

# 20/20 VISION

Twenty Conversations with  
Twenty-Somethings about Calgary

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# HOW MIGHT CALGARY ADAPT AND EVOLVE TO BECOME A PLACE THAT TWENTY-SOMETHINGS CAN SEE THEMSELVES LIVING AND THRIVING IN, WELL INTO THE FUTURE?

Looking back on 2020, to say it was a watershed year is a profound understatement. 2020 will define many Canadians' lives. And it will impact Calgary permanently. But it wasn't all about the coronavirus pandemic: Unprecedented low oil prices, spurred by global events, coupled with the urgent need for climate action, have sent the petroleum industry into a tailspin. While there have been previous rough patches, this time is different.

For much of the past 20 years, indeed 50 years, significant economic growth, population growth, and material prosperity has defined the city. Calgary grew fast, and stayed young: With an influx of young workers, especially during boom times, it maintained one of the most youthful demographics in all of urban Canada. But unemployment is at epically high double-digit levels, a quarter of downtown commercial space remains unoccupied, home prices are falling, and many businesses and nonprofits are beginning to disappear.

But another troubling trend has been quietly unfolding for a while.<sup>1</sup> Shortly before the full brunt of the pandemic hit Canada, an article appeared on CBC News observing that, despite Calgary's population having grown by over 20 per cent over the past decade, there was one demographic that actually shrunk during the same period: The age group 20- to 24-year-olds declined by 4,400, a decline of 5.5 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past three years, there has been an even sharper drop in the 25-30 year range.<sup>3</sup> The questions that pique our interest are "why is this happening?" Is there a connection between the broader funk that the city finds itself in, and this particular trend? And are young Calgarians, more globally networked through social media and more racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations, having difficulty reconciling Calgary's narratives with the dynamics sweeping the globe and defining the near future?

## Twenty Conversations

Students in their twenties form the vast majority of the student undergraduate population. So, in the spirit of "2020" as a watershed moment, we reached out to twenty Mount Royal University (MRU) students or recent graduates, all still in their twenties, to discover their vision for community prosperity in Calgary; Their *20/20 Vision*. Some are still in school, and some have gone on to start careers outside the city or pursue graduate or other professional degrees. All have some current or former connection to the Institute for Community Prosperity, as either a *Catamount Fellow*, employee, or former summer student or intern, award recipient, or challenge participant.

We asked each of these twenty-somethings a few questions about how they experience Calgary: What do they love about the city? What do they dislike?

What concerns them about the future, and what do they wish or hope for? All these questions converge into a central question underpinning *20/20 Vision*:

*How might Calgary adapt and evolve to become a place that twenty-somethings can see themselves living and thriving in, well into the future?*

Please note that this is not a formal research project and is not conducted for the purposes of academic publication or dissemination. Rather, it is a series of conversations by MRU students with fellow students or former students with some prior or current connection to the Institute for Community Prosperity - i.e. emerging "changemakers." These conversations were conducted for the purposes of generating community reflection, dialogue, and enthusiasm.

For more in-depth, research-driven analysis, and as a companion to the anecdotal insights captured here, visit [Why Calgary?](#), a project of the CityXLab.

<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is adapted from Stauch, J. (2021) *Unmasking the Future: 2021 Environmental Scan*. Institute for Community Prosperity Mount Royal University

<sup>2</sup> Fletcher, R. "Why is Calgary losing its young adults?" CBC News online. Feb. 3, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-losing-young-adults-census-data-analysis-1.5444969>

<sup>3</sup> Fletcher, R. "The greying of Calgary: 2019 census shows the city is becoming 'more like Winnipeg'" CBC News online. Sept. 3, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/calgary-2019-civic-census-results-1.5268588>

## WHAT DID WE HEAR?

The key themes that emerged from these 20/20 conversations are *NARRATIVE*, *CONTRADICTION*, *BELONGING*, *SPACE & PLACE*, and *CULTURE*. Overall, the city is far more complex and multifaceted than it can seem from the outside. Even the experience of twenty-somethings is wildly diverse. Calgary has many thriving and diverse industries, but only one of them gets most of the attention (whether positive or negative). There is a shared feeling that the city needs a “new story.” It must embrace change enthusiastically, not with resignation. And it can take additional steps to be culturally vibrant (or at least visible). Neighbourhoods are vital to people’s experience of the city, especially since getting around the city affordably and effectively is a challenge. The clearest theme that emerged from these conversations is that Calgary can feel unwelcoming or alienating to many, and there is a necessary reckoning with respect to race-based exclusion and racial justice that cannot be ignored. Overall, two thirds of interviewees said they didn’t see themselves living in Calgary in 10 years, or were unsure. Six have already moved.



