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Chianello: CEO Kristmanson giving NCC a new urban focus

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Dr. Mark Kristmanson was recently named the new CEO of the National Capital Commission.

Julie Oliver / Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — The fifth floor of the National Capital Commission's offices on Elgin Street — space that was previously occupied by the folks who organized Winterlude and Canada Day events — is now completely empty, except for a 3-D model of the capital region. It dates back to the days when Jacques Greber was running things, although it's been updated over the years, adding such landmarks as the Canadian Museum of History and the World Exchange Plaza.

Until a few weeks ago, however, the model had been in storage. Now, still a little dusty, it's the single item of interest among the unoccupied desks and limp electrical wires.

The symbolism is almost too obvious: The NCC is reinventing its public image from the quasi-government entity that brought you festivals to a centre for visionary urban planning and forward-thinking handling of heritage properties.

The man at the front of this rebranding is Mark Kristmanson, who's been the CEO for all of 10 weeks. He's already started to put his stamp on the organization, from holding breakfast meetings with the (furious) public over the demolition of the heritage-designated stone building at 7 Clarence St. in the ByWard Market

to inaugurating something he's temporarily referring to as a "capital urbanism lab."

"With the departure of the animation and promotion mandate, it's a real opportunity to cast the light back on some key competencies that we have here. I'm talking about the architects, the landscape architects, the planners, the industrial designers," said Kristmanson. "The NCC has a whole set of capacities in these areas that I think the public are not so aware of anymore. They were aware that we did Winterlude, but not that we had this."

So the newly minted CEO thought a good way of taking full advantage of the NCC's talents was to establish an urbanism centre on that recently vacated fifth floor. It will be a place for "public discussions, design charettes, master classes — some will be public, some will be for staff development; we'll do some webcasts," said Kristmanson, who says that staff is stoked about not just the "urbanism lab" but the entire refocusing of the NCC's role.

And why wouldn't they be? When that high-profile party-planning role was summarily transferred to Canadian Heritage in last year's federal budget, it must have surely had a demoralizing effect on NCC employees, especially as rumours persisted that the move was only the beginning of the end for the agency. Yet those close to Foreign Minister John Baird — the ranking local Tory MP who's effectively in charge of the NCC — and Kristmanson himself say the NCC isn't going anywhere. The leaner operation does, however, need to refocus on the hundreds of properties it holds across the capital region.

Kristmanson appears to be throwing himself into the role wholeheartedly. At his first board meeting as CEO, he proposed a plan to improve the landscape on either side of Booth Street in the LeBreton Flats area. He wants to make it as accessible and attractive as possible, but also to "start to define the urban design guidelines" that will determine the second phase of the LeBreton development. Entrenching some permanently defined setbacks on either side of Booth Street should create a striking new capital-city vista with the War Museum and the planned Holocaust memorial as its focal points.

Kristmanson also has immediate plans for handling heritage buildings, which includes "better understanding 20th century built heritage," hiring a new heritage manager, and "bringing back" some disused NCC buildings in the LeBreton Flats and Ottawa River islands.

"What I've been reminding people here is that in the '60s and '70s, the NCC was a leader in heritage management, heritage policy and adaptive reuse of heritage structures," said Kristmanson. "I'd like to reactivate that tradition, which I don't think is gone but I think the idea of being a leader in this area, of restoring that in our ongoing philosophy, is very important."

That sort of workable strategy — redeploying existing resources to make immediate strides while laying the groundwork for a more ambitious vision — likely helped Kristmanson cinch the top job at the NCC. It's early days yet, but with his apparent keenness for public discussions and his grounded ideas for improving the capital quickly, Kristmanson looks like he has a decent shot at rebranding the NCC as an organization that doesn't just think deep thoughts but actually enhances the built spaces we use — and in our lifetimes.

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