

Is Suburbia Sustainable?

Most people would agree that it is important to preserve the environment, but what exactly is being preserved, and how does one determine the best way to do it? Preserving the environment must include the perspectives of five groups of stakeholders: (1) the land; (2) federal and local levels of government; (3) the development industry; (4) residents; and (5) non-government organizations such as environmental groups. As a starting point in this discussion of the preservation of the environment, I cite a statement made by Aldo Leopold, an internationally respected scientist and conservationist:

It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to the land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. By value I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value in the philosophical sense.¹

Leopold suggested as well that all branches of ethics that have evolved so far rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community whose ethics prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but also prompt him to co-operate. Inclusion of the land in the list of stakeholders above simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants, and animals, or the land, collectively. (Dicon 3} As the land is becoming increasingly appreciated for its intrinsic worth, the expansion of ethics to include the environment is becoming an inseparable part of negotiations between the other groups of stakeholders. I am, however, concerned that the ways in which this process is taking place may involve unfortunate compromises being made along the way. The essential question is, is it possible to balance preservation of the environment with the development of urban communities?

¹ Leopold, Aldo *The Land Ethic*, Environmental Ethics: an anthology, Ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston 111. Oxford Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2003. 46

Across North America in the last decade when issues of protecting the environment against urban sprawl are being negotiated, traditional forms of suburban development are being put into question. The way humanity has chosen to live in its cities in recent decades threatens the natural balance necessary to sustained life on this planet, so there are strong ethical reasons to change the way cities are being built. (Woolliams 24) The precise relationship between the environment and urban development is very complex, and is becoming a challenge for local governments, who are trying to service their established and emerging communities, and to amend fissures between the competing stakeholders. To better understand the issues at hand it is valuable to look at the history of how North American suburbs initially developed.

The first suburbs were created in the nineteenth century in tandem with industrialization. By the 1870's and 1880's, rapid industrialization led to the concentration of populations in cities. As cities struggled to accommodate rapid growth in the population of factory workers, their failures combined with the relative indifference and inexperience of the factory owners to produce massive social problems in the cities, including particularly the effects of sustained poverty and overcrowding. The upper classes sought escape from the unpleasant aspects of concentrated industrialization by building their own homes in the country. These Victorian houses were situated in isolated idyllic park like settings, away from the appalling social conditions of city life. The reputation of the city for being "a bad place to live" emerged from this social landscape. In time, with the increasing success and complexity of industrialization, a rising middle class emerged, and a home in the country became one symbol of upward mobility. With rising incomes and an abundance of affordable space

outside the main urban centers, the “suburban dream” came into being. By 1910, in response to this social demand, smaller, higher density, cottages and bungalows were built just outside the cities. These new suburbs were referred to as “streetcar suburbs” because developers originally provided light rail systems running from the city cores out to these new communities. These urban developments were designed to be livable, workable cities, with a sense of community built into them. As a local example of this trend, in 1910, the B. C., Electric Railway Company opened the Interurban tram line, running between New Westminster and Chillawack.

The 1920’s saw the widespread introduction of the automobile in North America, a development which further encouraged the dream of a home in the suburbs, a trend only briefly interrupted by the depression of the 1930’s and by World War II. A number of factors had simultaneously come into play. Automobile producers such as Ford and GM became economic powerhouses, and their plan for the masses was that independent vehicles, operating on gasoline engines, were to be the future of transportation. The automobile companies literally bought up the light rail systems and tore them out in order to encourage a dependency on cars, and they also undercut the importance of railways with the mass manufacture of cheap trucks and busses. A new Federal highway program came into being, which encouraged factories to move out of the expensive tax based cities to the suburbs. And at the same time, because of new methods of mass production, factories were adopting “a continuous-material-flow system which required long single-story buildings and lots of cheap land, land that was unavailable in the city core.”(Fowler 1443)

