



Big Box, Little Box

The Harsh Reality of the Suburbs

We quit our chalet at 6 AM to beat the morning traffic into the city. Beating it will require an act of God or sorcery. But driving through the reverie of the Mulmur Hills, Ontario, we are sure we stand a chance—and we are wrong.

We hit traffic sixty kilometres north of Toronto's city centre. One moment we're speeding along and grooving to Aretha Franklin, the next we run into a wall of civilization. It's not exactly like coming upon a forgotten Mayan temple in the Mexican jungle. More akin to ramming into forced confinement, everybody growing fat and sluggish just like farmed salmon. Nobody moves fast—if at all.

We've entered the exopolis community of Vaughan—a place where cookie-cutter housing marches relentlessly across the fertile farmland. Wooden barns still stand on the odd agricultural property. If they haven't already been converted into ghoulish haunted houses or pumpkin-picking circuses for city folk desperate to distract their children, they'll be demolished to make way for idealized suburban communities. Once the ecosystems have been wiped out, the creeks and wetlands rationalized into concrete drainage systems and the animal habitats destroyed, big billboards are erected announcing the coming of Fox Glen or Heritage Estates. Beware of addresses with dreamy sounding

names. Wasn't that place in *Streetcar Named Desire* where Blanche du Bois went loco by the glare of a naked lightbulb called Elysian Fields?

We crawl along. The rooftops with exact replicas of each other's peaks and gutters stand like sentries behind the highway sound barrier. The doors, the windows, the views mirror each other. By this measure, everybody should be taking the same drugs. There couldn't be a more depressing way to end a holiday.

What makes the suburbs so troubling, so visually noxious? Sameness. There is sameness of built form, of roads, of signage, of trees, of fencing, of roofing tiles. It's the erosion of places for our eyes to rest, and the replacement of nature's complexity with the simplicity of bottom-line interests. Developers don't want to spend money so they scrape the bottom of the architectural barrel. Is it possible that sameness can trigger cultural paralysis? That's one question that Statistics Canada won't ever go near. But how could sameness not be deadening to our spirits? Once upon a time, a developer might build ten or twenty houses at any given time, but now massive tracts of land are exploited at increasingly rapid rates of development.

In Toronto, Canada's largest metropolis, sprawl is spreading at an impressive clip. By the year 2031,

PAVED PARADISE
The housing with the same peaks and gutters, the parking lots with repeating light standards and the wide yawn of the big-box retailers: is it possible that sameness can trigger cultural paralysis?

approximately 264,000 acres (106,840 hectares) of new land will be urbanized, representing an area almost double the urban footprint of Toronto today.¹

Sprawl refers to growth of the suburban margin that is of a haphazard, discontinuous low-density kind. The phenomenon is ubiquitous. In Italy, the sprawling suburb is referred to as a *città diffusa*, in France as an *aire-urbaine* or *banlieue*, in Holland a *ranstad*. In Switzerland, the *hyperville* is what spreads beyond the dense urban city. In North America the endless tracts of housing and unfettered spread of low-rise commercialism represent new urban growth—it is particular to the suburbs. The British critic Deyan Sudjic wrote a book famously titled *The 100 Mile City* (1992). The American cultural critic Joel Garreau called his popular investigation into sprawl *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (1991). Several waves of commercial and residential decentralization away from the central city into the burbs represented, to Garreau, “the most sweeping change in 100 years in how (North Americans) live, work, and play.”² What we are witnessing, says Garreau, is a whole new form of urban civilization.

The commodification of the urban landscape has become one of the most disturbing by-products of rural immigration around the world. Whether it’s happening in New Cairo—a two-hour drive from the original Egyptian city of 18 million—or Mississauga, Ontario, the trend toward housing people in depersonalized environments is consistent. In fact, the latest kind of exurban development could be called leisure sprawl. Leisure sprawl is what gloms onto ski resort areas like Canmore, Alberta and Collingwood, Ontario. Whenever elites congregate for recreation you can be sure that retirees will follow, along with an explosion of new, anonymous housing estates, mega liquor stores with wine for the most discriminating of palates and gigantic supermarkets that compete to offer the freshest sushi-grade tuna.

