

Jane's Walks celebrate what makes city great

On a beautiful spring Saturday, 24 Calgarians strolled along the Elbow River — and all the way back to 1923 — to what was then a charming green bathhouse.

Lorraine Hjalte, Calgary Herald



Historian John Gilpin leads a Jane's Walk along the Elbow River on Saturday. The walking tours across Calgary are a tribute to the civic design philosophy of Jane Jacobs, who saw parks as all-day retreats.

The structure still stands by the pathway near 29th Avenue S.W., not used for any seedy purposes that the bathhouse name would suggest.

Rather, it was a change room and first-aid centre, or a “bathhouse” in 1920s parlance, serving the river’s many bathers at one of the city’s premier swimming holes.

It also served as historian John Gilpin’s starting point Saturday for a Jane’s Walk, one of 10 around Calgary this weekend.

The walks are meant to commemorate late urban critic Jane Jacobs and use her teachings to get residents to ponder a certain area’s past, present and future.

One walk led people through St. Andrew’s Heights, while another highlighted the public art of the northwest suburb of Brentwood. In downtown, a blind guide and a former police officer showed fellow walkers how they uniquely “see” the district.

Gilpin's tour was decidedly historical. And covering only two blocks, it wasn't much of a walk, but provided a historical appreciation of a vibrant yet unsung stretch of parkland along the Elbow River.

"I think Jane Jacobs would have liked this — it was a people park," Gilpin said about the much newer Gerry Shaw Gardens, one of Calgary's most meticulously manicured public parks.

It was built only 15 years ago, but is an homage to classical garden parks, the sort popular throughout European cities but also in old Calgary, before parks became more popular for Frisbee players or off-leash dogs than horticulture fans.

Jacobs, best known for the 1961 book *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, wrote that parks were at their best when they were used throughout the day — for pre-work joggers in the morning, parents with strollers in mid-morning, workers breaking for lunch, and so on.

She'd have also liked the area around the bathhouse before the Second World War, when up to 1,000 locals would swim on a much wider Elbow river on hot summer days, and people played checkers on an oversized board built for half-metre wide game pieces.

City-built swimming pools in the 1940s ended an era of river swimming, which is now forbidden.

Before the Glenmore Dam transformed the Elbow River, it was also popular for ice skating, Gilpin explained.

"People would skate all the way to Bragg Creek," he said.

It remains a vibrant area, with people today gliding along the trail on bicycles or lazily on inner tubes down the river on hot days.

"We need more celebration of the history of this place," walker Ray Farnalls said.

"Now with the pathway system, it's more static."

Janice Lowe said people will learn to care more about cities once they know more about them.

Organized by the Calgary Foundation, this is the second year the city has participated in the Jane's Walks, which take place in nearly two dozen Canadian cities.

Three more walks are being held today along 17th Avenue S.W., in Ramsay, and one led by Ald. Brian Pincott from Windsor Park to Britannia.