

Urban Planning and

by **Mohammad A. Qadeer, MCIP**

PUT YOURSELF IN THE SHOES of a senior planner in a Canadian municipality and imagine how you and your department have responded to the needs of ethnic minorities, immigrants, and other culturally distinct groups. Furthermore, ask yourself what approaches you could have followed to be more responsive to their needs.

You will probably acknowledge the need for more culturally sensitive planning, but chances are, you have no specific ideas about how to achieve this goal. You may say: Here and there, we could have been more accommodating, but we can do only what the Planning and Municipal Acts allow and what our political bosses approve.

Planners feel that they are sensitive to cultural and social differences and that planning policies are, by and large, unbiased. Yet the literature on multiculturalism and urban planning is full of admonitions about sensitizing planners to differences between cultures, lifestyles, and genders.¹ The perceptions of academics and theorists about urban planning's response to cultural differences are far apart from planners' feelings about their work.

Much of the current debate is driven by the assumption that urban planning is characterized by systematic bias, dominated by the culture of the majority, and based on a belief in universal norms and rational decision models. Is this assumption valid? What can be done within the scope of the institutionalized mandate of urban planning to (further) tailor planning policies and processes to cultural differences?

What is multiculturalism?

Multiculturalism is more than the tolerance of people with different beliefs, behaviours, and lifestyles. It is a vision of nation-state and society in which different cultural groups and communities co-exist as equals, entitled to their ways of life in their private realms but bound to common institutions in the public sphere. Cultural diversity within the private sphere also implies a reconstructed public sphere based on common institutions that incorporate the values and ideals of all citizens – in other words, a new social contract.²

A multicultural society (and state) is a community of communities. Its many cultures may be more evident among immigrants and ethnic groups, particularly those from different racial groups, but that multiplicity is not limited to these communities. Canada's Multiculturalism

Act acknowledges "the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and shape their cultural heritage."

In urban planning, multiculturalism means creating urban forms, functions, and services that promote a plurality of lifestyles and sustain diverse ways of satisfying common needs. Have Canadian planning systems fulfilled the demands of multiculturalism?

Multiculturalism and urban development

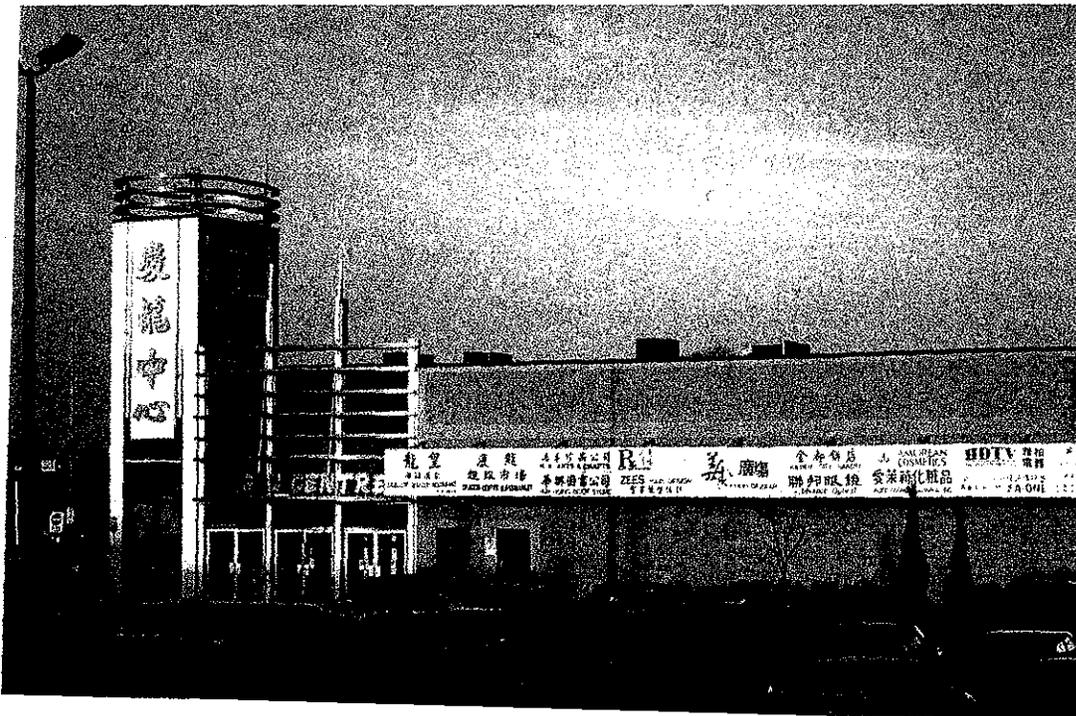
In the growth and development of cities, citizens' needs are met through market processes, backed and regulated by institutionalized urban planning and other public policies and programs. Culturally determined differences in people's needs come into play in two ways:

- in the provision of health, education, employment, and recreational services; and
- in the delivery of sites and community services through the urban planning system.