Sprawl sits uneasily within our memories. The rodeo of big-box stores with their false storefronts squat in fields where we used to ride horses or go to a drive-in movie. We imagine what it would be like to take those places back. But the lure of what’s on offer—forty-eight rolls of toilet paper at a bargain price, artificial flowers enough to fill the Taj Mahal and building supplies to reconstruct entire towns³—has erased any recollection of such rustic pleasures. Jane Jacobs, one of the most compelling urban thinkers of our time, says that suburbs generate cultural amnesia: “Even the memory of what has been lost is lost.”⁴

Every suburb has a beginning. For the lucky few who escaped the fire and brimstone that God threw down onto Sodom and Gomorrah, the suburbs began in a cave high up in a mountain. That’s where Lot and his daughters fled to keep clear of the smoking piles of devastation below them.⁵ In *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, social geographer David Harvey provides a vivid account of Paris in the 1850s, to remind us that people have made the horrendous commute to work for a very long time.⁶ In a 1962 article for *Landscape Journal* called “Toward Making Places” the American architect and critic Charles Moore bemoaned the monotony of the tract house and office block, which he had observed during his travels through California. He described acres of featureless concrete and plaster-clad buildings, surfaces as blank and unintelligible as radio static.⁷ Critic and sociologist William H. Whyte predicted new outer-city development in North America as early as the 1960s. He noted acidly that planning brochures and promotional literature for new towns used a consistently standardized language and suggested sarcastically that one all-purpose brochure could be produced to cover the ground: “I would include an impressionistic drawing of a U.S. new town center, with a group of children holding balloons...”⁸



OUTSIDE MEMORY

At an alarming rate, the most bucolic landscapes have been exploited by developers. We imagine what it would be like to take these places back. But, as Jane Jacobs says, “Even the memory of what has been lost is lost.”

Left: The wilds before becoming Don Mills, Toronto’s first planned suburban community, located seven miles from the city centre.

Bottom: Construction of Don Mills’ housing during the 1950s.





At first, the suburb was imagined as the blessed antidote to the grimy, fast-paced city, a place of respite and of wholesome domesticity.⁹ Happiness was possible there. In 1869, for Riverside, Illinois, the celebrated landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted with his partner Calvert Vaux designed a Romantic suburb with curvilinear, tree-lined roads that followed the winding path of the Des Plaines River. It was a rural community located only eleven miles outside of Chicago. And there were the early-twentieth-century garden suburbs of Letchworth and Hampstead Garden, England designed by the British town planner and architect Raymond Unwin.¹⁰ By 1928, however, monotony had set in, as evidenced by Radburn, New Jersey, a utopian garden-city community where housing was neatly separated from industry, and where the neighbourhood plaza was designed with a row of spaces for angle parking in front of it.¹¹ By 1940, neighbourhood shopping centres were already commonplace. A writer in the American magazine, *Architectural Record* asserted that “today’s housewife drives to her neighbourhood shopping center.”¹²

In the early 1950s, Levittown, Pennsylvania, provided the prototype for the corporate suburb, with rows of identical houses and garages, neatly positioned on curving streets.

After the Second World War, suburbs became fully established in Canada.¹³ Our first examples of

standardized tract housing were wartime and veterans’ homes in subdivisions that ranged from 150 to 350 units. And seemingly overnight, the romanticism of the idyllic suburb died. Ticky-tacky housing was thrown up across the country, in Vancouver, Calgary, Ajax, Toronto, Quebec City, Fredericton and Halifax, the dream of the city in the country was replaced by a landscape of uniform bits and pieces inspired by Henry Ford’s mass production line.