*"I believe that the city has done a disservice to the Northeast and its populations by keeping them so secluded, intentionally or not. Most people, unless they are also immigrants, treat the Northeast as some sort of “trip,” like it’s exciting that they visited that part of the city."*

**- Serena Gadamsetti**



*"Something that I've been seeing working is leveraging the tech tools that we have available. I've been really inspired by how many organizations are willing to put out free resources or free seminars that you can just jump on."*

**- Sally Njoroge**



**Two thirds didn’t see themselves living in Calgary in 10 years, or were unsure.**



**Six have already moved.**



# NARRATIVE

## We need a new story, and to embrace change.

Calgary is many things to many people. Quite often, Calgary is compared to other places: Nearly identical in size to Edmonton or Ottawa, just as outdoorsy and hockey-obsessed, but with more chutzpah and swagger. 'Houston of the North' - petroleum-driven and corporate. To some, it is a place with assets more comparable to Austin, Portland or Nashville - quirky, more culturally diverse, with a happening craft brewing and distilling scene, great live music venues, and an emerging grassroots tech industry.

None of these are really 'our story' though. Interviewee Tim Lipp, for example, pointed out that Calgary can be the best version of itself if it recognizes its assets instead of looking elsewhere.

There is a strong consensus emerging from these conversations that Calgary needs a 'new story.' One as unique as the Stampede once provided, but with the 21st century squarely in the foreground. There is a concern among the interviewees that young Calgarians are looking elsewhere for jobs, a sense of belonging, and ultimately a place to call home. Calgary is capable of providing this, but many feel there is a resistance to change, whether in the oilpatch, the political class, or beyond. In some quarters, it's experienced as an outright hostility toward change.

Some of the twenty-somethings we spoke with said it's crucial to fight this resistance to change, while others felt it's not worth it - better to decamp to more change-embracing pastures elsewhere.

University of Calgary Law School graduate Joel DeWiel, for example, explained that while he wants to be part of an innovative shift in Calgary, he often feels like there is still too much resistance to change for his actions to create real change. His sentiments were echoed throughout the entire process with many of his peers expressing a desire to be part of the change, but encountering resistance from 'established Calgary.'

While COVID-19 may have wreaked havoc on the energy industry in the city, subsequent fractures in Calgary's community prosperity have also risen to the surface. Interviewees revealed how the pandemic has changed their Calgary, whether that be their perspectives on healthcare, race, or a general sense of community. Each interviewee brings a unique perspective to the conversation of what its new story may be, but they ultimately all crave a new Calgary that is rich in culture, economically diverse, and a place for all to feel welcomed. No matter how many young people choose to leave, the story and direction of Calgary will be determined by those who choose to stay.



*"Being in tech, I think a lot about Silicon Valley. They invented their own authentic game that worked to their strengths. For us, we need to design the city we want authentically."*

- Tim Lipp



# CONTRADICTION

## A tale of two Calgaries.

So much of Calgary's current identity appears to be coupled with its economic prosperity, and it is a story of paradoxes and contradictions: Despite having the worst unemployment in the country, Calgary maintains the highest GDP per capita. It is consistently ranked as one of the most livable cities in North America, and yet much of our prosperity, and high quality of life, continues to rely on fossil fuels (and increasingly on carbon-intensive bitumen). There is also an insider-outsider quality to this. Nearly every interviewee stressed the need for Calgary to abolish its love affair with oil and gas. Young Calgarians are not energized by the "be part of the energy" narrative, just one of countless ways in which the energy industry soaks up all of the limelight, as it does much of the public angst. Interviewees want to see the city's other accomplishments get their time in the spotlight.

