



## The Greater Toronto Suburban Working Group

SEAN HERTEL & ROGER KEIL TORONTO, SEPTEMBER 2013

The Greater Toronto Suburban Working Group (GTSWG) was established in 2010 as part of the Major Collaborative Research Initiative (MCRI) *Global Suburbanisms: Governance, Land and Infrastructure in the 21st Century* ([www.yorku.ca/suburbs](http://www.yorku.ca/suburbs)). This long-term research project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). It runs from 2010 to 2017, and involves 50 researchers worldwide and 20 partner organizations including those who have been part of the GTSWG. Membership in the Working Group is comprised the Toronto area-based partners of the MCRI. Each partner organization assigned representatives and attended most meetings. Meetings of the GTSWG have been hosted by the partners throughout the Toronto region. They have been coordinated through the City Institute by Sean Hertel and Roger Keil.

The GTSWG has aimed at furthering collaboration within and across government and non-government actors within the planning and development arena of the Greater Golden Horseshoe region of Toronto. This is not without precedent. Over the past two decades there have been examples at both macro (e.g. province and regional) and micro (e.g. town or city) scales; confronting specific goals or problems, generating discussion, exchanging information, and making recommendations on existing and proposed policies and programs. This institutional history developed in connection with particular issue or problem constellations.

Collaboration, communication, and capacity-building have become important pillars for contemporary planning theory and practice. There are procedural and substantive aspects to these developments as claims for more democratic processes have been associated with new political actors and policy arenas (e.g. new socio-economic and socio-spatial divisions, the environment, culture, identity, etc.).

The GTSWG has served as a forum for the exchange of information and ideas regarding present-day and future prospects for development and governance policies and processes shaping the growth of suburbs across the Greater Golden Horseshoe. More specifically, this forum discussed shared issues, working towards inspiring new modes of governance within the region. While one aim of the group was simply to bring people together to talk, the larger objective is to apply wider perspectives and new knowledges to the processes through which the suburbs are shaped, lived and worked in, and perceived.

To that end, this report is meant to be an interim, manifesto-style statement that is geared towards stimulating wider public interest and contributing to future debates in, and about, the region.

Its publication has been generously supported by R. G. Richards and Associates and SSHRC.

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## introduction

### The Region Around the Table: Seeking Suburban Governance in Conversation

Hear the word “suburb” and you already know the rest: sprawl, drive everywhere, sameness, consumer culture, boring, etc. This is the prevailing view – as if somehow time was still frozen in 1950s Leave-it-to-Beaver land – despite mounting evidence to the contrary. While the suburbs today have become as different from their 1950s versions as the Cleaver household was from the city at that time, our stereotypical view of these places has not evolved in the same way.

In short, the suburbs have grown up and moved on but how we think about the suburbs has not.

We know that suburbs today are diverse in almost every way conceivable – perhaps even as much as the inner cities they surround – and are fast becoming destinations of choice for not only increasing waves of newcomers, but for commerce and industrial powers as well. In the suburbs people just don’t consume any more but produce – they make and transship many of the things they buy in the ubiquitous retail power centres and, most poignantly, what city-dwellers purchase in self-styled uber-urban boutique shops.

The Greater Toronto Area suburbs, for example, have the region’s majority share of population and job growth and on these bases the suburb can no longer be considered subordinate to the city of Toronto. But still it is. Prejudices have power over facts – clouding our view of what the suburbs truly have become and why, most importantly, that should matter.

Fact is, the city needs the suburb more than the suburb needs the city.

The suburbs have become, like the city centres before them, the new arenas for forming and contesting politics, modes of governance, ways of life, and the forms and notions of community. Taken one step further, the suburb has become the new city. And a new kind of city – a “regional city.”

From a demographic and economic perspective – where the jobs are, for example – the regional city has no centre. And if it does, it is not likely the “downtown”.

Our governance of these city-regions, like Toronto and the surrounding region, does not reflect or even directly acknowledge this phenomenon. Political structures like Toronto City Council dominate, for example, while dozens of suburban municipal councils make decisions that impact twice as many citizens – but do so in virtual silence and obscurity. Somehow, it’s been accepted that what goes on outside “the city” is unimportant. This is not only reflected but magnified in the media, and in politics.

But things are changing.