Occasionally, early on, suburbia got an injection of architectural integrity. Before the exurbis became homogenized, there were random slices of creative design. I’m thinking of the Rockland Shopping Plaza (1958) near Montreal by Victor Prus. Or South Hill Village (1956) by James Murray and Henry Fliess for Don Mills, Ontario, then located on the outskirts of Toronto. Before everybody started craving them—before the masses moved in—the suburbs offered a happy place to be. In California, the suburban district known as Balboa Highlands was built in the 1960s by the developer Joseph Eichler in a San Fernando Valley subdivision. Inspired by the iconic Case Study Houses¹⁴ by prominent Californian modernists such as John Lautner and R. M. Schindler, the development offered new styles of architecture featuring floor-to-ceiling glass and open-air courtyards within each house.¹⁵



But let’s not pretend that suburbia was anything but deadening. Betty Friedan, in her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, made no bones about the suburban dream home. She called it “a domestic prison” in which the 1950s housewife was forced to navigate through days of dreariness: “She takes her peanut-butter sandwich lunch while standing, thinks she looks a fright. . . jabbars over the short-distance telephone with the next-door neighbour.”¹⁶

Nobody could have predicted the rate of expansion in the United States or the insidious impact of sameness on people’s lives. Disney’s eight-year-old new urbanist housing estate near Orlando, Florida, called Celebration, dictates the colours of residents’ drapes. More alarming is the fact that there are 249,000 homeowners’ associations, based primarily in the American suburbs, whose primary mandate it is to dictate the hues of basketball backboards its members should purchase, or where they should plant a garden or what colour to paint their house.¹⁷

Canada shares more than a continent with the United States. Both countries have come under similar influences: large-scale immigration before and after the world wars, rapid urban growth, a shared labour market, cheap land and building materials,¹⁸ people clamouring to get ahead. But the land of milk and honey in North America has been soured considerably by the way that so many hungry people have sucked natural resources dry.

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is one of North America’s fastest-growing regions. Specifically, the GTA consists of 25 municipalities and four regions (Durham, York, Peel and Halton) in a total area of over 7,000 square kilometers with a population of 5 million. The GTA is absorbing 100,000 newcomers every year, and most of them will be accommodated on the suburban margin, says Professor Larry Bourne, an authority on the phenomenon of the North American suburb who is currently the director of the graduate planning program at the University of Toronto. Yes, more in-fill in downtown Toronto would mean more people moving to the core rather than to the fringes. But, as Bourne points out, about 30 per cent of all new construction throughout the city is already in-fill or “intensification,” among the highest proportion of new development in North America. Even if that figure rose to 50 per cent there would not be enough housing to absorb the rapid growth in the region.

As suburbs go, the ones in Canada are more densely urban than those in the United States. The average single-family house in Toronto’s suburbs is constructed on a 30-foot wide (about 9 metres) property. Compare that, says Bourne, to tracts of housing that sprawl along the edges of Orlando, Atlanta, Dallas or Phoenix. “Even wonderful Portland, where the average lot size is 6,000 square feet is

TICKY-TACKY HOUSING

Built to a formula, new suburban housing is thrown up along the edge of Canada’s cities. The Greater Toronto Area receives 100,000 newcomers every year—most of them will live on the city’s edge.

Left to right: New housing on Toronto’s suburban edge.

considered to be a wonderful achievement—whereas Toronto’s would be about 3,500 to 4,500.”

Cities in the province of Alberta appear to be most comfortable with unabashed sprawl. Unlike Toronto and Vancouver, the downtown of Calgary is awash in vacant lots. The restaurants may be excellent in the heart of the city but, so far, the condominiums and loft conversions have yet to arrive. Instead, the City of Calgary relies on a policy of land annexation that allows it to expand beyond its borders so it will have a 30-year reserve of developable land. Negotiations to annex the municipalities of Foothills and Rocky View are currently underway.¹⁹ When Calgary’s developers run out of places to put their sterilized houses, more of the prairie is sucked up. In this way, the city is encroaching on the foothills of the Rockies.