The insider-outsider dynamic has a strong geographic imprint: The Northeast, for example, is a quadrant rich with talent, diversity, and entrepreneurial drive, yet to many it sits apart, forgotten and under-invested in. Serena Gadamsetti mentioned how separated the experience of culture and wealth can be by quadrant and neighbourhood. Many see the Northeast quadrant as a kind of exotic "trip," she pointed out, but fundamentally not part of the 'real' Calgary. Many also feel alienated from the culture of the downtown core. Unless you work in a 9 to 5 job in one of the towers, there is little reason to spend time in the core.

What we heard from interviewees is that they wanted responsive, effective, and powerful leadership on climate change coming out of Calgary, following the lead of the Calgary-based Pembina Institute, one of Canada's strongest civil society voices on climate action. Many people would like to see green tech and alternative energy industries become competitive. Interviewee Braden Etzerza adds that there is a lot of work that could be done around retrofitting Calgary and preparing it for long-term climate change.

The "feeling," or "vibe," of the city is something that Tristan Smyth has spent a lot of time thinking about. They noted that the feeling hits them as soon as they get off the airplane to visit their hometown from Gatineau. The same people they have interacted with over past years now have a feeling of hopelessness attached to this experience, and there is a general sense of uncertainty about the direction Calgary is headed. That being said, Tristan also reiterated more than once that Calgary is a much friendlier place than other cities they have lived in.



*"[Calgary] has so much opportunity and potential, but I feel like due to the political atmosphere, it just doesn't seem like they're taking the lead compared to BC when it comes to climate preparedness and funding for food security or renewable energy projects."*

**- Braden Etzerza**



# BELONGING

## Western hospitality? Or alienation and exclusion?

A majority of the individuals interviewed agreed that at least some part of them did not feel welcome in Calgary. This was particularly true among those who identify as racialized or persons of colour, or who have non-heteronormative, non-cisgender identities. Interviewee Cordelia Snowden, who, although she herself felt welcomed and included, pointed out that the voices of those who feel included and comfortable living in Calgary have drowned out the voices of those who do not feel welcome or included.

One of the biggest challenges the interviewees faced is alienation. Calgary, like many other Canadian communities, has a racism problem, full stop. This is something impossible not to address when discussing who we are and where we are going. It was pointed out that racism blatantly reared its head during the summer when the City of Calgary commissioned four Black Lives Matter murals to be painted downtown. The backlash and threats that the selected arts group, Pink Flamingo, endured was and continues to be a stain on our reputation.

Racism is something that Latasha Calf Robe has had to endure. She points out that Mohkinstsis and the Elbow River was a traditional gathering place for First Nations to come together, and now that same land is occupied by settlers who have subjected her to systemic exclusion. As she pointedly notes, “we can take comfort in our similarities, but we find truth in our differences. If you take that to every action you do, it becomes so important.”

Latasha encourages more diverse voices at every important civic or community decision-making table, but even questions if we should forget about the “table” that someone is missing from and always be looking at the system of community as whole.

The feeling of excitement that electrified the city when Nenshi was first elected and the conversion therapy ban over the summer are examples of what can happen when there is representation for marginalized groups. Latasha hopes that political representation continues to happen for other groups of people, as it leads to more informed policy making processes.

Someone who knows about representing BIPOC (black, Indigenous and people of color) issues at the decision maker’s level is Spirit River Striped Wolf, the current President of the Student’s Association of Mount Royal University. One policy he hopes to see a reversal on is the Provincial Bill 1 because it effectively prevents people of colour from protesting. He also supports more meaningful representation that covers gaps and blind spots, but not baseless tokenism. To Spirit, one manifestation of this is a city where Indigenous people are not just employees, but C-suite managers, executive directors, senior civil servants, proprietors, and owners. Indigenous people hiring Indigenous people.



*“We can take comfort in our similarities, but we find truth in our differences. If you take that to every action you do, it becomes so important.”*

**- Latasha Calf Robe**





# SPACE & PLACE

**Affable and affordable, but flat, wide, and a little dull.**

Middle-sized metropolises (in the 500,000 to 1.5 million range) in North America share many of the same assets and challenges. They tend to be “great places to raise a family,” which, in the context of the 20/20 conversations with twenty-somethings, can be more of a backhanded compliment. But there is a certain magic in, as Anna Johnson explains it, experiencing a feeling of living in a small town coupled with the amenities of a big city. There is a strong possibility in Calgary that you may run into a familiar face anytime you are out, while enjoying the amenities of a metropolis - concerts, clubs, live theatre, electrified rail, and so on. Interviewee and business owner Alexandra Daignault spoke about how Calgary has an incredibly resilient and friendly local business scene, where she feels comfortable reaching out to other professionals. We are a city of people that want to move forward on a better path and that is inspiring to her.

