

Former councillor champion of public places, spaces

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As a former four-term London councillor who has literally travelled the globe to discuss the importance of municipal government, Gord Hume knows a lot about the public realm.

In fact, Hume's fifth book for Municipal World's municipal knowledge series is called just that — Places and Spaces. In writing his newly released book, Hume draws upon not only his vast municipal experience, but something he considers one of his bigger failures during his time on council.

Many years ago, Hume was among the councillors fighting for the construction of the west Oxford Street bridge. Council, at the time, told engineers to build them a bridge, which is exactly what they did — unfortunately.

"They built us a bridge, strong, sturdy, ugly, grey concrete. We never said this is a beautiful ravine, this is a gateway to London, what can we do to make it esthetically appealing?" Hume said. "That wasn't part of the conversation; I was as much at fault as anybody, we didn't understand that in the late '90s. I didn't have the knowledge at the time. People in office today should always consider that perspective; it should always be part of their decision-making."

Hume said one of the big issues for a lot of cities today is how they attract and retain not only investment, but "bright, young minds" as well.

More studies are showing "it isn't really about local tax rates," it is about the quality of life for residents and employees, the ease of doing business with local government, and the receptivity of the community.

These days, companies aren't hiring a person, Hume said, but rather entire families who are asking questions about things like access to libraries, local schools, neighbourhood parks, arts and culture, sports facilities, and all things that contribute to a strong quality of life.

"That is the connection the book looks at, that is the link. So then the issue becomes how can we do that?" Hume said. "If a city chooses not to be fun and exciting and animated and interesting, the chances are very much that their economic prosperity will be in jeopardy. They will not attract bright young minds, and families, and investments in businesses."

The response to the book has been really good, Hume said, the biggest launch he has ever had in terms of sales response and positive reviews. And it isn't just municipal politicians and employees who are showing interest, but also community leaders and individuals interested in building strong neighbourhoods.

That group includes a growing interest by younger people who see a direct connection between their lives and the relationship with their municipality.

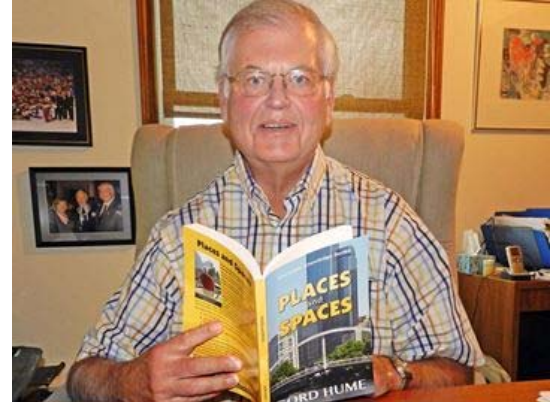
That relationship is reflected in many ways. However, Hume said one way in particular shows how important public places and spaces are in the lives of a growing number of people.

When looking at the larger urban centres — and on a growing basis in the case of London as well — there is a move to what Hume calls micro-suites. These are 350-500 sq.-ft. apartments and condos that aren't much more than "a closet, a bedroom, a bathroom and a kitchen."

That means public places and spaces are now becoming, for many people, the new community living room.

"That is where people live their lives. That is where they meet their friends, that is where they exercise, that is where they have their coffee in the morning on the way to work, that is where they socialize on a Friday night," Hume said. "So, all of the sudden, you are seeing municipal responsibilities like streets, sidewalks, parks, libraries, festival squares, these are where people are meeting and going. That is the new trend."

Among the changes Hume champions are creation of public spaces, not for automobiles, but for people.



Places and Spaces

Gord Hume, a former four-term London councillor, has published his fifth book focused on municipal government issues, Places and Spaces.



Places and Spaces

Paris, France: Very animated street, walkable, buildings are to human scale.

In a recent visit to Paris, for example, Hume saw “lovely, tree-lined grand boulevards” and wide sidewalks. In North America, the tendency is to build wide streets and narrow sidewalks, something he says needs to change.

And that change might just come with London’s new council.

“We have just come from a council that couldn’t agree on a couple of food trucks. How hard a decision was that?” Hume said. “That is the kind of dysfunction this council had. I just think they lost touch with the modern community, with what London wants to become.”

The hospital lands in SoHo are London’s “wonderful opportunity,” to begin the kind of change that will take the city forward. London needs to embrace its river, but also energize its public spaces.

By constructing spaces like a boardwalk, by bringing in buskers and musicians, cafes and restaurants, Hume said London would begin to see the change it needs.

“That is why I always fought for arts and culture. I understood by that point the links between economic prosperity and a strong arts and culture environment. Every year we are seeing that proven more and more,” Hume said. “A lot of cities don’t get that. So that is why I wrote the book, to help educate. That is why I do talks all around the world. We need to have these conversations.”

Places and Spaces book is available through www.municipalworld.com where it can be order or downloaded.