

Greg Christenson takes the long view on residential development. "We have to think in 60-year cycles," he says, so that neighbourhoods and "urban villages" support demographically diverse populations.



# IT TAKES A LEADER TO BUILD A VILLAGE

Greg Christenson is supporting a sustainable way of building sustainable communities

By Richard Cairney

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—Greg Christenson

When Greg Christenson (Civil '79) talks about homebuilding, he's really addressing the creation of sustainable communities and neighbourhoods—planning the ways that buildings, services and gathering places serve the families making it their home, knitting people together in a community that thrives and endures over generations. He's the kind of guy who wonders why towns and cities sprouted up where they did, and what kept them going.

“I'm more interested in the whole spectrum of development, from the raw land all the way to densification, to building a community, to creating something more than buildings,” says Christenson.

Through his charitable foundation and a gift in his estate, he is establishing an endowed professorship in the Faculty of Engineering dedicated to research and education in sustainable and healthy community development.

“The idea is to advance the science of urban villages and do feasibility studies in brown- and greenfield markets,” says Christenson, president of Christenson Developments and a member of the city's social and affordable housing advisory groups.

The professorship will investigate the use of renewable energy, new materials and innovative construction practices along with quality-of-life issues like helping neighbourhoods rejuvenate themselves by accommodating a diverse population.

“Community building plays on a number of levels, and as engineers we sometimes think too much about bricks and mortar,” Christenson says. “We can go through numbers like cost and what people are willing to pay for certain features. You

also need to think of how happy the people who are living in a community are going to be—having nearby services like grocery stores and schools and health care are important too, and we can quantify that.

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The belief in the importance of community and service to community runs in the Christenson family. His parents, Lloyd and Joyce, were active members of the Lutheran Church. Lloyd served on the board of the Camrose Lutheran College (now the U of A's Augustana Campus, in Camrose, Alta.), and Joyce served the church at the national level on various boards and committees. The family's history is tied to rural development and community building in central Alberta.

In the 1940s, Lloyd helped his father build homes in the Camrose area and later helped with construction of the old Bethany Nursing home in Camrose. Lloyd also helped the Lutheran College move its iconic headquarters, Founder's Hall, to its current site, presiding over the vibrant Augustana quad. Family ties to the area were so strong that Lloyd and Joyce wanted their son to attend the Camrose Lutheran College. Greg had other plans.

“Growing up in southwest Edmonton, the U of A casts a long shadow,” he says. As a youth, he and his neighbourhood friends spent plenty of time on the U of A campus, attending Golden Bears football and hockey games. After high school, it was expected of many of his peers that they'd attend the U of A “regardless of your grades.”



**Building communities runs in the Christenson family. Greg's father helped build then relocate Founder's Hall, at the U of A Augustana Campus in Camrose, Alta.**

Grades became an issue for Greg, who jokes that he was a member of four graduating classes. At one point he was put on “dean’s vacation” for a year. Perhaps the challenge for Greg was that he’d skipped a grade in elementary school, being advanced from Grade 4 to 6. He felt, as a university student, that things were happening too quickly.

“I didn’t want to be a teenage engineer,” he says. “Imagine that you’ve just turned 20 and you’ve graduated and now what—you’re a professional engineer? I don’t think so.”

But graduate he did, at the age of 24, adding to his university education by studying his father’s books on leadership—by the likes of Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale. He began coaching lacrosse teams at the Enoch First Nation just west of the city to put his leadership skills to the test. Professionally, he was helping his father with his building company, which specialized in apartment buildings. The trouble was that like so many of his classmates, he had emerged from the relative security of university studies into the waiting jaws of a devastating global economic meltdown.

The inflation rate in 1979 was 9.3 per cent. It jumped to 12.5 per cent in 1981 and 10.9 in 1982. Five-year fixed mortgage rates sat above 15 per cent for two years from 1980 to 1982, spiking to more than 21 per cent in 1981. The national unemployment rate, steady at 7.5 and 7.6 per cent from 1979 to 1981, blew up into double digits, peaking at 12 per cent in 1983 (and didn’t return to 7.6 until 1999).

Everything stopped.

“I was a young man building large projects beyond my experience,” Christenson recalls. “We were a one-dimensional company building apartments. Dad built the company up and I carried it for a while, but we went from about 200 employees to one—Brenda Mackin. She still works here.”

Christenson turned to property management, running buildings that had been foreclosed upon, then aligning his company with investors who bought the properties and retaining them as clients. At the same time, members of the building community closed ranks. Operators like Reza Nasserri (Electrical ’70), founder

of the Landmark Group of Companies, and Radhe Gupta, who established Rohit Communities, ran their one-office companies from Christenson’s building.

“For a while, I didn’t even have an office or a phone,” Christenson says. “When I got phone calls, I’d take them in whatever office was available.”

From this petri dish emerged a community of entrepreneurs working in a symbiotic way, supporting one another’s projects and, in time, charitable causes.

“Our industry is collective and we all got started in the depths of a depression,” he says.

In 1989, Christenson formed a partnership with Peter Dirksen, and together they began to delve into shifting demographics, working with non-profit agencies to build new “active adult” housing for the aging baby boom generation. Today, Christenson Developments doesn’t simply construct buildings—it manages communities.

“Part of this comes from Dad’s affinity for not-for-profits,” he explains of the company’s ongoing work with the Lions Village of Greater Edmonton Society. “We don’t just turn over the keys and walk away. We’re partners. We stay in that micro-community, and the buildings are focal points and gathering places for the community.”

From working on seniors housing with non-profit groups like Lions Villages in the past, Christenson has now become involved in wellness and community care models, working with Lyn Krutzfeldt of Advantage Assist Group, and with Dr. Karen Lee, a noted public health design advocate.

The Christenson professorship will be a part of the Nasserri School of Building Science and Engineering, established in 2015 to support research into more environmentally friendly construction practices.

Dean of Engineering Fraser Forbes noted that Christenson’s gift is, by its nature, sustainable.

“Endowed gifts such as this ensure that teaching and research programs continue in perpetuity,” says Forbes. “The Christenson Professorship will establish a legacy of advancing the engineering and science of community building, giving generations of engineers the tools they need to improve the ways our communities and cities work.”

Reza Nasserri, an Edmonton-based homebuilder and namesake of the Nasserri School of Building Science and Engineering, says the professorship is an important part of the school’s ethos.

“It’s a perfect fit,” Nasserri says.

“What Greg is doing is going to be a big component behind the Nasserri school.”

Christenson says the school is just one of the assets of the U of A and the city that make it the best place to advance sustainable and healthy community building practices. Equally important, he adds, is that Edmonton’s homebuilders are also colleagues who have grown together and are working together to improve quality, overall affordability and sustainability. Alberta cities, he notes, have land where urban villages could be put to the test. In Edmonton, that includes areas such as Blatchford Field and potentially the Northlands Park area and the U of A’s own South Campus lands. Cities are encouraging inward growth aimed at rejuvenating mature neighbourhoods with housing and services that appeal to young families and seniors alike, and the professorship can help advance research supporting this style of growth and community building.

“We’ve got all the ingredients in place in Edmonton,” he says. “And members of the building community here—we truly aspire to build communities.”

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**—Reza Nasserri**