This may be one of the reasons why interviewees like Roisin Dillon feel that Calgary is an ideal place for long-term “settling down” - the place you will return to. Indeed, even as people in the 18-24 age range leave the city, those in their 30s and 40s are taking advantage of the affordable housing. January sales for all building types were the highest they have been for the month since 2014, as housing market momentum from the end of 2020 carried over into the start of 2021.<sup>4</sup> While this is encouraging, there are still major concerns about an exodus of Albertans and how to replace them. According to the Calgary Real Estate Board, “negative international immigration added to losses due to inter-provincial migration, resulting in a net decrease of 545 people to Alberta’s population

in the third quarter of 2020. This stood in contrast to the almost 16,000 people added in the previous third quarter.”<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, as Anna puts it, “Calgary is not a particularly exciting place to live in the meantime.” Cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal appeared to have caught the eye of many of the interviewees as they are drawn to their better-known and more diverse arts and culture sectors, more efficient and effective transportation systems, and the greater economic and political diversity of these centres. If you were asked to picture “Calgarian architecture,” what comes to mind? Interviewee Mizuki Oshita throws this challenge down, noting as well a relative absence of buildings with heritage value, at least among those that remain. Are we signalling that we are an ahistorical place, a place forever temporary?

Some of the interviewees pointed out that Calgary is flat and wide - it continues to have a chronic sprawl problem. Chase Shrader observes that in cities with less urban sprawl and higher densities, the commute typically isn’t as long, solitary, or painful. For Mount Royal University students relying on public transit from the northeast part of the city, for example, the commute can easily be in excess of an hour and half each way. The routing of light rail far away from a commuter campus in favour of catering to low density affluent suburbs is a head-scratcher for students, but fits with the sense of alienation from that downtown commuter culture. Despite Mississauga being the same physical size as Calgary, it has double the density. Mizuki Oshita adds that Calgary’s public transportation leaves much to be desired, especially

with respect to commuting from suburbs that are a stone’s throw away from Okotoks or Airdrie. Ashley Dion notes that the pandemic has “people feel[ing] disconnected from each other. A lot of communities are in the suburbs, where there are not a lot of activities.”

Many have long commented that Calgary’s greatest asset is its proximity to the Rockies. But with regard to young Calgarians, even this asset is under-exploited. Ashley compares living in Calgary to living in Sydney, Australia, insofar as each city’s relative proximity to mountains and skiing. However, while Sydney has good rail-based transit that can take you to the mountains, the only way for a car-less Calgarian to get to the mountains is to rent a car or find their way first to the airport in order to take a bus. Compounding this, another interviewee, Maya Pajevic, pointed out that our *rapid* transit doesn’t even take us to the airport.



*“I think that Calgary is constantly right on the cusp of being such an innovative and really break-the-mold kind of city.”*

**- Joel DeWiel**

<sup>4</sup> “Regional Monthly Snapshot.” *Calgary Real Estate Board*. January 2021. Retrieved from [https://www.creb.com/Housing\\_Statistics/](https://www.creb.com/Housing_Statistics/)

<sup>5</sup> “Alberta Migration - CREB.” *Canadian Real Estate Association*. n.d. Retrieved from <https://creastats.crea.ca/board/calg-migration>

# CULTURE

## A vitality challenge? Or a visibility challenge?

People want to live in a place where they can believe that exciting things are happening around them. Places where culture is strong and alive are places that contribute to meaning in people's lives. Spirit River Striped Wolf also expressed that for citizens of many cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous people, art is very spiritual. It can also be a source of healing and resilience. A lot of painful stories can be told through art.

One of the primary things driving twenty-somethings we spoke with away from Calgary is the perception of a lack of arts and culture, relative to other Canadian cities. This may be more about perception than reality. Hafsa Havyarimana pointedly observed "I think people just say Calgary is full of cowboys and just think of the Calgary Stampede . . . I don't think a lot of people would be like, Oh, yeah, let's go to Calgary [for the culture]."

