



WHAT WE HEARD · REPORT

# Built World Founders' Dinner

What nine built-world founders told us about the barriers Alberta's built world innovators face — and what could clear the way.

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A JOINT REPORT BY



Cities Institute



# Real barriers, real opportunity

**WHEN**

September 3, 2026

**WHERE**Enterprise Square,  
Edmonton**HOSTS**Build Forward Alberta  
(Safety Codes Council),  
the University of Alberta's  
Cities Institute, with the U  
of A's VP Research &  
Innovation team**WHO**Nine built-world  
founders**FORMAT**Three tables, three  
questions.**\$14T → \$22T**Global demand for  
construction and  
engineering, 2023 to 2040

Alberta's built environment is under pressure from every direction: housing supply, affordability, labour gaps and climate resilience. It's also sitting on a remarkable opportunity.

Global demand for construction and engineering is set to grow from \$14 trillion in 2023 to \$22 trillion by 2040. Yet the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce's [Unleashing Innovation in Construction & Engineering: Our Next Industrial Cluster](#) report makes clear that real barriers still stand between Alberta's industry and that opportunity. The Safety Codes Council and the University of Alberta have each created a new vehicle to help remove them.

The Safety Codes Council's [Build Forward Alberta](#) supports organizations on their innovation journeys as a partner, collaborator and facilitator. It complements existing ecosystem organizations by connecting partners, identifying opportunities and supporting collaborative innovation, and it is doing its own research and development, including real-world experimentation, to learn which products and services can sustainably support innovators.

The University of Alberta's [Cities Institute](#) is an applied, interdisciplinary hub that turns research into better decisions about how cities are built, governed and financed. Independent and evidence-led, it connects more than 50 experts across six faculties with industry, government and community partners, and starting in 2027, will train the next generation of city builders through the [Master of Real Estate Development \(MRED\)](#).

This report shares what nine Edmonton-based built world founders told both organizations about where those barriers are and what could potentially clear them.



Welcoming guests to Building Edmonton's Future at Enterprise Square.

# The evening

9

built-world founders

3 × 3

tables and questions

On September 3, 2026, Build Forward Alberta and the Cities Institute, along with the University of Alberta's VP Research & Innovation team, hosted a structured-conversation dinner at Enterprise Square in Edmonton. The goal was twofold: to celebrate the people building Alberta's built-world future, and to learn exactly what stands in their way.

**Who took part.** Nine Edmonton-based built-world founders, whose work spans robotic prefabrication, advanced materials, indoor air quality, building controls, construction-site AI, regulatory intelligence and software for the trades.

**How it worked.** Rob Bennett, President and CEO of the Safety Codes Council, opened the evening with a simple proposition: that innovation and safety need to move forward together, and that a regulator at the table from day one can give an ecosystem its edge. Founders then stayed seated at three tables while three facilitators rotated, each carrying one question, so that every table answered all three.

1

## What gets in the way?

Barriers to developing, adopting or scaling new products, technologies or ways of working.

Mychele Joyes  
Build Forward Alberta

2

## What would help?

Supports, services, partnerships or resources that would accelerate growth.

Kristen Jancewicz  
Safety Codes Council

3

## What would make Alberta the best place in Canada to build?

The founders' vision for the ecosystem.

Kirsten Sokolovski  
Cities Institute



Rob Bennett, President and CEO of the Safety Codes Council, opens the evening.



Founders stayed at their tables while facilitators rotated.

# What we heard

## SIX THEMES

- 01 Access to regulatory knowledge
- 02 Access to customers and partners
- 03 Access to funding
- 04 Access to experimentation opportunities
- 05 Access to talent and expertise
- 06 Risk-resistant culture

Six themes surfaced across three questions and three tables, and one thread ran through all of them.

### THE MOST STRIKING FINDING

**Not a missing rule or program, but missing access: many of the tools founders asked for already exist in Alberta, and they simply could not find or reach them.**

The pages that follow take each theme in turn: what founders told us, the numbers and stories behind them, and a set of potential action items to address drawn from the conversations.

Conversations were captured through facilitators' notes and recordings, and ran under the Chatham House Rule: ideas and quotes appear in this report without attribution. It was a small, invited group and a single evening, so the findings are best read as well-grounded signals, strong enough to act on and worth testing at scale.