### **The Toronto Suburbs: Welcome to our urban future**

Toronto's suburbs are our urban future. Not in the concrete sense. Toronto is not a model for the world. In fact, all suburbs around the world will be different, will be on different pathways. But Toronto has a few lessons to teach us. It is an urban region that grows in leaps and bounds despite being in an old industrial region in a Western country. Most of that growth is in its suburban rim, although, admittedly, some reurbanization has taken hold in the city's condoland downtown. The suburbanizing region is unrivaled in terms of its diversity. It is a true "arrival city" to use a term by Doug Saunders. It displays a wide variety of urban forms. It experiences a tremendous range of activities in infrastructure planning and construction in various modes and across the entire area. It is the site of political process renewal and policy innovation. Although built on privatism, it is also a place where civil society thrives. It is a creative powerhouse that grows by 100 000 people a year.

### **The government's suburb**

The Toronto suburbs were built by government. In a history of waxing and waning government regulation, the suburbs and their development can be read off the regulatory environment of the day. Only in the last 25 years, we went from stricter regulation of sprawl to libertarian deregulation in the 1990s and strong government intervention during the 2000s which brought in the complementary Places to Grow and Greenbelt legislations. An increasing challenge government is faced with is anticipation of future growth (and perhaps decline) to service more diverse and yet unknown communities with schools and other public institutions. Increasingly, suburban governance is indistinguishable from urban governance. Beyond putting up the subdivisions, there is a growing demand for services that are just beginning to be defined. The service gap must be closed.

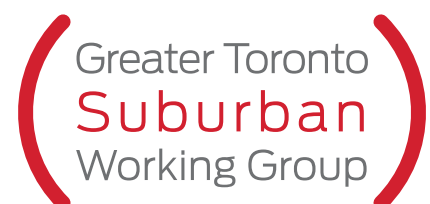
### **The market's suburb**

The most visible actors in the making of suburbs are the developers, the builders, the construction firms, the land lobby. They buy the land, they prepare it for development, they import labour and material to put up houses, buildings, and roads. They pay development charges on the residential lots and commercial floor area they create. They donate to politicians of various stripes, with the hope of promoting a favourable development policy, regulatory and approval regime. And when a new community or building is complete,

developers move on and, in many cases, as close as the next parcel or concession block out. Enjoined with accommodating government regulations, this development pattern leads to "perverse cities" in the words of Pamela Blais – creating mounting financial and infrastructure burdens for municipalities, and, ultimately, the taxpayer. This must change and the development and building industries have begun to acknowledge the need for diversity in form (beyond the perennial single family home), of sustainability and resilience (thinking beyond the obligatory flood retention pond), and of social justice (making space for tenants). Much work remains to be done. But the dialogue has started in the shadow of the Greenbelt and in the Places to Grow.

### **The private suburb**

Suburbs are and have been private spaces. In the worst cases, suburbanization is identified with gating, with the physical exclusion of public access to streets and places in the urban fabric. This is typical for any condominium downtown but more visible in the outer city. But gated communities, not numerous in the Toronto region, are only one expression of the private suburb. Other, more insidious forms of privatization, such as large lot zoning, "clubbisation", to use a term by French expert Eric Charmes, and the like invade our land and our ways of building suburban structures. Inward looking planning, design and architecture reflect a society built on economic individualism and suspicion of the public good. Privatism in its worst form leads to what Dutch researchers once termed "archipelagoes of enclaves". No urban region can sustainably survive with that principle of organization. Our public spaces need protection from encroachment from private interests. Furthermore, since space figures prominently in the definition of larger, collective identity; key to social cohesion and vibrancy in the suburbs will be the definition, over time, of an aspirational and enduring idea of a place that goes beyond an individual's property line.







