



Can Planning Save the Suburbs?

By Jill Grant, MCIP

PLANNING HAS MANY CRITICS WHO FORCE THE PROFESSION to reflect on the problems of the urban environment and to develop new planning approaches. In the 1990s, the most vocal critics have drawn public attention to issues of sprawl, affordability, land-use segregation, transportation, environmental degradation, and aesthetics; they have argued that planning needs to renew its commitment to good design to solve the problems of the cities, and especially those of the suburbs.

By enhancing flexibility and allowing the private sector the means to explore new design practices, the critics suggest that they can create vibrant urban areas that better meet the needs of residents. The suburbs, in this contemporary view, seem anachronistic, doomed to disappear as the new planning changes regulations and offers compact urban models with mixed-use and "traditional" design elements. Despite the efforts of many to spread the new gospel of planning, however, millions of suburban Canadians have little interest in "being saved" and show considerable resistance to forced conversion.

The persuasive appeal of improved urban design won many adherents in the planning profession and resulted in some changes in the built environment in Canadian cities in recent years. The "new urbanism," as espoused by authorities like Peter Calthorpe (1993), Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (1992, 1996), and by Canadian planner/designers such as Frank Lewinberg, Ken Greenberg, and Andrea Gabor, has had an impact on

planning and design standards and practices. For example, the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto prepared a plan in the mid-1990s incorporating new urbanist principles.¹ Edmonton (1997) imbued its downtown plans with extensive doses of the philosophy. However, the reaction to some new urbanist plans have shown that while community members appreciate high-quality design, they may be less ready to accept what they perceive as crowding. They generally do not favour changing the character of their communities, and may find the "cutesiness" of front porches and picket fences cloying. As one of the summer movie hits of 1998, *The Truman Show*, illustrated, the artificial ambiance of the neo-traditional town as embodied in "Seahaven" (shot on location in the new urbanist model community of Seaside, Florida) has a disturbing subtext: everything seems carefully designed and controlled by the central planners.

Nonetheless, the new urbanism has become pervasive in Canadian planning in recent years: it has featured prominently in professional conferences, journals (such as *Plan Canada*), and books. From Newfoundland to British Columbia, planners are supporting developers'

proposals for suburban "villages" and "centres" and adjusting by-laws to fit new urbanist models: narrow streets and lots (often in a modified grid), back lanes for parking, limited setbacks, mixed uses, civic squares, green spaces, nostalgic designs for houses. Cities like Calgary and Markham have adopted new planning regulations to facilitate new urbanist development.² Even small cities like Mount Pearl, Nfld., and Saint John, NB, are reviewing their regulations.³ Some proposed communities using new urbanist ideas, like Bamberton, BC, have had trouble securing financing. Others, like McKenzie Towne (in Calgary), are into their first phase of building. Most common in regions with the strongest housing demand, new urbanist projects fill small niche markets differentiated by price range and housing philosophy: the costs associated with these projects place homes in new urbanist communities out of the reach of most households.⁴ Developers are taking a "wait and see" attitude towards the experiments: if they can market the projects successfully, they will continue to build them. Given the interests and means of the

average home buyer, builders may find it harder to sell a new urbanist town-home than a "traditional" side-split on a cul-de-sac. As was the case with the popularization of the Don Mills suburban type in the 1960s, developers pick and choose the elements which they believe cost-effective and buyer-friendly. It seems likely at present that the retro house designs, elegant road layouts, and reduced front setback requirements may prove more popular than transit-oriented infill or significant increases in urban densities. Instead of eliminating the suburbs that so many contemporary critics find distasteful and sterile, new urbanism seems destined to generate "prettier" suburbs for those with the means to make a statement through their housing.

Will new urbanist suburbs solve the problems of the city for planners?