Albertans are, in some sense, self-absorbed frontiersmen, still fighting for a patch of land to call their own, even though more than 120 years have passed since the traders laid waste to the land through ruinous adventure. In *Wolf Willow*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Wallace Stegner describes how independent American traders and wolfers rode up into the plains of Saskatchewan and Alberta from Fort Benton, bringing with them the murderous violence of the American West. Typhoid and hunger—the traders often poisoned buffalo carcasses—destroyed the Blackfoot communities. Even the great Sioux warrior Sitting Bull was ultimately reduced to petty squabbles with his beleaguered supporters. By the 1870s, with the Canadian Pacific laying down tracks to the west and the North-West Mounted Police laying down the law, the open range of the plains was carved into farming sections. The universal spread of the land was radically changed—long lengths of barbed wire separated cattle and people from each other.²⁰ That’s when the race to break the land began.

Flying over Calgary at medium altitude, a visitor is now dazzled by monumental squares of green and brown prairie. And then, without warning, the most banal evidence of human habitation replaces the spread of ranch country. Nothing could prepare me for the placelessness of Alberta’s rural towns, discovered during my road trip through the province. The streets of Red Deer are wide enough to host a rodeo; many of them have been forced into a matrix of community-killing one-way thoroughfares. Downtowns have been so badly displaced by strip malls and big-box retailers that the chopped-up suburban fringe of a town has now become the destination. On the highway, a sign outside a town like Claresholm, where once there would have been an indication of the number of human beings who made up the community, the graphic logos of A&W, Tim Hortons and Wendy’s are prominently displayed directly below the town’s name. At the entrance to Innisfall, south of Red Deer, the yellow neon “M” is taller than the grain silos.

In southeast Saskatchewan, where the influential politician Tommy Douglas started preaching the fundamentals of Prairie socialism, the Wal-Mart dominates a strip of fast food restaurants and outlets on the western edge of Weyburn. Overnight, something of an edge city has grown up. And guess what? The parking lot at the Wal-Mart in Saskatchewan is full.²¹