01

## 3 years

for one product to be approved, reportedly because it wasn't in the code

## ~\$40K

The cost for one founder to remove and replace their restaurant's sprinkler system after conflicting approvals

## Access to regulatory knowledge

**"When you develop something new and it's not in the code... to get approvals for those things, it can be a long process."**

PARTICIPANT

The first barrier founders named was not a rule, but rather working out which rules applied. One product can fall under product-safety standards, the building code, discipline-specific codes and municipal processes, and these rarely point to each other. Founders described building first and discovering requirements later; one product reportedly took three years to approve because it simply was not in the code.

Then comes interpretation. Two professionals can read the same clause "and they come up with two different answers, but they're both right." In one case, a city approved removing a building's sprinklers, and a fire inspection later required them back, at roughly \$40,000.

**The encouraging finding:** Alberta's Safety Codes Act already allows alternative solutions and ministerial exemptions. However, most founders had never heard of either.

#### ACTION ITEMS

Create an accessible starting point for technologies not addressed by codes, including the existing alternative-solutions pathway.

Name contacts who connect innovators with regulatory expertise.

Engage regulators to identify requirements and potential pathways before substantial resources are committed.

Improve coordination where authorities overlap, and build a searchable code database.

Map where mandates overlap or conflict, and what it costs.

Help design a pathway for creating standards for new technologies.

02

5 = 500

Five good contacts from a trusted network are worth 500 cold calls, one participant estimated

## Access to customers and partners

**"We don't get stopped by builders who want to innovate. We get stopped by trades who don't want to change."**

PARTICIPANT

Founders explained how, in construction, the customer is a chain: developers, general contractors, subcontractors, trades, consultants and municipalities. Every link runs on thin margins and little spare time, and any one can stall adoption. A builder may be keen while the trade that installs the product resists.

Reaching the person who can say yes is its own project. Founders described months of cold outreach to find one decision-maker and, particularly post-COVID, networking events crowded with bankers and consultants rather than buyers. That slows early validation and keeps founders guessing about what industry needs.

#### ACTION ITEMS

Provide curated introductions to people who can assess, pilot or purchase.

Create structured ways to get early customer feedback.

Convene construction-specific events, and pilot a "reverse trade show" where large builders host tables and startups come to them.

Publish clearly defined industry problems for innovators to solve.

Convene curated, sector-specific sessions with decision-makers.

Increase the frequency of interactions between innovators and innovation-interested companies

03

## Access to funding

**"Investment vehicles and investment amounts are not, in Canada in general, commensurate with the amount of investment required to grow our tech businesses like this, and they don't have timelines that our tech needs."**

PARTICIPANT

## 10–15 yrs

for hardware and construction technologies to mature

Built-world innovation runs on a different clock. Founders said hardware and construction technologies can take 10 to 15 years to mature, while most investment models expect returns in five to seven.

## 5–7 yrs

the timeline founders say many investors want

The specifics were telling. Founders felt few Canadian venture funds back hardware. Some programs unlock only once a lead investor commits. Matching-fund and revenue requirements shut out companies before their first sale. Federal loans that require a personal guarantee, one participant argued, “fundamentally do not allow possibility of failure.” Underneath this sits a loop where customers and investors want proof before they commit, and founders need their commitment to produce it.

### ACTION ITEMS

Develop investment approaches that fit longer development cycles.

Offer small pilot grants without matching requirements.

Connect founders, investors, customers and users.

Help founders identify a first paying market and a clear value proposition.

Explore formats where investors pitch to founders.

Study whether funding rules match real development cycles.

## 04

## Access to experimentation opportunities

“If you get some sort of a space which can be considered as an open laboratory... where you can test out the pilot-scale projects.”

PARTICIPANT

Founders reported that customers and investors often want evidence that an innovation works, however innovators need customers, facilities and real conditions to produce that evidence. For physical products, lab results are not enough. Edmonton itself, one researcher-founder noted, is “a live... laboratory, with the extreme temperatures.”

The first adopter carries the risk, and in construction a failed trial can hurt a firm's next bid. Participants proposed open laboratories, municipal testbeds, regulatory sandboxes and access to underused public facilities.

### ACTION ITEMS

Establish paid pilots built around a committed customer.

Create regulatory sandboxes or protected testing environments.

Connect innovators with testbeds and underused public facilities.

Capture and share evidence from successful pilots.

Independently evaluate pilots and sandboxes so results can travel.

Fund and support prototype testing, including for prospective customers who may lack the internal capacity to test innovations themselves.