## Suburban Networks of Governance

IAN CHODIKOFF

Canada's 2011 census has determined that 27 million Canadians (81%) live in urban areas, yet the reality is that we are predominantly a suburban nation. Given this reality, we should aggressively engage in progressive forms of qualitative and quantitative analytics to accurately describe the realities of contemporary Canadian society rather than concentrate on the suburban-urban divide. In the Canadian context, an urban area is defined as including at least 1,000 people with no fewer than 400 persons per square kilometre. In reality, there is no real standard definition of what comprises a "suburb." However, Statistics Canada has historically produced reasonable clarity in what constitutes a "suburban" community by recording the density of several Canadian municipalities' neighbourhoods based on the relative dominance of detached and semi-detached dwellings. Using their criteria, we find that roughly two-thirds of Calgarians live in low-density neighbourhoods whereas in Toronto, roughly one-third of citizens live in similarly low-density, or "suburban" communities. Placed in a regional context, if we understand Toronto to be the central municipality of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and comprising roughly 45% of the region's population, then nearly 70% of those who live in the entire GTA have chosen to live in the suburbs, given the fact that the remaining population of the GTA reside in the municipalities surrounding Toronto and are essentially considered to be suburban. Debunking the myths behind who is suburban or urban, effective urban planning and governance should no longer be concerned about the oft-mythologized duality between these two types of citizens. Instead, we should strive to better understand suburban networks of governance by encouraging citizen engagement, cultural awareness, or environmental stewardship across all populations.

For suburban and urban populations alike, the three greatest challenges influencing the future prosperity for all cities and city-regions is to engage in the following: (1) leverage the potential of effective governance, (2) maximize the diverse social networks comprised of recent immigrants and globalized populations, and (3)

establish new forms of community engagement through innovative technological, interactive and educational platforms.

For all cities to be more effective, they must be increasingly politically autonomous as they tap into the social networking potential of their globalized and transnational populations to drive change. Policy formation and implementation at the municipal level must increasingly act proactively given the fact that municipal authorities are inherently more connected to grassroots community issues than provincial, state or national authorities.

Implementing innovative online tools that encourage citizen engagement and political awareness may be particularly effective when reaching out to suburban populations or specific populations that share a unique culture, ethnicity or language. Similarly, those whose interests place a higher priority on their global diaspora rather than their surrounding community can benefit from new forms of data-driven policies that are responsive to a particular community's social or economic requirements. With increasingly powerful tools to collect and disseminate relevant data to a wide range of citizens, the culture of suburban communities will continue to evolve as particularly culturally and economically complex entities. No doubt, the physical complexity of the built environment will similarly change.

A variety of innovative community engagement tools will continue to shape suburban communities. Crowd-sourced funding and microfinance are increasingly relevant in encouraging not only citizen engagement, but contributing to the better overall management of cities. Mobile devices and online tools can provide a useful glue for stakeholders invested in shaping healthier green spaces, workplace environments, mixed-use developments, or local entrepreneurship. All of these factors help generate high-functioning social networks regardless of their levels of urban densities. Encouraging education for grassroots citizen involvement is critical, and can be especially powerful in well-networked communities, many of which can be defined as suburban - all of which are integral to our cities' overall prosperity.



### the way forward

- The success of resolving our greatest (sub)urban challenges will increasingly rely upon new sources of data analytics, online tools for communication, and the acknowledgment of powerfully complex economic and social networks that exists in the suburbs as they do in urban areas. With increasingly powerful online tools such as crowdsourcing and other data analysis, our suburban communities will undoubtedly become more networked. This has the opportunity to positively benefit the physical form of the suburb, by allowing more diverse residential and commercial activities to take root.

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## Designing the Suburbs

ANTONIO GÓMEZ-PALACIO

Imagine you are 26 years of age, and perhaps you are indeed. In all likelihood you find yourself somewhere between finishing a post-secondary degree and starting your first professional job. You are probably burdened by student loans. And you are probably leapfrogging between living with roommates, moving back with your parents, and your first bachelor apartment – you are part of the boomerang generation.

Now, ask yourself: what do you want in life?

A generation ago, a 26 year-old craved a car – that was the ticket to freedom. A car was the necessary tool to achieve all your dreams; it was your only way out of childhood and into independence. Today, things are different. Your window to the world is a smartphone, not a car. A car is a burden. You travel and meet people through social media. You engage digitally with the world, your friends, and your politics.

You have also become a collector of experiences, rather than stuff. You live for the thrill of a moment captured – a bungee jump, a trip to India, a re-tweet by Kendrick Lamar, a specialty-coffee on a funky patio. You are happy to forgo individual ownership for a ‘collective consumption’, a ‘sharing economy’ where you gain access to goods, services, data, talent... Notable examples include cars (transit, autoshare, car2go, zipcar), travel accommodations (couchsurfing), seed-money (Kickstarter, Indiegogo), and others. So, you no longer dream of a big house with a two-car garage in the suburbs. In fact, you dream of a condo, in a ‘happening’ place, where you can access all of the above, with an App.