Although decentralization was well established before World War II, the most

dramatic decentralization occurred afterwards, when governments sponsored and provided incentives to developers for the construction of millions of housing units in the suburbs to accommodate both war veterans and the beneficiaries of a post war industrial boom. After 1945, entrepreneurs saw opportunities in suburban house building in almost every Canadian city. Some realized that land development was more profitable than construction, and established the trend we see today toward specialization in the development industry. The post-war cities that developers built were a departure from the past. There were high-rise apartments in the central city. In the suburbs, a new style of house was developed situated on large lots on streets laid out in irregular patterns rather than on the rectangular grid. The cull-de sac template emerged in the late 40's, reinforcing the concept of the closed, protected community serviced adequately only by automobile transportation. These were inspired by what was the prototype for today's industrial parks, Don Mills, Ontario, which was built next to Toronto in the 1950's by industrialist promoter E. P. Taylor, whose concept was suburban industrial parks with one-story buildings on large lots serviced by road rather than rail. Then, in 1956-65, US developer William Zeckendorf expanded substantially the development of suburban shopping centers throughout the US. The prototype was Vancouver's Park Royal, built by the Guinness brewing family to accommodate the upscale residents of their housing development in West Vancouver, the British Properties, and other developing communities which were relatively isolated from the rest of the Lower Mainland, and required their own extensive retail infrastructure to service residents. The type of shopping centers which developed were owned for the purpose of earning retail rent, and the availability of prime retail space situated near large suburban populations has favored

the growth of chains and led to the demise of many independent retail outlets, including many of the large department stores.

In the 1950's other entrepreneurs saw the potential for high-rise apartments, and by the late 1960's and 1970's, developers were producing many commercial and retail projects along with the housing in the suburbs, leading to another stage in the development of suburbs, that of satellite cities where all a residents needs could be satisfied without travel to the large central city. Because real estate development is such a highly prized segment of the industrial mix, with Canadian financial institutions providing ever increasing amounts of investment, rising dramatically from approx \$14 billion in the 1960's to over \$140 billion in the 1980's, developers earning substantial profits but pay little to no corporate income tax, and this favorable tax treatment has tended to continue despite many developers lack of commitment to a sustainable environmental business ethic.

A further cause of instability and lack of ethical steadfastness in the development industry concerning the environment is the ever present profit motive and the risks inherent in business investment. Unless developers are positively encouraged by regulation and enforcement, environmental concerns tend to take a secondary place in decision making. Times of boom in the industry lead to over concentration on profitableness, in preparation for the inevitable turndowns during which investment will suffer. One bad result of this from the environmental point of view is that good times encourage inefficiency on the part of developers in the allocation of scarce resources. By the mid-1970's developers in North America were embroiled in controversy and heavily criticized for the rapidly increasing prices of the housing it produced. The focus was on

land, because serviced building lots were selling at prices that had no relationship to the developer's costs. The exorbitant profitability of developing raw land outside the area of urban concentration had been encouraging a level of consumption of land that was not justifiable from other points of view. During Canada's urban boom, land development companies grew quickly. More than a dozen firms with assets of \$100 million or more emerged, and a good part of that profitability was the result of artificially inflated land prices, which, in response to a strong demand, encouraged excessive land consumption of new lands for new development, when other modes of housing would have been as good, if less profitable. As the boom slowed in the 1970's in Canada, many Canadian developers simply expanded into the US. The recession of the 80's and the high interest rate squeeze meant many developer's experienced severe problems, receiverships and major asset sales, as difficulties paying high interest on borrowed money increased. This only added to their arguments in favor of being guaranteed access to cheap, undeveloped land for the building of new communities.