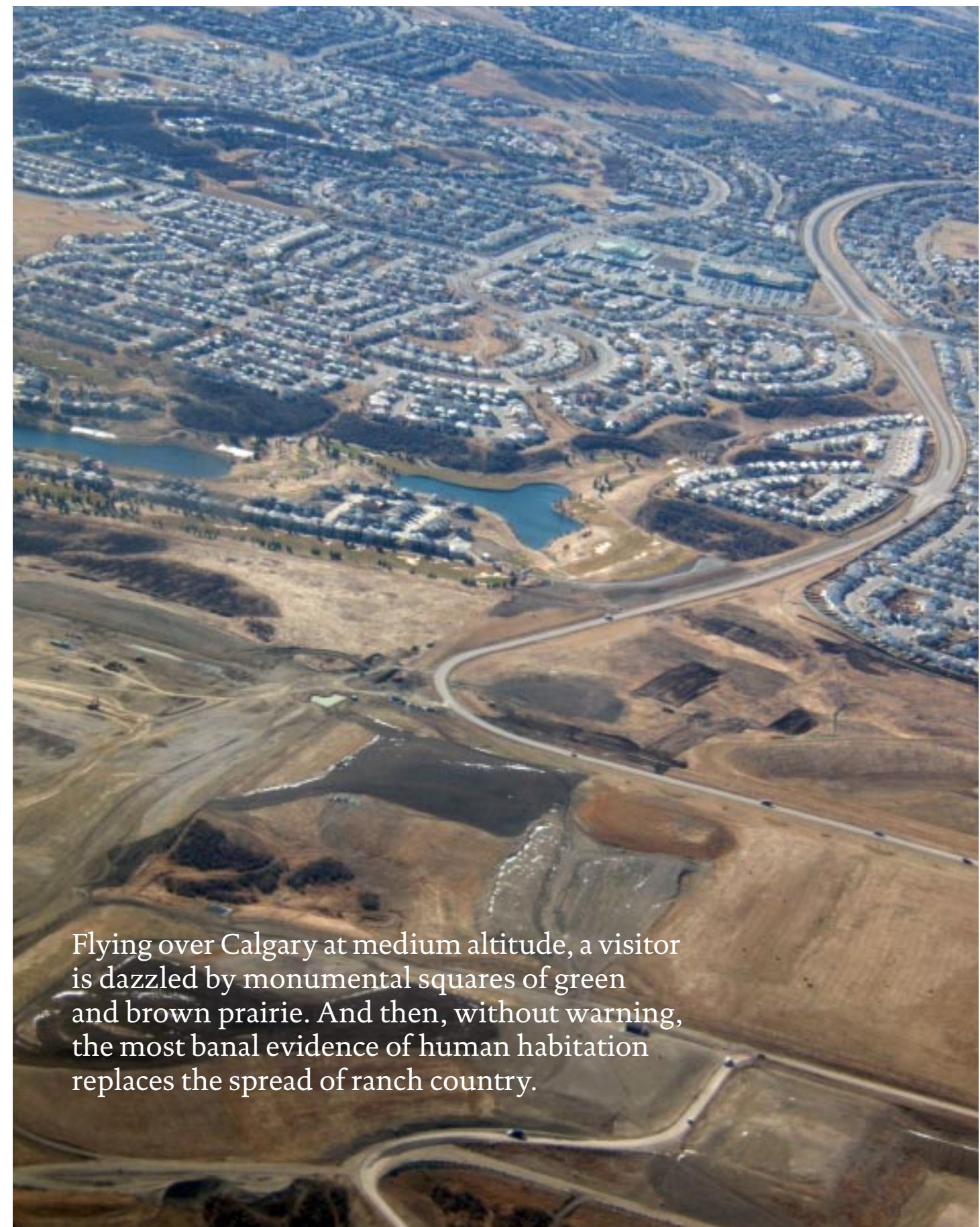
What distinguishes sprawl everywhere is its lack of distinctiveness. The land, flattened, eliminates the difference of topography. Housing is built to a formula. Developers will build semi-detached townhouses, stacked townhouses or single-family dwellings in a way that does not deviate from their standard square footage cost.

There’s a common misperception that suburbs equal housing. In fact, housing represents only about 40 per cent of suburban land development.

PRAIRIE STORM

When Calgary’s developers run out of places to put their sterilized suburban houses, land from outside municipalities is annexed, and more of the prairie is sucked up.

Right: Aerial photograph of Calgary, April 2005, taken by the author before landing in the city.



Flying over Calgary at medium altitude, a visitor is dazzled by monumental squares of green and brown prairie. And then, without warning, the most banal evidence of human habitation replaces the spread of ranch country.



COMING SOON!

Power centres built at spectacular dimensions of up to a million square feet have replaced the shopping mall. There are currently 275 power centres in Canada.

Top: Retail development in Aurora, Ontario.

The rest is commercial sprawl, which is far more damaging to natural wetlands, river systems, glacial drumlins, moraine lakes and forests. Big box retailers, such as Price Chopper, Rona and Home Depot, regularly devour enormous amounts of pristine land. Power centres built at spectacular dimensions of up to a million square feet have replaced the shopping mall. Since the mid-1990s, the power centre has become the sector of the commercial economy that has grown the fastest, netting 9 to 10 per cent of total retail space and generating 20 per cent of non-automotive retail trade. To date, there are 275 power centres in Canada. The country's largest power centre nodes are located at the intersection of Highways 7 and 404 in Ontario where about 100 to 150 massively scaled stores have concentrated. There's a power centre node located north of West Edmonton Mall and another in the Sundridge district of Calgary, Alberta. Price and value are what drive the popularity of the mega, one-stop store. "You will eventually be able to buy perfume at Home Depot," says Kenneth Jones, dean of Ryerson University's faculty of business.²²

