

CHAPTER SIX  
**Showplace  
like  
Home**

In April, 1910, when the City of Calgary was only 16 years old, with a population of about 38,000, there were enough real estate dealers and salesmen in town to form an organization. Their first gathering at which they elected officers and set themselves a modest agenda must not have been considered newsworthy. It is known, though, that one of their main purposes was that of fellowship and the pleasures of leisure: bending the elbow as well as the tongue in pursuit of gossip that might help them increase their property deals.

Although the idea persisted, the organization did not. Only following World War II, in January, 1943, did the re-born Calgary Real Estate Board realize it needed an address. Up to that time the group had rented office space, and the directors had met in the Albertan newspaper board room, at the Club Cafe which was a favorite meeting place for Calgary groups, and at the Renfrew Club. Then late in 1957, with the purchase from the Junior League of Calgary of a \$38,000 two-storey building at 622 5th Avenue South West, C.R.E.B. not only had that address but it was one of the first boards in Canada to become its own landlord.

The place was a beehive. Board meetings often had to be held elsewhere because of the heavy bookings of the existing facilities. By 1958 the premises were so crowded that, for an outlay of \$4,000, the second floor had to be renovated to provide a lecture room, a committee room and a board room. While the renovators were still on the premises they were given the job of making an office for the newly-

appointed assistant executive secretary. Alongside the building, fifty feet of property was bought for \$30,000 and converted into a parking lot.

The passing years saw an increasing number of board undertakings each of which required administrative space. One of them was the growth of group insurance, begun in 1955, and in a state of constant expansion by an average of about 80 members a year. There was the Multiple Listing Service and all the paperwork it entailed. It had a growing need for work space especially due to the fact that while, in its first year, 1951, it handled \$159,000 worth of property, by 1966 the figure stood at \$28 million. The MLS, by the way, has long been one of the yardsticks of the hand-in-hand growth of Calgary and C.R.E.B. The listings stood at \$333 million in 1975 and by 1981 the almost explosive figure had climbed to \$1.484 billion. Now, at the end of 1992, a year of difficult financial times, the MLS dollar value is projected to exceed \$2.5 billion!

There was a time when C.R.E.B. and the MLS were separate entities each in its own premises. Frank Johns, in his capacity as the board's secretary treasurer, had become interested in the Multiple Listing Service which was said to be a great success in the United States. He visited Grand Rapids, Michigan where it was claimed to be working particularly well. He came back with the opinion that it would work in Calgary but that the larger C.R.E.B. member companies would have to be convinced that sharing real estate information was the answer to increased sales for all. Also, that the MLS scheme

*Frank Johns, President, Calgary Real Estate Board 1954. (Photo-Calgary Real Estate Board Archives.)*