The Canadian urban planning system's effectiveness in meeting diverse needs for housing, locations, sites, and services can be seen in the outcomes. The Canadian urban landscape is a tapestry of Chinatowns, Italian villages, Indian bazaars, and Asian malls. Community facilities also reflect diversity: soccer fields, cricket pitches, Korean retirement homes, South Asian housing cooperatives, mosques, gurdwaras, and Chinese churches are all part of Canadian cities. The market may have delivered these multiple forms of development, but the planning systems certainly facilitated and approved them.

Noteworthy is the development of varied communities in suburbs rather than in inner-city ghettos. Richmond in the Vancouver Region and Markham in the Greater Toronto Area are two examples of the cultural change that has swept through suburban municipalities. Both have been transformed from prosperous but stolid suburbs to thriving multicultural communities within the past decade. Even the high-tech information economy has been affected by multiculturalism. Silicon Valley North (Kanata and Nepean in the Ottawa-Carleton Region) thrives on the labours of new Canadians from Russia, India, and China, and on the investments

Dragon Center, Scarborough, Ontario
Photo: Mohammad Qadeer



Multiculturalism

Beyond Sensitivity

of immigrant entrepreneurs. About twenty-seven mosques have been developed in the Greater Toronto Area, and not one proposal so far has failed to materialize, although many have had a rough ride through local councils and "citizen meetings."³

Even evidence of the housing conditions of immigrants indicates integration. The following table shows that, as immigrants settle, their housing conditions become more like those of Canadian-born residents. The housing conditions of new immigrants are, of course, poorer than those of established Canadians, but major improvements are attained with each decade after arrival.



Sikhé Gurdawara, Malton, Mississauga
Photo: Mohammad Qadeer

Housing Conditions 1996

	Non-immigrants		Immigrants who arrived			
	Total		before 1976	1976-85	1986-90	1991-96
Percentage living at or above standards for adequacy, affordability, and size of housing	71		70	53	40	31
Percentage of owners	67		76	66	50	31

Source: CMHC Research Highlights # 55-3.

This evidence suggests that the planning system has been successful in accommodating cultural differences in its typical incremental, procedural, and reactive ways, not through comprehensive policy initiatives. Yet for many minorities, success has come only after difficult public hearings, political battles, and inter-community confrontations, characteristics of the Canadian planning system.⁴

Because the planning process has evolved as the arena for the battle of interests, minorities are left feeling discriminated against, even when they succeed in getting approval for developments of their choice. The paradox of multicultural developments is that the achievements are more positive than the social, financial and emotional costs of the process of getting them.

Three critical issues need to be addressed to institutionalize the practice of pluralistic planning.

1. Planning by persons, or by functions and use?

At the heart of culturally sensitive planning is the issue of whether urban planning should be based on persons or on use and functions. For example, should funeral homes not be allowed near Chinese residential areas, but approved if the neighbours come from a different ethnic group? This question highlights the dilemma of attempting to create different policies for different people. The Ontario Municipal Board has ruled in one case that "Personal preconceptions are matters that cannot be addressed in a planning context."⁵ The board interprets the compatibility of land uses in terms of impacts on uses, functions, and forms of buildings.

The way to accommodate cultural differences is to design policies, criteria, and norms that take diverse needs into account. There would be more inequities, to the disadvantage of minorities, if planning were applied relativistically.

2. Reconstruction of planning principles and common institutions

The key to accommodating the cultural and social diversity of citizens lies in comprehensive planning and policy development. For example, our current notions and norms regarding such things as parking requirements, traffic impacts, compatibility of land uses, and service provisions are embedded in the social patterns of the dominant culture. They should be thoroughly reviewed. Should planning policies define the size and structure of households? Are funeral homes compatible with residential neighbourhoods? Do Asian malls generate more traffic because they have restaurants as anchors?

