

Free Queen's Lecture Series

Planning the Urban Environment: The Case of Kingston

Session 3: Modern Suburban Planning – Monday October 16th

Lecturer:

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Modern Suburban Planning

1949: Modern suburban planning began with the return of the vets from WW2 – They came home with the “dream” of new communities and home ownership. The ideal living arrangement was a single detached home and a car. Aka: The suburbs.

New home developments were arranged into neighbourhood “units” with 10% recreational or park space, shopping districts located on the periphery, arterial streets circling the exterior with small interior streets. Churches and schools were located at the centre of the unit.

The principles behind this kind of development were:

- To adapt to the automobile age
- Create a hierarchy of streets
- Have an elementary school at the centre (within ½ mile of all houses)
- Have local shops within 1 ½ miles
- Plenty of park space

The first place to try this form of development was Radburn, New Jersey, pre-depression. They had three community units with 3 public schools and a central high school. The development contained a housing mix and was actually a low-cost housing project. Rather than having streets in a grid formation they created the “loop and lollipop” system with many cul-de-sacs. One of the major principles for this development was to have no children crossing the street on the way to school. In order to accomplish this there was an elaborate park and pathway system set up and all roads had pathway underpasses to prevent the children having to cross them. There was to be a large community facility and retail across the street from the train station which was located on the edge of the development. Unfortunately due to the depression only one of the three phases was ever built.

The first development of this kind in Canada was in Don Mills, North York. In 1950 it was advertised as the “suburb of the future”. Don Mills was initially divided into four community units each having an elementary school at the centre. At the centre of the entire development there was a shopping centre and a high school. The designers created a discontinuous road system where the loops always finished in 3 way stops – it had been determined that a three way stop didn't require traffic lights and was much safer. The small interior roads did not have sidewalks as the designers wanted to have the look of a

continuous lawn. The houses were also designed in the new style – instead of having a narrow frontage and a large skinny backyard the lots were wide and thin. The houses were placed “sideways” on the lot in order to have the appearance of largeness whereas in fact they were actually rather small. At the centre of the development there was also rental housing along with an industrial area and shopping. One of the major concepts for Don Mills was to have everyone in the community be able to be employed within the community.

Similar communities in Kingston would be Polson Park and Calvin Park.

New Ideas for Suburban Planning

The new idea for suburban planning is actually a return to the traditions dating back to the 1890s – 1920s. This new style is to have narrow long lots with garages out front.

The main themes are:

- To keep cars in perspective (have a corner store within walking or biking distance)
- Have a mix of household types and land uses
- Have architecture that responds to local traditions and matches local buildings.
- Have a neighbourhood centre with public space and civic and commercial buildings

Differences Between Conventional Suburbs and New Urbanism

Roads:

Suburbs:

- Focus on cars
- Curvilinear “dead worms” layout with cul-de-sacs
- Two car driveways
- No on-street parking

New Urbanism:

- Pedestrians first
- Cars tolerated
- Modified grid layout
- Local streets
- Back lanes
- On-street parking

Transit:

Suburbs:

- Low-density – not profitable
- Awkward routes

New Urbanism:

- More riders
- Grid works better for routing
- Better access to stops

Housing:

Suburbs:

- Exclusivity and Not-In-My-Backyard mentality
- Mainly single family homes
- Garage door land

New Urbanism:

- Variety of types, prices, and ownership
- Architect designed
- Coach houses

Other Uses:

Suburbs:

- Rigorously excluded
- Shopping centres
- Drive to everything

New Urbanism:

- Work at home
- Main Street
- Daily needs within a 5 minute walk

Public Realm:

Suburbs:

- Backyard orientation
- Anonymity

New Urbanism:

- Public buildings
- Schools and parks
- “Eyes on the street”

Traditional Neighbourhood Developments

Neighbourhood:

- Neighbourhood has a centre and edges
- Optimum size: 400m from centre to edges
- Balanced mix of activities
- Fine network of interconnecting streets
- Priority to public spaces and civic buildings

District:

- Functionally specialized urban area
- Primary specialization: multiple uses
- Theatre district, tourist district, university

Corridor:

- Connector and separator of neighbourhood & districts

- Civic space and functional design

Example community: Cornell Community in Markham, Ontario

- 28% Open Space
- 10,000 units
- 29,000 pop
- 10,000 jobs
- 10 Nhd units
- 973 hectares

When this project was initially proposed the designers, Duany & Plater-Zyberk, held public meetings with the local community to decide upon the design. As a result the community contains the following:

- Neighbourhood centre with daycare, mini drugstore, coffee shop, etc
- Narrow streets with porches
- Variety of housing: apartments, semi-detached, single detached, townhouses
- Similar aesthetic to Old Markham
- Back lanes with rental units over garages
- Two schools with sports fields
- Storm water pond to minimize runoff

Other similar communities:

‘The Bridges’ in Calgary:

Close to downtown with a focus on the Light Rail Transit system – High density rather than high rise.