While new urbanism may create visually appealing urban landscapes, it cannot deliver its social promises.⁵ Good design cannot recreate the social environment of the small community, solve the problems of affordability, reduce

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environmental resource exploitation, or tempt people to abandon their cars. Although new urbanism may limit sprawl and enhance opportunities for transit, it runs smack into cultural practices and values: in a society that defines privacy in spatial terms, that spells out success in square feet and number of bathrooms and that links automobile use with personal identity, it is no trivial matter to propose significant changes to the urban landscape. Many of the "planning problems" of contemporary Canadian cities result from significant life-style choices that Canadians have made: they cannot be "solved" without dramatic cultural transformation which seems unlikely to come anytime soon.

While planners and designers seem increasingly committed to new urbanist principles, the most notable trends affecting the built environment in the late twentieth century reflect the appeal of the values that contributed to suburbia. Whereas new urbanism draws on the historic design models of City Beautiful and Baroque colonial town plans, the other two common contemporary development forms in North America offer allusions to other built traditions. The rapid spread of gated communities in the US reveals the power of the concept of the medieval fortified town, while the growth in ex-urban (rural/urban fringe) development demonstrates the continued lure of the "frontier" in mass consciousness.⁶

In the US and in some areas of western and central Canada, developers are enclosing new suburbs in walls or fences, and finding that they thereby enhance the attractiveness and marketability of their product.⁷ The built form within the gated suburb is typically the traditional suburban layout of loops and cul-de-sacs, reminiscent of the organic street pattern of the medieval town, and embodied in the garden city tradition. Large lots and houses, privatized amenities, and limited commercial functions are found within the compound. An intense cultural concern about security feeds this phenomenon of the gated community: people seek safe built environments with neighbours much like themselves, protected from hostile elements.

The other popular built form that exacerbates the problem of sprawl is "exurban" growth. Outside the suburbs on the rural

fringe of the city, large lot residential development consumes land swiftly.⁸ North Americans idealize the rural environment, and urbanites often indicate a preference for living in the countryside. Developers cater to this search for rural life-styles by providing one to five acre lots within commuting distance of the city. Such large lot developments are available near many Canadian cities. Could it be that Frank Lloyd Wright's concept of Broadacre City, with each residence on a one-acre lot, may be achieved in our lifetime?

Affluent Canadian cities like Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver are most likely to show the hot trends in urban planning: the best urban design, up-scale new neighbourhoods, the most attractive homes. Leading planning and design approaches have always catered to the affluent, offering them a variety of life style choices. Today home buyers can select from among new urbanist retro-village, gentrified central neighbourhood, gated golfing park, rural estate with horse stables, or the "traditional" post-war suburb.

Although most North Americans came to see themselves as "middle class" in the post-war period, class-segregated neighbourhoods did not disappear. Economic segregation, and its nasty twin racial segregation, are a function of two processes: the financial link between income levels and housing costs, and social mores that make people feel most comfortable being around others like themselves. None of the popular planning and design approaches currently in use by planners or developers address these issues. Although the new urbanists claim they can provide affordable, integrated housing by offering a variety of housing types, the results of their projects show otherwise: attractive homes with apartments over the garage accommodate the wealthy. Those building gated communities and rural estates make no pretence about the market they serve: they cater happily to the upper and middle classes.

Despite the critiques of new urbanist designers and planners, suburbia still appeals to many Canadians. Realtors confirm that the average middle class buyer is happy to find a home in a typical suburb. Homes on cul-de-sacs (a street form disdained by new urbanists) remain the easiest ones to sell. While progressive planning departments may be rewriting rules to enhance design flexibility and to accommodate new urbanist principles, traditional suburbs are still built in cities across Canada by developers catering to the mass market. Suburbia may seem formless to its critics, but it can and does provide a sense of place for many of its residents by offering the locus of a web of social relations based around family, neighbours, schools, churches, and sports activities.⁹ Suburbia provides a landscape that acknowledges and reifies the cultural values of the "middle class."

Clearly, however, neither the upscale villages for the affluent nor the

severely compromised. In the contemporary context, the values of equity and environmental protection are promoted as general planning goals but do not always come with sufficient tools and mechanisms for implementation. Instead, the dominant force in the cultural context within which planning is practised remains that of economic growth and prosperity. New urbanism has done nothing to change that reality.