Such questions need to be researched and examined from a multicultural perspective in order to formulate policies and norms that serve the common interests of all. (For example, funeral homes could be dealt with by re-evaluating their compatibility as a land use and by revising zoning and site standards to reflect diverse interests concerning their locations.) Pluralistic planning can best be promoted in this way, and not by tailoring policies to clients' cultural backgrounds at the project level.

3. Reforming the planning process

The planning process, particularly project reviews and approvals, largely proceeds in an adversarial way. It brings different interests into conflict, causing public controversies and costly delays and often leaving all involved dissatisfied and dazed. The process is particularly harsh on the politically weak or unorganized, and on minorities, as it tends to be driven by the politics of local power structures and vote banks.



To accommodate cultural differences, the planning review process should be redesigned. Implementing a code of ethics for public discussions and entrenching the provisions of procedural non-discrimination and human rights in planning acts may help ensure a fair hearing for all interests, powerful as well as not so powerful. Civility and cultural sensitivity need to be instituted in the public discourse about planning matters. The planning approval process is already under review because of its costly delays, complexity, and uncertainty as a part of the regulatory reform programs. It should be also reviewed for procedures and rules regarding public discussions, including what can and cannot be brought up in public hearings.

Reconstructing common institutions

Multicultural urban forms are common in Canadian metropolitan areas. They have emerged one by one mostly through market transactions that have been accepted or approved by planning systems. Canada's national multiculturalism policy and Charter of Rights and Freedoms have helped ethnic groups carve out distinct private spaces. The planning system has supported the expression of cultural differences in the private realm.

Yet the success of multiculturalism comes slowly for immigrants. Many new arrivals – particularly those whose poverty impedes their integration – have to wait a long time to enjoy material and social equality.

The challenge of multiculturalism lies in restructuring common institutions, rethinking planning principles, and realigning planning models, assumptions, and criteria. A multicultural approach to planning has yet to evolve. It entails reconstructing common institutions, not merely ensuring that planners or planning bodies respond sympathetically to differences in needs on a case-by-case basis.

Summary

Multiculturalism brings up culture alongside race, class, and gender as the bases of defining differences in community needs. This paper argues that such differences should be accommodated by revising planning policies, regulations, processes and standards, and by rethinking planning principles to serve all groups fairly. Plans and policies should not be applied differently to different persons and groups in implementation.

Sommaire

La culture, la race, la classe sociale et le genre sont autant de facteurs qui définissent les besoins différents d'une communauté multiculturelle. Ces différences devraient être prises en compte dans l'élaboration des politiques d'aménagement, de la réglementation, des procédés et des normes. Les principes d'aménagement doivent être repensés de façon à répondre correctement aux diverses attentes. L'exécution des politiques d'aménagement ne peut varier selon les personnes ou les groupes desservis.

Mohammad Qadeer has been a teacher at the School of Urban and Regional Planning, Queen's University, Kingston, and has written extensively about urban planning and housing in Canada and the Third World. He is currently involved in research on the impact of multiculturalism on public policies and local economies. He can be reached at: qadeerm@post.queensu.ca

References

- 1 See: Leonie Sandercock (1999), "A Portrait of Postmodern Planning: Anti-Hero and/or Passionate Pilgrim?" *Plan Canada* 39:2.
See also: Michael A. Burayidi (2000), "Urban Planning as Multicultural Canon," *Urban Planning in a Multicultural Society*, edited by Michael Burayidi (Westport: Praeger).
- 2 Will Kymlicka (1998), *Finding Our Way* (Toronto: Oxford University Press).
- 3 See: Mohammad Qadeer and Maghfoor Chaudhry (2000), "The Planning System and the Development of Mosques in the Greater Toronto Area," *Plan Canada* (March) 40:2.
See also: Engin F. Isin and Myer Siemiatycki (1999), *Faith and Faith: Claiming Urban Citizenship in Immigrant Toronto* (Working Paper, Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement, Toronto).
- 4 See: Lisa K. Domaie (1998), *Multicultural Planning. A Study of Intra-ethnic Planning in Richmond, B.C.* (A thesis submitted to the School of Urban and Regional Planning for the degree of Master of Urban and Regional Planning, Queen's University, Kingston).
- 5 Ontario Municipal Board (1998), *Tilzen Holdings vs. Town of Markham* (PL956623), p. 13.



Silverland centre, Scarborough, Ontario
Photo: Mohammad Qadeer