For you, the suburbs are a dead-end. Odds are, if you live in the outskirts of Regina, Brampton, or Sudbury, you are probably looking to move to downtown Vancouver, Montreal, or Toronto.

So, as low-density, post-war, urban environments scramble to retain (and attract) the coveted generation of youngsters entering

the labour force – and the gusto, creativity, and entrepreneurialism they bring with them – suburban city leaders must ask: what will make this an actual choice place for a 26 year-old to live, work, study, visit, and invest? And we all know the answer is not more free parking.

Not all suburbs are positioned to win this competition. Many of them will fail to re-invent themselves and will decline. The winners will be suburbs that are becoming increasingly diverse – socially and economically – and thereby able to provide attractive options for living, working, playing, mobility and spending (increasingly limited) resources. And all this would be available no matter your background, culture or level of income. In this paradigm, the homogeneous suburbs – which have not changed much since first developed – are especially challenged to attract new talent and investment.

Arguably, the solution lies in the quality, character, and synergies of a place, neighbourhood, city or region – the simple yet important experience of walking down a street, buying a coffee, bumping into a friend, sitting in a shaded patio. To that end municipalities, school campuses and Business Improvement Associations are re-investing in the quality of their urban environments; increasing the critical mass of users (thus reducing the cost per/capita of services), and becoming choice destinations to boomerang sensibilities.

Critically, post-war suburbs are experiencing a second wave of urbanization, re-focused on quality urban design and walkable and transit-oriented developments. It is no longer enough to build quantity; competitive environments need to focus on quality: on design. Design has become the differentiating factor in creating choice (and success).

**DIALOG**

### the way forward

- The continued vitality of suburban communities lies in adapting to change through innovation, driven by diversity and design.
- Traditional post-war that suburbs focus on creating new and re-invented environments that offer choice and design quality will succeed, and those that do not will fail.



the roundtable report

7





## The Greenbelt

KATHY MACPHERSON

### A LEGACY LANDSCAPE AND ECONOMIC FORCE

For decades, the urbanized areas in the Golden Horseshoe have been continuously expanding, consuming swathes of some of the country's most fertile farmland and converting ecologically sensitive areas to roads and subdivisions. With the Greenbelt Plan (2005), the Ontario government drew a line in the sand, defining where development is off-limits in this diverse landscape of high agricultural and natural value. The Plan provides permanent protection to 1.8 million acres, adding to the already protected land in the Niagara Escarpment, a world-recognized geological formation, and the Oak Ridges Moraine, a significant source of groundwater for suburban municipalities and rural communities.

The Greenbelt Plan uses a systems-based approach to planning and conservation, protecting not just individual natural features but also the areas that surround, connect, and support them. The Plan also provides for an agricultural system, incorporating prime agricultural land and specialty crop areas (the Niagara Peninsula Tender Fruit and Grape Area and the Holland Marsh), that enables a vibrant and evolving agricultural and rural economy.

The Greenbelt is much more than a barrier to sprawl, it is an economic powerhouse. It is the heart of Ontario's local food system and forms a significant part of the second largest farming and food processing cluster in North America. The direct economic impact of Greenbelt associated activities in just the tourism, recreation, forestry, and agriculture sectors exceeds \$3 billion annually. When direct, indirect, and induced impacts are combined, the total impact raises to \$9.1 billion and more than 160,000 jobs. This is in addition to the \$2.6 billion per year in benefits

provided by the forests, fields, streams, and wetlands that filter our air, clean our water, and protect us from floods.

The Greenbelt is also crucial to Ontario's growing communities. High quality green spaces play an important role in building competitive cities and regions by increasing their liveability. Communities like Burlington and Ajax regularly tout their Greenbelt connections as a selling feature.

The long-term success of the Greenbelt depends in part on what happens beyond its boundaries, especially the extent to which growth can be contained by the Greenbelt's southern edge. If development in suburban municipalities does not meet the intensification and density goals set out by the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, lands in the so-called 'white belt' – potential future growth areas located between the Greenbelt and the built-up urban area – could be used up more quickly and potentially lead to a 'leapfrogging' of development over the Greenbelt into the outer ring municipalities in the north. Likewise if low density development is allowed to continue in those outer ring municipalities on less expensive land, households that might have otherwise settled in the inner suburbs could be tempted to locate on the other side of the Greenbelt.

