

Sunshine Chen

Sunshine Chen found himself at the centre of the dynamic redevelopment of Uptown Waterloo ten years ago. He was 25-years-old at the time, a young architecture graduate who completed his thesis on the derelict Seagram lands the very day the City of Waterloo purchased the property.



After a few well-placed telephone calls and an impassioned presentation to City councilors, Chen was hired to help City staff navigate a plan to turn the historic Seagram barrel warehouses into condominium lofts. It was originally a six-month contract that turned into five years for the design “whiz kid.”

Now president of his own company, Urban Imagination and Design Co., Chen recalls his early career as a rare opportunity to use his talents and education to help his hometown. Chen also heads up Storybuilders, a new business that creates short video presentations that can be viewed on hand-held devices like the BlackBerry.

He remains passionate about public space and cherishes his involvement with the City during a pivotal time in the history of the downtown with changes to the Seagram site, Waterloo Town Square and the establishment of the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics.

For a young graduate of the University of Waterloo’s School of Architecture, it was an opportunity to be part of discussions with “serious players” like those that had worked on Battery Park in New York City and Canary Wharf in London, England.

“The conversations in the City of Waterloo were a remarkable thing to experience at that time,” said Chen. “As a young graduate, it was amazing to be around.”

Chen has been a member of the City of Kitchener’s Economic Development Advisory Committee and a board member for Leadership Waterloo Region and the K-W Art Gallery. He also served on a steering committee that was formed to promote Waterloo as one of the most intelligent communities in the world.

He has written on the benefits of intensifying Waterloo’s core and holds up the seemingly unremarkable Dupont Street as a model. Chen marvels at how this short street in the Uptown core has evolved into a home for several media and software businesses, a pub, galleries, police station, public library and finally the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery and the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics.

Chen retains his unabashed optimism about Waterloo’s future, believing “we have all of the foundations on which to build something really great.” He jokes that it is one of the few communities where “your local billionaire goes to the same coffee shop as everyone else.”

Chen's hope is that the emerging high-tech and knowledge-based economy in Waterloo can nurture stronger connections with ordinary residents of Waterloo. While the City of Kitchener embarked on negotiations last year around the development of the controversial Centre Block, Chen wrote a poignant essay on how, as a young boy, he rode his bicycle from Waterloo to Kitchener because he knew where to find the best selection of books.

“As a kid growing up in a working family, I am a benefactor of the vision behind the creation of public libraries . . . I am a testament to that vision because it was in our public libraries that I cultivated my sense of curiosity, developed my imagination and learned to work with my mind.”

Photo courtesy of Sunshine Chen