

PROFILE

BY Nathan Kunz  
PHOTOGRAPH BY Jared Sych

# From the Ground Up

With a strong sense of his family heritage and a desire to honour his rural roots, Robert Ollerenshaw has cultivated a unique approach to urban development.

Robert Ollerenshaw recalls Calgary as a string of lights barely visible from his family farm. Today, that same farmland has been enveloped by the lights of the city, with the fields Ollerenshaw once traversed by cultivator now home to the southeast communities of Copperfield and Mahogany.

While the story of Calgary’s urban sprawl taking over rural landholdings may not be unique to his family, Ollerenshaw’s connection to the development is. As founder and executive chair of Section23 Developments, Ollerenshaw took an active role in creating the new communities. As an architectural designer and an urban developer, he has built a reputation over the past four decades for being thoughtful, collaborative and innovative. He works closely with individual clients to integrate their history and personality into the homes he designs and his urban development work is an extension of this philosophy — that what is new doesn’t have to come at the expense of heritage.

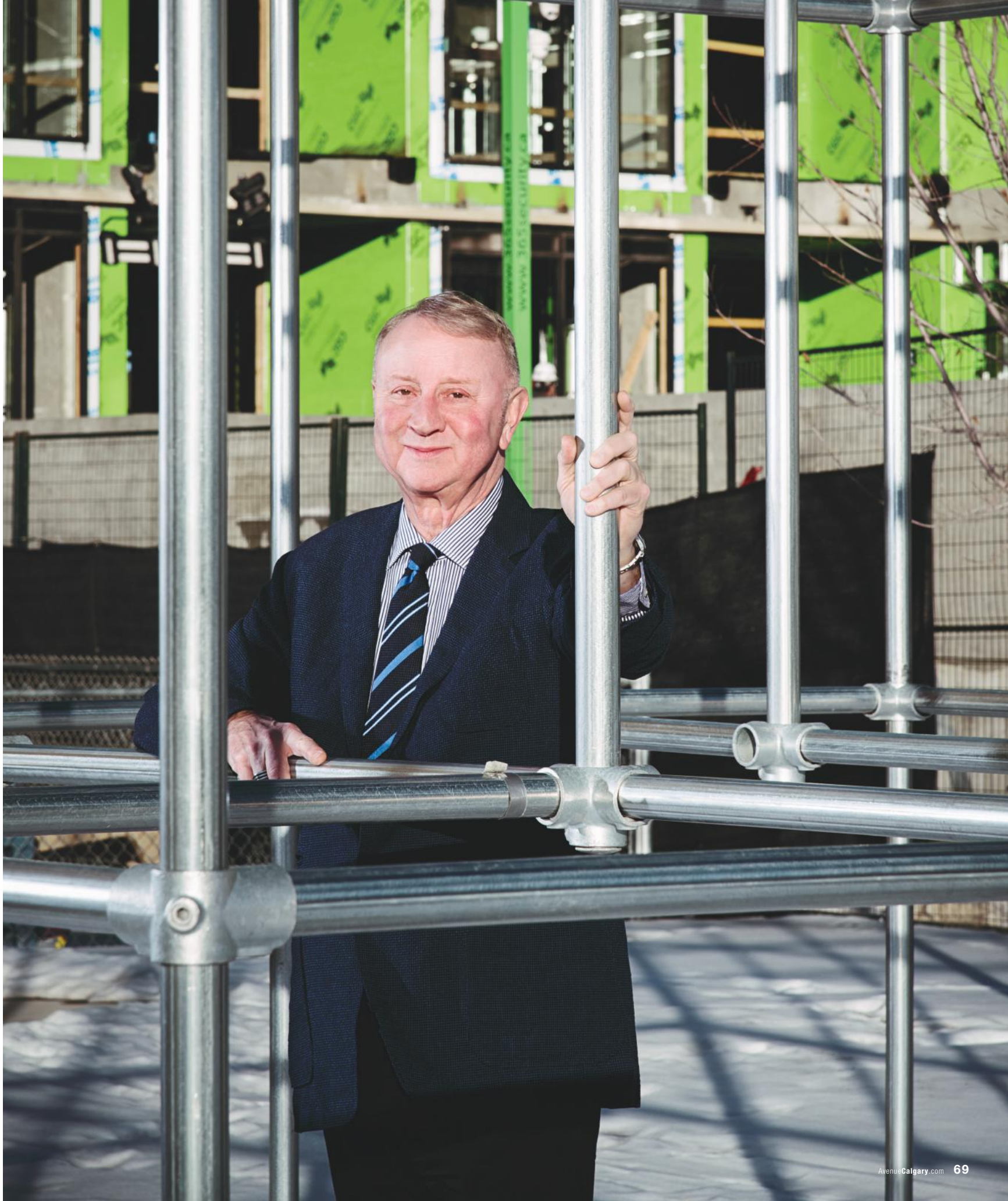
The Ollerenshaw family history in Alberta starts with Robert’s grandfather Joe Ollerenshaw’s emigration from England in 1911. Joe first worked as a blacksmith. Then, in 1923, began farming Section 33, a spread of land southeast of Calgary. Robert’s father Fred Ollerenshaw expanded the mixed-farming operation into neighbouring sections, including Section 24 and Section 23, where Robert Ollerenshaw, born in 1955, was raised.