One of the best ways to protect the Greenbelt in the long term may be to plan for its expansion. An expanded Greenbelt would reduce the threat of leapfrog development in the long run, and incorporate additional lands of ecological and agricultural importance, strengthening the overall farm economy.

### the way forward

- The Greenbelt is an integral part of the second largest farming and food processing cluster in North America. The direct, indirect, and induced impacts of Greenbelt-related activities (e.g. tourism, recreation, forestry, and agriculture) account for \$9.1 billion annually and support more than 160,000 full-time equivalent jobs.

- A systems-based approach makes the Greenbelt Plan one of the world's most forward-thinking land-use planning models. This approach goes beyond protecting individual natural features by linking them with the ecologically sensitive areas that surround, connect, and support them.

- Future urban expansions should be linked with the achievement of intensification targets, as set out in the Provincial Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe.





## The Social Suburbs

JANE WEDLOCK

York Region is a vast, fast-growing and diversifying regional municipality located immediately north of Toronto. With a population of over 1.1 million residents spread over 1,700 square kilometres, York Region is planned to add another half a million people over the next 30 years. While it continues to grow, York Region social service providers are grappling with the challenge of meeting the needs of a population that is becoming more ethnically and cultural diverse, as well as economically diverse, and, in many cases, economically challenged. Despite the popular perception that York Region is a very affluent region, simply “making ends meet” – the ability to afford adequate housing, food and transportation for daily life – is becoming a mounting challenge for an increasing number of residents and their families.

The region is comprised of nine municipalities: anchored in the south by the three largest, highly urbanized and ethno-culturally diverse communities of Markham (301,700), Vaughan (288,300) and Richmond Hill (185,540); and the six northern communities of Aurora, Newmarket, King, Whitchurch- Stouffville, East Gwillimbury and Georgina.

Overall, this is a growing, ageing and diverse region which is more often known for its prosperity and yet the trends indicate an increasing number of low and moderate income residents. A growing challenge is that the cost of housing continues to escalate – creating an increase in homelessness and the risk of homelessness. Many of the social challenges being faced in the region are, in effect, invisible unless you know how where to look, and have a critical perspective that informs understanding about what is actually happening in these communities.

United Way York Region is the largest non-government funder of social services in York Region and plays a key role with other partners including government, universities, labour and other social service providers in identifying and addressing emerging social trends and related emerging needs.

**Land** The prohibitive cost of land, particularly in the southern three municipalities, is combining with an overall limited range of housing options due to historical planning decisions – the large lot, single family home was and still remains a dominant housing form – to create an undersupply of housing that meets the needs of all residents, and lower income residents in particular.

**Governance** The provincially conceived division of mandates between regional and area municipalities means that there is no integrated comprehensive social planning taking place at the local level; taking into account regional and area municipal mandates together with critical non-profit sector services and supports.

**Infrastructure** United Way York Region is asking the question, “How do we build social infrastructure<sup>1</sup> in the context of rapid and massive growth?” In a series of community conversations...*More than Roads, Sewers, Schools and Stores* held by UWYR in the 5 municipalities that are already and will continue to experience substantial growth, we heard loud and clear that people love their communities – they want to get involved in making change, but don’t feel connected.

Facing growing and increasingly complex challenges, shrinking government resources and the realization that we cannot “social service our way out” of this predicament, we need other strategies. We must work to ensure that people are the focal point as we work towards identifying and addressing our shared social challenges, together. We must develop local networks of social capital, share data, incorporate systems thinking and grow to understand and address root causes of problems, invest in social infrastructure that supports new ways of thinking and doing, and build collaborations of “unusual partners” across disciplines and sectors.

<sup>1</sup> “Social Infrastructure is not just the social services and programs available to residents and neighbourhoods, but the area’s resources and relationships such as spaces for gathering, opportunities for learning as well as partnerships and networks within and beyond the community level.” Toronto’s Inner Suburbs: Investing in Social Infrastructure in Scarborough Deborah Cowan, Vanessa Parlette Cities Centre University of Toronto, June 2011



### the way forward

- Invest in social infrastructure that fosters research, leadership and learning and a sense of place, identity and belonging.
- Invest in innovative strategies for civic engagement in suburban communities as they transition to “city regions”.