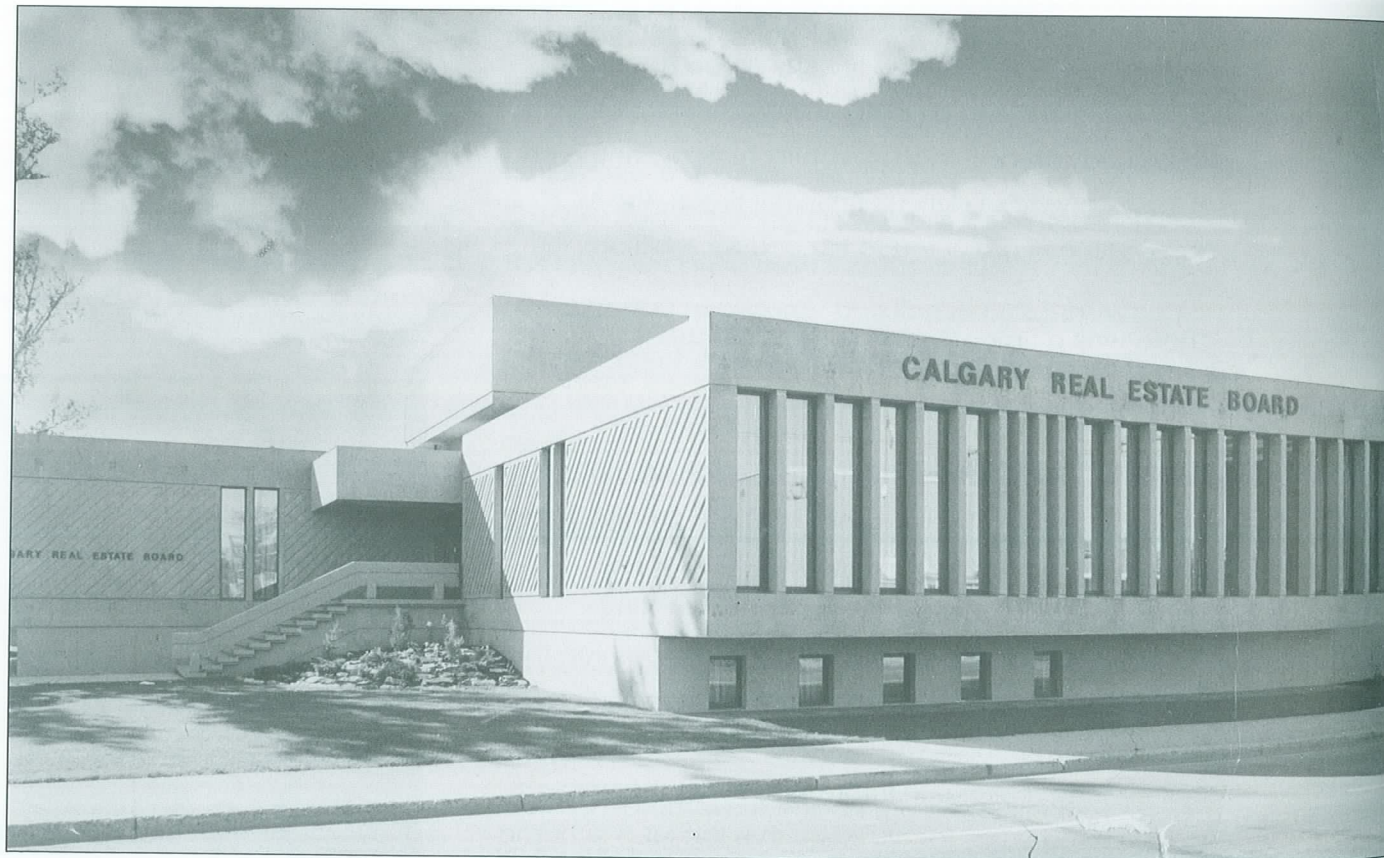




assured a fairer sharing between sellers and listers, of financial returns.

Obviously the poverty-stricken co-op system was not working, and sure enough, it folded. Frank Johns gave up his very successful career as a real estate salesman to manage the MLS office "at no salary but a piece of the action!" He and a stenographer took an office in the Kresge Building on Eighth Avenue West but at the end of two months they had had enough of that one. They found roomier and better quality space in the Venini Building a block further west on Eighth Avenue just at the time the MLS idea took off. Johns was wearing two hats for he was also president of C.R.E.B. in that year of 1954. So he had

*The Calgary Real Estate Board building was opened by Realtor/Appraiser and then Mayor Jack Leslie in 1968.*



his vice president Aubrey Edwards take his place until the two activities could be amalgamated. It became a heady time when the 1960's began showing up on the calendar. Amid all the other C.R.E.B. office traffic, and because of new involvements, about thirty standing and short-term committees were in urgent need of regular and readily available conference space. So C.R.E.B. seemed always to be bursting its home at the seams! A new building committee was formed, and before long property at 503 7th Street West was bought through Aubrey Edwards for \$170,000 and designated as the site of a new larger building. A design was decided upon, a contract let, and a possession date finalized for late 1968. At the time it was not realized that the new Calgary Real Estate Board building would be honored. Upon completion, it was recognized as one of Canada's best all-concrete structures built in that year.

The new premises, designed by Calgary architects J.H. Cook and Associates, represented an investment in land and building of about \$400,000. The opening ceremony was performed by a member of C.R.E.B., a practising realtor and appraiser, Jack Leslie, who by that time also had been elected Mayor of Calgary. At last, up to that point anyway, the board's 12,000 square foot home included ample meeting rooms, a staff cafeteria, and brightly-lit carpeted offices. But in time, of course, it too became cramped by the ever-expanding scope of C.R.E.B.'s responsibilities and activities.

One other very good move, while the price was right,



was the purchase of adjoining land as a parking lot. That was achieved gradually through a series of land purchases, one of them having been the long-established address of Jack Leslie's firm! The many faceted wisdom and value of that move was to be realized when, on May 24, 1989, the present even larger \$1.4 million C.R.E.B. headquarters building was opened on its own acre of very valuable mid-town land.

The new building was a clever marriage of the previous office facility with an imaginative addition, giving the board a total of 33,000 square feet of operating space. Although it appears as a change in venue, the new main entrance and address, is on Fifth Avenue,

*May 24, 1989 marked the expansion and grand opening of the new board facility situated on its own acre of valuable downtown property.*



just around the corner from the old one on Seventh Street.

That is only one of the emerging attractions accomplished by John Riddell, the principal architect of this home of Canada's fourth largest real estate board in Canada. Another is a 250-seat multi-purpose theatre with adjoining kitchen and lounge. There are three committee rooms, and office work and storage space designed to meet the board's need for the next 15 or so years.