05

450

applicants from Waterloo  
for a single co-op role one  
company posted

## Access to talent and expertise

"I'm the subject-matter expert. I'm not the tech builder."

PARTICIPANT

Turning an innovation into a business, said founders, takes skills few early teams have. Researcher-founders described doing the science by day and the sales calls by night. Industry experts described the reverse: knowing the problem, but struggling to find developers who understand it. Short placements help, until they end and the knowledge leaves with them.

The appetite on the talent side is tangible: one company posted a single co-op role and drew 450 applicants from Waterloo. But founders outside the University of Alberta often felt shut out of programs run by institutions they aren't part of.

### ACTION ITEMS

Match technical experts, industry experts, researchers and founders.

Provide shared marketing, business development and sales services.

Develop placements that last through defined milestones.

Open institutional programs to founders outside the host institution.

Connect founders with students through placements, co-ops and capstones, across institutions.

Support key technical talent during market validation and fundraising.

06

10x

Solutions need to be 10  
times better before  
anyone will switch to it

## Risk-resistant culture

"The Canadian construction industry... is a little bit conservative. They often avoid the innovation part."

PARTICIPANT

Participants described resistance to innovation as the product of reinforcing conditions: tight margins, lean staff, demanding schedules, real liability and processes that already appear to work. Adoption can also depend on trades, insurers and regulators with different incentives. Several suggested a new solution has to be 10 times better, not twice as good, before anyone switches.

### ACTION ITEMS

Fund small pilots that reduce the burden on adopters.

Design pilots around defined customer problems, not technologies seeking a use.

Provide clear guidance for emerging technologies without unnecessary mandatory costs.

Effectively convey Edmonton's built-world story to investors.

Examine why innovation spreads slowly in construction.

Enable low-risk testing before large-scale adoption.

# What would make Alberta the best place in Canada to build and scale innovation?

Founders did not ask for a new rulebook. Instead, they asked for the existing one to work, with codes written in “the fewest number of words to give the highest level of clarity.” They described the ecosystem below:

01

## Regulators are innovation partners

Participants envisioned a future where innovators can engage regulators earlier in the development process. They saw the regulator's most valuable role as creating trusted pathways for safe innovation through clearer approvals, regulatory navigation, pilot and sandbox opportunities, connection to decision-makers, and faster adaptation of codes and policies to emerging technologies.

03

## Connections drive collaboration and growth

Participants envisioned an ecosystem where entrepreneurs, researchers, investors, customers and decision-makers can more easily find one another and collaborate. Access to trusted relationships and strategic networks was seen as an important accelerator of innovation and commercialization.

05

## Innovators can access capital, customers and markets

Participants envisioned an environment where innovators can more easily secure investment, reach customers, identify pilot partners and scale successful solutions. Access to decision-makers was frequently described as being just as important as access to funding.

02

## Innovation approval pathways are clear, consistent and predictable

Participants described a future where innovators can easily understand requirements, navigate approvals, and receive consistent interpretations across organizations and jurisdictions. Greater certainty was viewed as essential for reducing risk and increasing investment confidence.

04

## Innovation and responsible risk-taking are culturally embraced

Participants described a future where testing new ideas, piloting technologies and taking calculated risks are viewed as normal parts of economic growth. Many felt Alberta's long-term competitiveness depends on becoming more comfortable with experimentation and change.

06

## Alberta is a global testbed for built-environment innovation

Participants described Alberta as having the potential to become a leading jurisdiction for developing, validating and scaling built-environment innovations.



The Institute will keep convening curated, sector-specific conversations like this one.

#### LOOKING AHEAD

## The distance between where Alberta is and where it could be is shorter than it looks

“We have the best legislation in Alberta. We haven't exploited it.”

PARTICIPANT

Nine founders gave up an evening to tell a regulator and a university what gets in their way. What they described was a province where many of the right tools already exist, but too few founders can find them, reach them or use them with confidence.

That is an encouraging diagnosis. Alberta does not need to build its built-world ecosystem from scratch. The legislation allows for alternative solutions. The region has a world-class construction engineering program, leading builders and firms, and founders with products already in the field. The distance between where Alberta is and where it could be is shorter than it looks. Closing that distance is a shared task for regulators, builders, trades, funders, universities and founders.



# Thank you

To the nine founders who gave up an evening to share their experience: thank you!

## CITIES INSTITUTE

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## BUILD FORWARD ALBERTA

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