Imagining a good city

Has our society lost the ability to imagine a good habitat, as Kunstler (1997) asserts? By facilitating suburban growth, have planners forgotten how to plan good communities, as the critics allege? Or do the critics espouse an elitist anti-suburban ethic that denies the values and the urban reality of the masses?

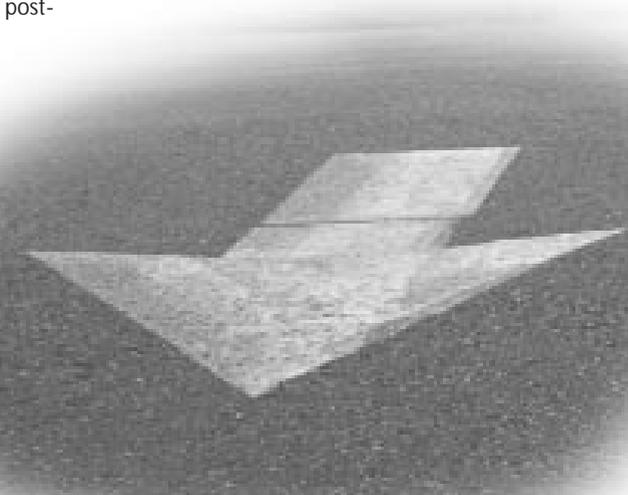
These debates about how to plan and build cities in the late twentieth century reflect the tension inherent in planning theory and practice: what is the role of

the Disney Corporation "new town" of Celebration each exemplify in some way the power of planning to impose the values of those in control. Most planners in the late twentieth century are understandably reluctant to wield their expertise with such authority, and few have sufficient power to do more than recommend options. Planning that seeks to offer alternate visions (eg, egalitarian, ecological) of society has little hope of being more than a utopian scheme without the ability to influence and alter cultural values and practices.

Many would argue that planning in a democratic society should work to realize and affirm the cultural values of ordinary citizens. They believe that planners should work with community members, to enable the community to develop and prosper through active participation. They believe that planning has to be pragmatic, understanding what people can accept and accommodate. Critics of such an approach suggest that accepting popular values means ignoring significant urban problems like affordability and environmental degradation, and that responding to people's concerns can result in planning by polling.¹⁰ While some may argue that planning which supports contemporary mass values is mere "trending," others point to the arrogance of public servants who might seek to substitute their own personal predilections for those of the people whom they serve (based not on persuasive empirical documentation as much as on the aesthetic lure of a new development model).

Can planning solve all the problems of suburbia?

No. Many suburban problems reflect deeply embedded economic and social problems far beyond the ability of planners to rectify; they will not disappear because planning policies and regulations change. Do we still need planning? Yes. Planning continues to offer a useful set of tools for governments committed to allocating resources according to community ends. As long as our cities and towns thrive in a changing economy, governments will still face difficult choices. While the signs are clear that governments seem more willing in recent years to leave many decisions to the market, they cannot avoid the need to set some of the rules of the game. Governments have institutionalized planning as part of a cultural



planning in a democratic society? Is the function of planning to create and implement a vision of the good community, or is the purpose of the profession to help fashion an urban environment in which people can achieve a good life on their own terms?

Certainly any profession worth its salt should be able to articulate a vision and espouse clear values to its clientele. However, the history of planning shows that the clearest vision comes from powerful regimes ready to implement a political and social agenda through built form. The planned towns of Europe, the colonial settlements of the new world, the renewal of major European cities by kings and emperors, the factory towns of the late nineteenth century, and

mass suburbs for the middle classes provide a place for the growing numbers of economically disadvantaged households who face decreased choice in the urban and suburban environment. Nor do any of these approaches adequately address the need to reduce the environmental impacts of urban development. Unfortunately, the Canadian government's commitment to planning to improve the urban environment and to reduce inequity has weakened considerably in recent years. Whereas planning played an important role in enhancing public health, efficiency and amenity through this century, its ability to advocate for equity and environmental quality has been



apparatus for dealing with the urban environment. While they may constrain its mandate in response to development pressures and changing community values, it seems unlikely that governments will completely abandon a process that has so many political, economic, and cultural functions.