It is very much a "people place", a gathering, a hub, and a sharing place for the twelve directors, nine of whom are elected by agents, three by salespersons, for the forty-nine permanent employees, members of more than a dozen standing committees, and for business visits by the city's 230 real estate member companies which represent over 3,800 salespersons.

One of the many in-house services is the printing plant which turns out more than 17,000 copies of Multiple Listing Service "green sheets" every day. Compiled, but not printed, on the premises is the Real Estate News, successor to the Calgary Real Estate Guide which was an earlier valiant, but unsuccessful attempt to serve the industry along with its buying and selling public.

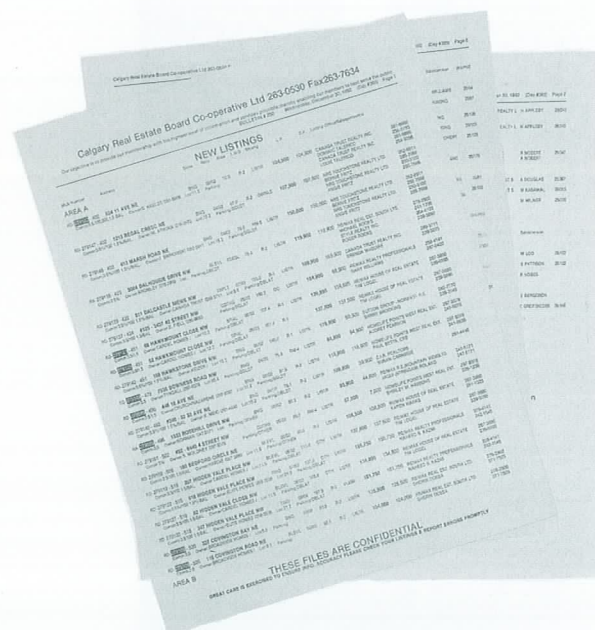
The Guide ceased publication in 1977 but in its place was born the Real Estate News. It made its first appearance on July 15, 1982 as a 38-page illustrated tabloid. Today it is recognized in the province's



weekly newspaper circles as the most successful weekly tabloid in Alberta. Individual photographs of nearly every listing of homes, farms, and commercial properties, advice on real estate buying and selling, dwelling and land insurance, choosing a house plan and home site, building and property maintenance, mortgage rates, painting and decorating hints, all are part of the tabloid. A measure of the effectiveness of board member firms' advertised listings is found in today's editions which often contain 100 pages, a record for which was established in the spring of 1992 of 108 pages. The Real Estate News is available to the public without charge and its 40,000 copies are distributed each week via about 700 locations throughout Calgary and the surrounding district.

One other element of C.R.E.B. operations that requires space is its deepening involvement in computer equipment and use. Back in 1969 real estate board president Al E. MacKay and past president (1967) Pat J. Toole represented the Calgary organization on a provincial committee struck to determine the feasibility of an Alberta real estate computer network. But not until July, 1979, was the first C.R.E.B. computer, a Datapoint, installed with the capability of replacing an outmoded MLS card indexing system.

One day, instead of listing information being about 24 hours old, the computerized data was immediately available to all members with computer terminals in their offices and homes. That included information on the "green sheets." Nowadays the



amended listings throughout the morning, processes them, and the computer-generated details are available on the sheets the next morning.

Before long the galloping forward pace of electronic information dispersal brought into the picture more sophisticated equipment - a Hewlett Packard system. It uses basic software developed by the Vancouver Real Estate Board and makes information available without charge to real estate boards across Canada. Achieving one other advance took four years of negotiation between C.R.E.B. and the City of Calgary. Ultimately an agreement was reached for the sharing, via computer, such municipal information as property taxes, legal description of land, and property owners' names, thus saving hours of work for everyone concerned.

The integrity of the Calgary board's computer system is safeguarded by every member having his or her own password which only allows access to the MLS and special notices. That matter of integrity and access is reminiscent of one of the earlier but extremely important electronic advances adopted by C.R.E.B. years ago and which still is a crucial part of everyday operations.

In past years, a vacant property on the market was protected by a Lock Box affixed to its front door. The box contained a house key accessible to a bona fide Realtor who had a skeleton key to the box. For such reasons as salesperson turnover, and a flawed system of recovering keys and credentials, the practise had to be replaced. Fortunately, at about

that time, electronic innovations were available as replacements. Networking these premises and the sales people who are showing them is a computer which monitors and processes a constantly-changing identification system.

A business venture that is completely computerized is in danger of erosion of the human touch. In the real estate profession individuals and inter-personal relationships are essential. The person-to-person bonding can never be replaced by electronics no matter how efficient the wizardry. However, with access to such process-simplifiers and economically reliable labor-savers, there is no-one to be found in C.R.E.B. who does not wonder, "How on earth did we manage before computers and a workplace like this?"