

# White: Marda Loop's evolution brings fresh take on established community



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The multi-use development in Garrison Woods mixes street-level retail with condos above. *RICHARD WHITE / POSTMEDIA*

If you haven't been to Marda Loop for awhile, you will hardly recognize it. Like downtown Calgary in the late 1970s, construction is seemingly happening on every corner.

While some might not like all the gentrification that comes with all the new construction, Calgary historian Harry Sanders, a long-time resident

of Marda Loop is “delighted with the expansion of the business district. I like the densification in principle, but I’m always sorry to see old houses disappear. Mine is from 1950, and it’s getting to be a rare oddity. Living in a hilly neighbourhood with retaining walls made from fieldstone and recycled bits of concrete make for a delightful neighbourhood with many surprises, including some beautiful and eclectic gardens.”

## **Marda Loop 101**

The origin of Marda Loop’s name is two-fold. It references the 490-seat Marda Theatre at the corner of 33rd Avenue and 21st Street S.W. (later, the Odeon) that opened in 1953, closed in 1988 and was demolished in 1990. It also pays tribute to the streetcar line that ran along 33rd Avenue S.W. and “looped” back at 24th Street (now Crowchild Trail.)

The completion of the hugely successful 161-acre Garrison Woods development by Canada Lands in 2004 was a turning point for Marda Loop. This master-planned community pioneered new urban planning principles for more diversity and density for inner-city communities with 1,600 homes (including extensive row housing, small condos and luxury homes on small lots), as well as new retail, such as a modern Safeway store, was hugely successful. Since then, new infill homes have become commonplace in the neighbouring Altadore and South Calgary communities, while the retail along 33rd and 34th avenues S.W. has been evolving with the community’s changing demographics.

Then in 2010, Marda Loop got its first real mixed-use urban building when Cidex Homes and Ronmor teamed up to build the six-storey Treo at Marda Loop at the corner of 33rd Avenue and 20th Street S.W. It consisted of ground floor retail, one floor of offices and four floors of condos above that. The street retail was anchored by a Shoppers Drug Mart and a Phil & Sebastian flagship cafe.

## **Recently Completed**

Garrison Corner is a three-storey retail/office building at the NW corner of 34th Avenue and 22nd Street S.W. with DavidsTea, Village Ice Cream and Cobs Bread as street anchors with a daycare and offices above.

At the northeast corner of 33rd Avenue and 20th Street S.W., the Odeon, has only recently been completed with Blush Lane as its anchor street tenant and offices above.

Today, Marda Loop has 130 shops, boutiques, restaurants and professional services — with more to come.

## **Under Construction**

A block east of the Odeon, Avenue 33, a development by Sarina Homes is under construction at the corner of 33rd Avenue and 19th Street S.W. It will add 36 flats and lofts geared to young professionals, as well as new street level retail.

Just a block south of Avenue 33 will be Infinity at Marda Loop, a 38-unit condo project by the SNR Group. In addition to the condos, it will include multi-tenant ground floor retail anchored by Good Earth Cafe.

Last but not least, Rockwood Custom Homes broke ground in May for its 19 luxury residences of King Edward project at the King Edward School site along 17th Street S.W. between 29th and 30th avenues S.W. This a Dan Jenkins' designed project, with its high-end finishes and larger units (1,400 to 3,400 square feet), will definitely appeal to the empty nester.

Speaking of the historic sandstone King Edward School, it is nearing its completion as cSpace, a creative hub with studios and workspaces for artists and other creative types, as well as a 150-seat theatre.

## **Stop the Madness?**

While some will see all the construction in Marda Loop and say, "stop the madness," it always amazes me how long it actually takes to revitalize a community. You can walk along 33rd Avenue (i.e. Main Street Marda Loop) today and still find pre-1950s cottages homes, 1960s single storey suburban retail with surface parking at the front and small walk-up apartment blocks.

One block over, on 34th Avenue just east of 20th Avenue, is a lovely stretch of small, brightly painted cottage homes that have been converted to retail.

## **Last Word**

When I explored Marda Loop recently, I immediately thought of the late Jane Jacobs, renowned North American community activist, who said, "community revitalization should be evolutionary, not revolutionary." I think she would be pleased with how Marda Loop is evolving.

If you want to check out what is happening for yourself, a good time might be this year's Marda Gras Street Festival on Sunday, Aug. 13 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. This year marks its 33rd year, making it Calgary's oldest street festival. And, unlike the infinitely more famous New Orleans Mardi Gras, this is a fun, family-oriented street festival.