Along with the meccas of consumerism, there are golf courses, recreational facilities, huge inter-modal storage spaces and warehouses. One-storey structures occupying several football fields may

employ only half a dozen people. But no municipality dares to tax commercial sprawl, says Larry Bourne. And, so, a bank's back office is approved with 6,000 parking spaces—for fear of losing its tax revenues.

Big box retail is constructed on a template. A Canadian Tire is a Canadian Tire is a Canadian Tire—only size distinguishes one store from the next. Once the site has been cleared of all distinguishing natural features—a process called *grubbing*—an engineered pad is prepared to receive the building. The steel construction is clad in either precast concrete panels or an insulated steel panel system. With virtually no variables like individualized design or considerations of site, big-box retailers are easy to build, estimate and replicate.²³ Every time a big box goes up, sameness looms larger while original architecture recedes into the distance.

Supermarkets and big-box retailers consume the landscape at a rate faster than any other built form in the history of the world. In the suburbs of Dallas, Texas, Highland Park Village was built in 1931 as part of a residential development. It was built on a single lot surrounded by parking areas with its stores facing away from access streets.²⁴ In 1950, Park Royal Mall, a sprawling concrete bunker, was the first mall to be opened in Canada, ironically in pristine, elitist West Vancouver. The concept caught on. In 1987, there were 1,321 shopping centres

in Canada, many considered today as power centres. A mere five years later, the number of shopping centres had doubled.²⁵ West Edmonton Mall—at 5.2 million square feet by far the granddaddy of the nation's shopping centres—represents one quarter the office space master-planned for the redeveloped World Trade Center in New York. This allows Canada to take pride of place in the the *Guinness Book of World Records* for the "largest shopping centre in the world" and "world's largest parking lot."

In Canada, little will be done to curb sprawl until it is more specifically studied. Compared to the United States where there are organizations such as the Trust for Public Land that track urban growth and preserve agricultural land, Canada has shut down its federal monitoring agencies. The government developed the Canada Land Inventory (CLI), which operated under the auspices of the Department of Regional and Economic Expansion from 1963 until 1971, and then was taken over by the Department of the Environment (renamed Environment Canada) between 1971 and 1994. But the program was officially discontinued in 1994.²⁶ Planning authorities who should know better are without basic statistics on numbers of agricultural acres being replaced every day by commercial developments and tract housing.²⁷ Want to know how much good farmland is being consumed by urban growth every day in your part of Canada? It would seem to be an important, urgent question to ask. But the truth is, nobody knows the answer.

The more the sprawl grows, the more cars are on the road getting from one place to another—it's a natural symbiosis. There is a less integrated transit system and increased reliance on private automobiles. That explains the traffic jams running across the tops or around the rings of major metropolises from Toronto to Paris. People are no longer only travelling in and out of the city but from one suburban node to the next. In his book

The Geography of Nowhere, James Howard Kunstler refers to this urban condition as "the great American automobile slum."²⁸

Clearly, this is not a sustainable way to build into the future. Some cities are trying to curb suburban growth and increase urban density. Mississauga, for instance, is Canada's sixth-largest city—uglier and bigger than Vancouver—with a population of 680,000. Now that the last corn field has been uprooted, the city has approved 12,000 units in high-rise towers located in the downtown; 5,300 of those will be sited next to the City Hall (1982), designed in an engaging post-modern style with reference to the area's agrarian past by Michael Kirkland and Edward Jones.