# Suburban Angst in the Greater Toronto Area

RON RICHARDS & SEANNA KERR

## WHAT IS TO BECOME OF THE SUBURBAN DREAM?

Can the “suburban dream” survive a new legislated planning regime within the Province of Ontario calling for compact, mixed-use and transit-oriented communities? The traditional, popular perceptions and expectations of suburbia – affordability, space, privacy, auto-oriented mobility and lifestyle choice, for example – are coming under fire.

The divide between “suburban” and “urban” within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is very real, and is defined by stark and mutually exclusive divides along all kinds of political and social lines. Between the 416 (City of Toronto) and the 905 (suburban municipalities surrounding Toronto) area codes. Between downtown being the fertile ground of predominantly left-leaning socialists and liberals (referred to as coddled snobs by the suburbanites) and the suburbs most often represented by more right leaning liberals and conservatives (referred to as cultural philistines by the downtowners). While grounded in a shred of reality, these divides are the product of years of willful misunderstandings, neglect and prejudices. But they cannot be ignored, and form a very real part of addressing real issues in the region.

While the momentum of suburban development within the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) continues to be strong, private sector developers and planners continue to struggle against the formulation and implementation of new and emerging planning policies – honed, largely, to bring urban living in the image of the downtown to the suburbs.

The industry is faced with the challenge of taking a highly successful and profitable form of development – most often and inappropriately referred to as “sprawl” – and redirecting efforts toward new forms of development that are untested in the market, and that are sometimes difficult to finance as a result.

Sustainable and complete communities in suburban locations are few and far between – most often the product of early to mid-20th century villages being absorbed by newly created growing suburban communities; like Port Credit and Streetsville in the City of Mississauga, for example. Creating these communities requires significant and sustained greenfield development (first generation urban development on rural or agricultural land). While possible, this greatly depends of coordinated planning and developer buy-in. The challenge is therefore great, requiring systemic change in not only how we plan and build, but how we think and what we base our lifestyle expectations on.

Unfortunately, it appears that current planning practices and market conditions are yielding an “in-between” product: something that is neither traditional suburb or sustainable downtown. Municipal road networks and standards, for example, are most often incompatible with “urban” forms of development (e.g. street-facing buildings and on-street parking) and “urban” modes of mobility (e.g. cycling and transit) – driven, instead, by outdated engineering standards that favour the movements of cars and large vehicles. Quite simply, the curvilinear streets just

don’t connect to form the degree of connectivity and proximity that is required to create desirable and efficient urban development.

Until such time as the public side of the sustainable community equation is recognized and implemented the worthwhile objectives of complete communities must remain unfulfilled and unattainable. The private sector cannot be asked to create complete and sustainable communities within an infrastructure environment that is outdated at best and hostile at worst.

The development of complete communities evolves over time and it is the factor of time that many policies currently in place fail to take into account. Communities are not created in a few years, they need time and they need policies that allow and encourage evolution, just as villages grew to towns in the past.

The frustration and resulting angst experienced by those currently living in the suburbs as a result of imposed policies of intensification and urban design is very real. People feel threatened by way of real or perceived reduced property values, loss of privacy, traffic congestion, pollution and a multitude of other factors. This is not the environment that they bought into and, in fact, is often the environment that they fled in the first place. Developers and city planners trying to implement approved policy find residents and neighborhoods unwilling to accept even reasonable intensification, and politicians are scurrying for cover and denouncing their own recently approved policy.

Like them or not, the suburbs remain a desirable form of development.

The greatest challenge to suburbia and its public administrators will be what to do with the existing expanse of curvilinear development? Various ideas such as punching through cul de sacs to create a more accessible and walkable neighborhood are likely cost prohibitive and certainly politically unattractive. Are we simply creating a much larger and difficult fringe suburbia or will these communities evolve into highly desired and valued quiet residential enclaves?

If it is the intention of the higher levels of government and municipalities to create a different form of suburbia, they are faced with a multitude of challenges not least of which is how to extend suburban development from its existing configuration to what is generally expected to be a modified grid pattern mixed use form of urbanism.

Quite simply, the roads don't line up: you can't there from here.