Others maintain that Calgary has a strong, if underprofiled, arts scene. Elise Martinoski provided the perspective of having been born and raised in Red Deer County, which relative to Calgary, wears the "cow-town" moniker more authentically. She mentions that Calgary is definitely shifting into a more cosmopolitan place, fuelled by a really strong STEM (science, tech, engineering and math) ethos. This is embodied in the very unique festival Beakerhead, for example. Sally Njoroge points out that it's actually Calgary's arts sector that is chiefly responsible for her feeling comfortable and a sense of belonging in the city.

Particularly in the film industry, there is a looming sense of moribundity capturing the industry, with

many looking to Toronto and Vancouver as more viable job markets.

Jillian Mah observes that because of the big city/small town paradox, previously mentioned, there is a lot of mingling between the business community and the arts community - they know and respect each other. Emily Knight recalls the Northern Exhibition window art exhibit as an example of a cultural experience appropriate to a winter city like Calgary.

One key to Calgary improving in this area is highlighting the opportunities in these cultural sectors that already do exist. Moreover, there are amazing new cultural venues, from Studio Bell and Contemporary Calgary to the Esker Gallery, Bella Concert Hall and Central Library.

Unfortunately, the live experience has been severely impacted by COVID-19. Others added there are many homegrown success stories that we can point to, such as Paul Brandt, Feist, Teagan and Sara, and "up and comers" such as Brett Kissel, Kiesza and Lindsay Elle. But also that there should be a stronger collective effort to help Calgarians and the rest of the world become acquainted with these emerging artists from our city. In contrast, Toronto has done a successful job of identifying celebrity representatives of their city, most notably Drake.

In terms of cultural events, nothing really tops the Stampede in fame beyond Calgary's borders, but also in notoriety among Calgarians. The Stampede is a polarizing cultural experience, with some interviewees describing a feeling of not exactly fitting in. Others questioned the extent to which the Stampede is really

a guardian of 'heritage' as they get set to demolish the historic Corral in the interest of expansion with the iconic Saddledome soon to follow. The first post-COVID Calgary Stampede is anticipated to be an especially festive event, and an opportunity to dramatically reboot a rather tired "Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth." It is a chance to flip the script.



*"I feel very welcome in Calgary because everyone presents in their own way, meaning they have their own cultural backgrounds. There are people from different parts of Canada or the world coming with their own cultural identities, and they feel comfortable presenting themselves how they like, so I feel the same way."*

**- Mizuki Oshita**



## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Now, more than ever, people want to live in a place that gives them a feeling of purpose. Calgary may not be an epicentre of grand historical events, nor can we boast streetscapes or architecture (with a few notable exceptions) that make Calgary a standout among cities. But it is immensely liveable, more diverse than it has yet to fully embrace, and brimming with new industries, ideas, and talent. But how do we recognize, welcome, and make space for this talent, these ideas, this diversity? Following are some suggestions offered up by the twenty-somethings in our twenty conversations, as 2020 came to a close and a new horizon comes into view:

- Understand and find ways to repair the reputation of Calgary - what others say about Calgary matters
- Understand the reasons why Calgary may have a 'negative' reputation
- Keep investing in better transit - more options, better service, and better alignment between rapid transit routes for the people who actually use transit. The Green Line is very important, but not sufficient
- Invest in education, innovation, and the arts. These are the things that attract talent and make people stay
- Continue to build a resilient, adaptable business ecosystem
- Be an authentic leader in new things, don't just play catch up to others
- Reduce barriers to decision-making, welcoming diverse voices, and facilitating their active participation
- Have more conversations around systemic issues like colonialism, racism, sexism, and homophobia
- Reduce the political divisiveness and foster human connection and conversations across divides



# CONVERSATION PARTICIPANTS

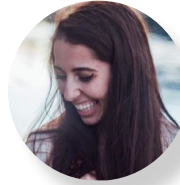
Thank you to the twenty students and former students who gave their time, insights, and ideas to this process. Whether you remain here or are living elsewhere, you represent the voice of the next Calgary. You are changemakers eager to live in a city that embraces and welcomes the change you generously and enthusiastically offer.



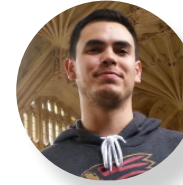
Anna Johnson



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Alexandra Daignault



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Cordelia Snowdon



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