The pity is that new high-rise design, besides being typically ham-fisted and insensitive, lacks the complexity of vibrant communities that have grown over time. Look at some of Toronto's most liveable communities where compact, low-rise housing has allowed the Beaches and Riverdale to achieve high densities of 11 to 15 units per acre. That's about three times the density of recent fringe development in areas such as Richmond Hill, Vaughan and Markham to Toronto's north.²⁹

Sprawl is here to stay. But the shape and feel of sprawl could change with two dramatic interventions: one, higher taxes, and two, more meaningful architecture. Developers should be heavily taxed on buildings that have enormous footprints. It needs to become too expensive to develop one-storey warehouses with limitless parking. In fact, it needs to hurt.

Currently, architects are only required—according to the Ontario Building Code—to design houses that are larger than three storeys. That leaves the aesthetics of suburban housing in the hands of developers and their bottom-line interests. Builders are unlikely to tear apart the formula of suburbia of their own volition—standards of design need to

be maintained by those issuing development and building permits. New cities, towns and municipalities need to embrace urban design review panels in which an independent body of expert architects, landscape architects and urban designers is charged with assessing, criticizing and even rejecting proposals for exurban developments. Vancouver owes its excellent public realm to its urban design review committee, operating with muscle and tenacity since the late 1970s.

All communities, big and small, are entitled to high standards of design. In England, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) sends out its design “enablers” to review hundreds of master plans, development schemes and drawings of individual buildings every year. Failure to listen up to the design recommendations of the government-funded body can mean a project is sent to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for review. Besides providing free advice to planning authorities and communities, it publishes research on the power of design to positively influence or diminish quality of life. In 2004, CABE issued a report indicating that four out of five buyers of new houses and flats have to settle for “mediocre” properties. The report, the biggest ever audit of housing developments in England, called on new home-buyers to be more demanding—as well, it provided extensive information about how to judge a quality, aesthetically pleasing place of residence. “Planners, developers and highway engineers give too much prominence to car parking and roads, and rarely use local materials that can help create a sense of place and character,” concludes the British report.³⁰

More than ever, the urban fabric of the city in Canada needs to intensify using carefully considered measures of good design. Building condominiums with any kind of architectural innovation requires grit and personal integrity. Only a handful of

designers in Canada are capable of achieving excellence in high-rise: I’m thinking of some of the glass, tall work by James Cheng and Arthur Erickson in Vancouver and, in Toronto, the chic point towers by Architects Alliance for the architect-developer Howard Cohen. In Montreal, small firms like Big City Atelier, Bosses Design and BUILD are contributing contemporary in-fill housing that invigorates the traditional fabric of the city’s greystones. Through his company, Housebrand, the architect and University of Calgary professor John Brown has reinvented hundreds of the city’s post-war bungalows as crisp, light-filled spaces. The intensification work of Jeremy Sturgess, Eleven Eleven Architecture and Andrew King is also helping to anchor Calgary’s downtown. The point is that, besides beautifying the suburbs, more of the urban gaps in Canada need to be filled in. Local zoning should make it easy to intensify the main streets of our cities. Laneway housing should become a viable option, not a pyrotechnical act.

And what are Canadians to do? Simply put, they need to demand more from developers, local planners and politicians. A *joie de vivre* in any community, old or new, should become the normal standard. Master plans, sensitively designed, can celebrate a site’s natural topography rather than tearing up the trees and pounding the land flat. Developers need to be pushed to think beyond nostalgic models of Victorian housing. Imagine a development with housing that, for once, does not carry a pitched roof. Imagine flat roofs, butterfly roofs and wooden windows that frame specific views. Imagine housing and commercial retailers that don’t cave in to the sterile aesthetic of stucco cladding. Imagine architecture of difference, where site and local materials actually matter.

The dream of happiness in the suburbs hasn’t died—it simply needs a serious redesign.

JOIE DE VIVRE

All communities, big and small, are entitled to high standards of design. Intensifying the suburbs is only part of what’s required of the redesign.

Right: Vaughan Mills, Ontario.