With the family name defined by a thriving agricultural operation, Ollerenshaw says he fully expected to take the reins. However, Fred urged his son to blaze his own path. “One day, he took me aside, and he said, ‘You know, Robert, you’re never going to become a farmer or rancher. You better think of something you’d love to do,’” recalls Ollerenshaw, now 64. Though it was somewhat shocking to hear his father suggest that he didn’t seem cut out for farming, in retrospect, Ollerenshaw says the assessment made sense. “I was never the first one to get up at six in the morning to go feed the cattle,” he says.

Always keen on building models and sketching houses, he says a magazine article on the legendary Canadian architect Arthur Erickson left him thinking, “if I could do that, I would really enjoy my career and my life.” He would go on to study architecture at the University of Calgary’s faculty of environmental design (now the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape), achieving a master’s degree in 1986.

Though Ollerenshaw didn’t take over the ranch, he has continued his father’s legacy in other ways. In regards to farming, Fred Ollerenshaw is remembered as a “risk taker” with a reputation for experimentation. Fred was the first farmer in the area to plant crops by air-seeding and the first to have a Caterpillar tractor with rubber treads. Fred also constructed the area’s first multi-tower grain dryer and storage that allowed for grain to be dispensed without shovels —

OPPOSITE  
Robert Ollerenshaw,  
founder and executive  
chair of Section23  
Developments, at the  
building site for The  
Edward Seniors’ Resi-  
dence next to cSpace  
in South Calgary.







ABOVE The Ollershaw family farm site following the development of the southeast community of Mahogany (top image) and pre-development (aerial view).

Robert remembers a group of German farmers coming out to the farm specifically to see it. “He was always breaking new ground,” Ollershaw says of his father. “There are big risks involved when you try to do something different in the world, but he made it succeed, and I think that gave me confidence later on in life.”

Throughout his career, first in architectural design and later in investments and land developments, Ollershaw

has also opted for the road less-travelled. When he finished university in 1986, the Calgary economy was in a downturn. Without much hope of landing a job at an established firm, he set out on his own as Section23 Design, working on a drafting board in his basement, relying mostly on word-of-mouth referrals. While most architectural firms at the time were branded by a collection of last names not unlike law firms, Ollershaw says he opted for Section23 in homage to his roots, but also “because nobody can spell Ollershaw right.” The company has evolved over the years from a design firm to what is now Section23 Developments.

As head of Section23, Ollershaw is known as a collaborator. Residential projects, such as the Nest townhome developments in Hillhurst and Inglewood, are a result of a long-standing partnership with Heritage Custom Builders president Dan McAllister and interior designer Monica Stevens. While not always implemented, Stevens says direct collaboration between architects and designers offers an extra level of thoughtfulness to detail on a project. “It’s a bit like a cat-and-dog relationship,” says Stevens. “But I have to say, when you get two very simpatico individuals in an architect and a designer, and they see each other’s points of view, and there’s a great respect for each person’s contributions, it’s really the very best of a situation that you can provide a client.”

Photograph courtesy of Section23

Ollershaw echoes such sentiments: “I remember working with Monica early on in a project — I was designing the floor plan, and she looked at me and said, ‘well, I can’t put my drapes here because the window is too close to the wall.’ I thought, ‘well, that’s interesting, because I would never know that.”

