

Garden becomes a way for community to engage

BY CANDICE SO, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM JULY 19, 2012



Jack Dong, 81, lives in the Koermann Block overlooking a community garden.

Photograph by: Bruce Edwards, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON - Most afternoons, you can find Jack Dong in a dusty, windswept garden, pottering among the roses and tomatoes. Other days, you might spot him sitting peacefully on a stump in the garden's centre, an umbrella there to shade him from the hot sun.

For 81-year-old Dong, the quiet hours in a garden on 96th Street are the best part of his day. He has cultivated three plots of flowers and vegetables in two weeks — something that would have previously been impossible in the brick-and-concrete neighbourhood of the Quarters Downtown. The community includes the area from 97th Street to 92nd Street, and from 103A Avenue to the peak of the river valley.

“When I retired, I did nothing,” he says. “But I saw some people making this garden, and I said, ‘If you need help, I don’t mind.’ I like gardening.”

The garden only came into existence on Canada Day, taking over an empty lot that had been the former site of the Mount Royal Hotel. Although it’s a temporary community garden, it’s also an artwork

for Dirt City: Dream City, a public art exhibition featuring work by 15 artists around the Quarters Downtown. The exhibit opens Friday and will close July 30.

Tiffany Shaw-Collinge, the artist behind the garden, says she expects the garden to last until October.

“It’s been really well-received,” she says. “I was worried it’d be a dirt pit ... So it’s sort of a testament to how wonderful the people here are, even if some have a negative view of this area.”

While many see the Quarters Downtown as an area plagued by crime or as something of a ghost town, residents like Dong are always around. They just have to be engaged, says Candace Jane Dorsey, vice-president of the board of the Boyle Street Community League.

“If you take a lawn chair next to Mr. Dong and sit beside him a couple of hours, you’d see this immense amount of community activity,” Dorsey says.

Dong has lived beside the lot in the Koermann Block for two years now, although he’s lived within a 10-block radius of the area for more than 30 years.

An immigrant from Guangdong, China, he remembers gardening for his starving family during the Japanese occupation in the 1930s. He was just four or five years old when he also started fishing, working on rice paddies and tending vegetables near the family home.

“Nobody helped me, but I learned,” Dong says, adding that he brought that spirit of hard work to Canada when he immigrated in 1951. That’s how he taught himself English, along with cooking and serving skills in Chinese restaurants across Alberta. “I was proud of myself.”

Crouching to uproot a stubborn weed, he says he’s no longer as busy as he used to be. He used to teach tai-chi classes and loved to dance. But now with age and diabetes, he’s slowing down.

“I was so busy all the time ... Now I don’t do much. But I have some flowers, tomatoes and three plots that belong to me,” Dong says. “Time goes fast.”

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