As an industry, land development is a remarkable example of what can happen when entrepreneurs with large amounts of investment capital are given unrestricted opportunities for profit. It was a unique combination of labor and business, automobile companies and government sponsorship that created the suburbs that we know today. As a consequence of the motives of these players, after half a century of development, half of the population has moved to the suburbs; and the suburban way of life has become embedded in the consciousness of North America. However, it is becoming clearer all the time that the North American dream of owning a suburban home is badly flawed. In this new century, questions of sustainability are arising. A true accounting for the

astronomical costs that our way of life has incurred in the last 50 years is rapidly coming due. As just one example, we know that the suburban lifestyle has contributed significantly to the green house gas emissions that are causing global warming, which is affecting climate patterns everywhere. Unless we reduce these emissions, we can expect the incidence of more extreme weather conditions, such as drought, rain fall, floods and storms, to continue and probably increase. As well, urban sprawl is cutting into precious farm and wild land. Canada's most productive farmland is mostly within 100 kilometers of the U.S. border, and this is also where urban sprawl is most rampant. In addition, precious wildlife habitat and species are increasingly at risk. It has been acknowledged recently by experts in the subject that world oil production has reached a peak, and because of decreasing oil reserves, we are now on a permanent decline in the residual supply. This will have a catastrophic effect on the bands of sprawl. Residents of sprawling cities who now have to rely on cars to get to work, school, shopping etc. because their municipalities don't have a sufficient concentration of riders to support efficient public transit will be the victims of rapidly escalating gasoline prices. Because of the almost irreversible reliance on motor transportation, new roads and freeways have to be built. A local for example is the newly proposed twinning of the Port Mann Bridge which once built will rapidly return to gridlock as communities continue to sprawl eastwards. With more traffic comes more air pollution and smog. Smog is not pleasant to look at or breathe, and it creates problems for those who have respiratory diseases such as asthma. Along with new roads and highways there will come higher taxes, because local governments are finding it difficult to cover the costs of building new roads, water, and sewage systems and extending urban transit lines through low density neighborhoods.

Energy is a major input into the cost of almost any material or project undertaken today, and so the increasing costs of this commodity only exacerbates problems and undercuts their solutions. The suburban lifestyle has created a lower quality of life for people living with in these communities, and the problems are only likely to increase. The development of the suburbs has been one of the greatest misallocations of resources in the entire world. Post-war wealth was invested in something that has no future. With the energy crisis on the brink, these circumstances will force us to live differently. We will soon have to find a way to live without petroleum, and as things are presently arranged, and the end of the age of oil may mean the end of the suburban lifestyle.

In communities across North America, there is a growing concern that the current development pattern, one dominated by urban sprawl, is no longer in the long term interest of our cities, existing suburbs, small towns, rural communities, or wilderness areas. Though supportive of growth, communities are questioning the wisdom of abandoning infrastructure in the city, only to rebuild it further out. It is at this time that urban planners are relearning the principles of town planning and civic architecture that were being implemented prior to 1920, when communities were more workable, livable and sustainable. Today, in Canada and the US, municipal governments are looking towards several urban design movements as means of creating healthier, more sustainable communities. The most common ones are the Canadian Urban Institute, New Urbanism, and Smart Growth, each of which non-profit agencies have similar mandates. Canadian cities are now competing with American cities for new international investments and for a knowledgeable work force, and the Canadian Urban Institute is committed to promoting Smart Growth in Canada. Overall, the Canadian Urban Institute is an independent body

that meets the need for a think-tank committed to improving policy making, governance and management in urban regions, by encouraging a better understanding of contemporary urban issues among business, government and other key institutions.

(Canurb1) The CUI emphasizes the involvement of the Canadian government at all levels, in order to make Smart Growth principles a reality. Smart Growth refers to land use and development practices that enhance the quality of life in communities. The basic principles of Smart Growth is to encourage and develop policies which:

- Create a mix of land uses
- Promote compact building design
- Create a range of housing and housing choices
- Produce walk able neighborhoods and communities
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty and critical environmental areas
- Provide a variety of transportation choices
- Make development decisions predictable, fair and cost effective,
- Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration

(smartgrowth.org)

These new urban design movements are based upon a strong environmental ethic balanced with fiscal concerns, and they offer governments and developers, residents and environmental groups more nuanced views of growth. As well they create a conduit for communication and negotiation between these stakeholders. The result is both a new demand and a new opportunity for creating demographic shifts based upon co-operative approaches to urban issues.