In 1998, Ollershaw was approached by Hopewell Residential about developing some of his family’s land into what is now Copperfield, and he saw an opportunity to enter into a partnership, rather than just sell the land. Working with Hopewell, specifically with Brad Wright (who now works at Section23), Ollershaw created architectural guidelines for the houses in the new community. He also saw first-hand how a new community comes together. “Designing a community is very similar to designing a house. There are a lot more players that you’re working with, but it’s the same design process,” he says. “That was a very easy transition for me.”

With one community underway, Ollershaw decided to work with Hopewell again to develop more of his family’s land into what is now Mahogany — with one caveat: that the original farm site be preserved.

“I noticed that every time [rural] land was purchased the developer would just come in and swipe away the history of the farm site,” he says. “That was not going to happen to me.” Ollershaw was able to keep two original barns and the grain complex intact, and he hopes to transform the site into a community hub, with amenities such as a farmers’ market, petting zoo and horse rides. “The history is important for people to know,” he says. “Yes, this land once did grow food and crops.”

The family farm site in Mahogany isn’t the only example of Ollershaw advocating for heritage in the face of encroaching development. He has also been instrumental in preserving the Leighton Art Centre, a gallery, museum and educational facility in the former home of late artists A.C. Leighton and Barbara Leighton, southwest of the city.

Barbara Leighton opened the centre in 1974 and it was around that time Ollershaw first visited as a young man, fresh out of high school. “I really thought it was the eighth wonder of the world. It was just amazing,” he says, recalling the expansive view of prairie landscape extending out to the Rockies. Ollershaw continued to visit and volunteer at the Leighton Art Centre, building a connection with Barbara Leighton in the process. He says his conversations with her cemented his choice to pursue a creative life in architecture.

Barbara Leighton passed away in 1984. Nine years later, Ollershaw joined the Leighton Art Centre board. The stunning views which so captivated him during his first visit were of great interest to a number of developers, but Ollershaw strongly opposed development of the property. “I just felt that went directly against the intent of the Leighton Centre,” he says. “Having known Barbara, I don’t think she ever would have supported that.”

To stop development, Ollershaw rallied the rest of the board to push for designation as a Provincial Historic Resource, a status the centre achieved in 2009. While seemingly at odds with his own work in development, Ollershaw says the decision came back to one of his core beliefs, that “there’s a time and a place for everything.”

“And it may have been the time, but it was not the place for development,” he says.

In early 2015, Ollershaw felt the time and place were right, however, for a seniors’ residence adjacent to cSpace King Edward, the arts and culture community hub created out of a historic schoolhouse in the neighbourhood of South Calgary. When another investor pulled out, Ollershaw recognized the opportunity to bring his vision to life. He was on the cSpace board at the time, so he first had to resign to avoid a conflict of interest. Months after stepping down, he would return to face the board to propose his concept for The Edward Seniors’ Residence.

Ollershaw’s intention for The Edward, which is on track to welcome its first occupants this fall, is for it to be an environment that encourages interaction between different generations, with the senior tenants engaging with the offerings at cSpace and cSpace tenants engaging with Edward residents at the in-house bistro. According to cSpace board chair Dean Koeller, Ollershaw’s vision immediately resonated with the board. “One of the objectives of the site was to really create a community of diverse groups of individuals,” Koeller says. “Rob understood that we’re trying to find ways of bringing community together — both young and old — and making it an enriched cultural site. Everyone on the board felt like this was the right project for the right reasons.”

The Edward is one of two ongoing projects Ollershaw counts among his proudest achievements. The other is out near the original homestead, where Ollershaw is developing a community on his own on the south half of Section 23. Rangeview, just south of Mahogany, is set for development over the next several years. Ollershaw’s plans include integrating community gardens and agricultural elements alongside retail and other urban amenities to create what he calls the province’s first “farm-to-table” community. Many may see a disconnect between the agricultural and urbanist mindsets in a development like Rangeview, but Ollershaw has defined his career by embodying both, altering the land while serving as its steward, and continuing his family legacy by forging his own path. 🍷

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—Dean Koeller, cSpace Board Chair