Can planning save the suburbs?

The answer to that question is for the communities for which planners work to explore. As professionals, planners can weigh in with our opinions and advice, but as facilitators of a democratic process we must hear what our communities tell us. We should offer residents new models of the "good city" and draw attention to the inequities and problems of contemporary built environments. At the same time, however, we should be cautious about proselytizing professional models that are newly introduced and as yet poorly tested in practice. If suburban living remains the people's choice, we can expect that planners will still be facilitating the development of suburbs well into the new millennium, albeit in a variety of forms to reflect the tastes and the issues of the times.

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Summary

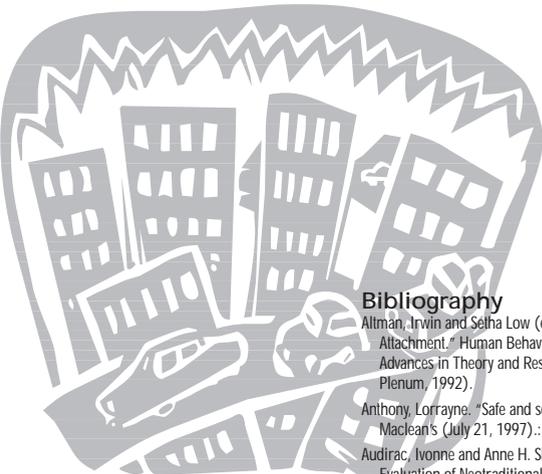
Can planning save the suburbs?

In the last decade, the new urbanism has penetrated Canadian planning theory and practice. Plans have been rewritten and standards revised to reflect a commitment to greater "urbanity." For most Canadians, however, "traditional suburbia" with its winding streets and big lots remains a meaningful landscape in which to raise a family and construct a life. This paper briefly reflects on some current trends in development and asks whether changing planning paradigms will have much effect on the shape and fate of residential environments.

Résumé

L'urbanisme peut-il sauver les banlieues?

Au cours des dix dernières années, de nouvelles conceptions ont modifié certains aspects théoriques et pratiques de l'urbanisme au Canada. On a changé les modèles et révisé les standards dans le sens d'une plus grande «urbanité». Toutefois, pour la plupart des Canadiens, la banlieue traditionnelle avec ses rues en cercles et ses grands terrains semble demeurer le modèle idéal pour l'établissement de leur famille et l'épanouissement de leur vie. L'auteur dresse un tableau rapide de certaines tendances qui se font jour actuellement et se demande si ces changements dans les paradigmes de l'urbanisme auront quelque effet sur la forme et l'avenir des zones résidentielles.



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Notes

- 1 The draft plan released in 1992 (Toronto 1992) presented a very strong case for new urbanism, but received mixed reviews from the community. Residents in areas identified as appropriate for greater densities did not necessarily agree with the plan. A revised plan was adopted before the City of Toronto was amalgamated later in the 1990s.
- 2 See Gabor and Lewinberg 1997; White 1996.
- 3 See Energy Pathways 1996; Moyes 1997.
- 4 See Chidley 1997; Newsweek 1995.
- 5 See Audirac and Shermeyen 1994.
- 6 See Blakely and Snyder 1997.
- 7 See Anthony 1997; Blakely and Snyder 1997; Egan 1995; Greinacher 1993; Hillier and McManus 1994.
- 8 See Davis et al 1994.
- 9 Place attachment is very complex and linked to more than simply aesthetic factors: many of the features typical of post-war suburbia contribute to residential satisfaction and place attachment (see Altman and Low 1992; Hull 1992).
- 10 See, for example, Howard 1995; Seelig 1995.

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