of the change, no matter how difficult it is. This can include something as simple as not putting bars on windows that have been broken multiple times for no apparent reason. Freeman says he doesn't want the centre to give in to the neighbourhood's reputation, and like many people trying to bring change, he'd rather focus on the positives.

“The big changes we've seen is this gradual infiltration of arts activities into this neighbourhood,” he says. “The challenges this neighbourhood has are still here, but there are these really great moments that happen where a lot of that stuff gets disrupted.”

The two major festivals run by Arts on the Ave, Kaleido in the summer and Deep Freeze in the winter, have grown exponentially over the past decade. Attendance started in the hundreds, but has grown into thousands of guests, not just from within the neighbourhood but across the city and surrounding areas. The festivals connect local visual artists, musicians, actors and restaurants with Ukrainian, Franco-Albertan, Franco-African, First Nations, and Acadian/East Coast cultures. It's an eclectic – even hectic – blend that reflects honestly on the neighbourhood.

The diversity of festivals, and the arts community in general, have brought many outsiders into the area but the city itself still has a lot of work to do to erase the stigma – which will remain until Edmontonians make the effort to come and see the changes.

Walking down the street in the middle of the day, the area feels safe. The building fronts have been revitalized through facade grants issued to business owners, and many restaurants have opened up, hoping to entice people into the neighbourhood. Yet, most Edmontonians have trouble looking past the area's reputation.

Amira Bere, 17, is a young Edmonton musician from North Edmonton, who found The Carrot after a stranger heard her playing guitar and suggested she perform at their open mike nights. Now, she makes the bus trip over to Alberta Avenue Weekly, volunteering her time there.

“When I told my parents about the cafe they were like, ‘It’s on 118th, it can’t be a good place,’ until they really went in there,” she says. “I do feel like it has changed quite a bit. I hadn’t seen it beforehand but just with the posters that say, ‘We Believe in 118.’ I think



Amira Bere, works as a volunteer at The Carrot. At first 118th Avenue made her nervous, but now says she feels the coffee house is the safest place she's ever been.

it's really become a different place. It's less sketchy during the night. I thought it would be really horrible, but it really wasn't."

These organizations have managed to imprint a sense of pride on the community. Young families continue to move in – and invite friends from around the city to visit during the festivals, or just to check out the galleries.

More surprising is the casual use of the word "gentrification."

Merriam-Webster defines gentrification as "the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents." In London, the fear of gentrification caused riots in some neighbourhoods. Here, community members don't seem to be afraid, and think that the change may be good for some, and irrelevant for others.

Musician Ted Ross lived in the Alberta Avenue area for "20-some years" before moving out of the city for eight. He returned just last month.

"A few other buildings have gone up and a few other roads," he says. "Other than that, everything's the same as far as I'm concerned."

After over a decade of work (in political years, not all that long) Alberta Avenue has made some massive strides. The community's sense of pride is arguably one of the strongest in Edmonton. Yet, after 10 years, the area is being pushed back by circumstance once again out of the residents' control.

The Ice District downtown revitalization project has been front and centre in the public's mind for the past five years. Since construction started on the \$480 million arena in March 2014, Alberta Avenue – as well as Whyte Avenue in Strathcona – have felt the effects. Homelessness in both neighbourhoods has gone up, because they were already equipped with youth shelters, group homes, and soup kitchens. However, these shelters are already under a lot of pressure and may not be able to sustain the growth.

St. Faith's Church on 93rd Street and 118th Avenue prepares three meals a week for vulnerable and displaced people in the Alberta Avenue neighbourhood and surrounding areas. In the past year, workers there have seen the number of regulars jump from 150 to 210.

I THINK THE LEADERS need to realize that us, as a community, can only do so much," Morin says. "You can keep on finding ways to bring change and bring positive – but I think the leadership within council and the city administration are going to have to step up."

The revolution in Alberta Avenue has been boiling for more than a decade, and it has taken a lot of work to turn small steps into big strides. Businesses that have stood there for over 60 years, like Polar Bear Health & Water, joined together with newly opened businesses and restaurants to not simply gentrify the neighbourhood, but to bring out its best features. Art and culture are painted all over 118th Avenue, from beautifully planned street art to murals in alleyways between art galleries and hair salons. There's a lot going on here.

There's no hiding the fact that the neighbourhood has had a hard past. It's also true that painting over swear words, cleaning broken glass, or putting up better lights won't chase crime from the area. However, in the past decade, the neighbourhood has worked hard to change – and it has made a difference.

“As of 10 years ago, when the work started in 2005 to concentrate on it and revitalize, we spent a lot of money and it’s gone extremely extremely well,” Caterina says. “People that just know it today might not think it is because they have nothing to compare it with. But if you were there 10 years ago or 20 years ago, you could see it like night and day. The area is completely different than what it used to be.”

One by one, simple things – whether arts festivals, galleries or restaurants, or just a coffee shop – have created little revolutions that add up to big change.



Deep freezer races at the Deep Freeze Festival held by Arts on the Ave in January are just one thing that sets the festival apart.

Photos by Tamanna Khurana