## the way forward

• **Typical post-war suburban form (e.g. street patterns) does not lend itself well to urban evolution and infill. And the same is true for suburban residents: the lifestyle expectations and economic factors that brought them to the suburbs are at odds with current planning and emerging planning instruments aimed to re-make the suburbs in a more urban or downtown image.**





# Understanding the Suburbs

MARCY BURCHFIELD

## MAPPING THE BUILT EVOLUTION OF THE REGION

At 9.1 million people (in 2011), the Toronto Region, comprised of over 100 municipalities, is one of the most rapidly growing regions in North America – adding nearly 125,000 people every year with an expected population of 11.5 million people by 2031 (Ontario Ministry of Infrastructure, 2012). Given the challenges and opportunities of such rapid growth, the Ontario Government, the de facto regional planning authority, has initiated a suite of plans and policies to help shape growth by limiting urban expansion at the edge and by increasing densities in both the urbanized area and new development at the edge. Currently, municipalities are integrating these plans and policies into their local official land use plans.

Although growth is occurring across the entire Region, the majority of population increase will be accommodated in Toronto's suburban areas, often referred to as the "905" (area code). In the regional plan, municipalities either fall within the Inner Ring of the Region, which contains the City of Toronto and its surrounding suburbs, or the Outer Ring of the Region, consisting of either separated cities, rural hamlets or ex-urban settlements.

### Increase in Population in the Toronto Region

GEOGRAPHY OF INTEREST	INCREASE IN POPULATION (2001-2031)
Inner Ring of Region	2,810,000
City of Toronto	490,000
905 Suburbs	2,320,000
Outer Ring of Region	878,000

Source: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2006 (2012 Consolidation), Ministry of Infrastructure

Given the magnitude and complexity of growth occurring in the Region, particularly in the suburbs, and the desire for new plans and policies to change the shape of development, it is imperative that a transparent and accessible system of tools and data be developed that enables the tracking of change over time.

Researchers and planners currently rely on the census data to track change in a number of socio-economic variables across the region. In combination with data derived from remotely-sensed imagery, the census can provide a basis for examining change within the urbanizing area of the region, for example: change in intensification and densification. But both sources of data have limitations. Given the 5-year lag time, the Region's population could grow by over 600,000 without any indication of who, where or how the population settled in the region. Current methodologies used to extract information from remotely-sensed data are limited, providing little detail on the change in built-form.

Data collected at the municipal level can be extremely valuable in

understanding on the ground change. To take one example, municipal official plans and zoning by-laws provide valuable information on how a municipality intends to grow through development over a 25 year period into the future. With over 100 municipalities in the Region, the governance challenge (and opportunity) becomes one of regional coordination; standardizing definitions and data collection methods so that a cohesive and consistent regional picture can be created.

The Neptis Foundation, a charitable, non-partisan, operating foundation, has taken a first step towards a regional picture of official plan data by collecting, standardizing and mapping urban and rural settlements expansion areas that are depicted in official plans. These data show where and how the region will be urbanized over the next 25 years. Whether that pattern looks different from the development patterns of the past can only be explored through a comprehensive program of tracking and measurement and a system of visualization.

In October 2013, Neptis will launch a new mapping platform that will begin to visualize changes in the regions over time. In addition to a visualization tool, the platform will be a forum for exploring regional planning issues in the Toronto region with the primary aim of enriching the discussion about regional coordination and governance. The conversation should bring to the forefront the need for better coordination of standardized, region-wide land-use and transportation data; being key components for tracking and measuring progress towards the goals of the regional growth plan. An "open data, open government" approach to regional planning and growth management will not only enable the public to better understand the need for such policies, but increase the buy-in for the overall vision of the plans.

## the way forward

- Given the magnitude and complexity of growth occurring in the Region, particularly in the suburbs, it is imperative that a transparent and accessible system of tools and data be developed that enables the tracking of change over time.
- From a spatial perspective, a governance challenge (and opportunity) is the coordination of regional data: standardizing definitions and data collection methods so that a cohesive and consistent regional picture can be created.
- An "open data, open government" approach to regional planning and growth management will not only enable the public to better understand the need for such policies, but increase the buy-in for the overall vision of the plans.





## The Aging Suburb – The Places and the People

GLENN MILLER

It is now commonly acknowledged that Canada is aging. In less than 25 years, a quarter of the nation's population will be 65+. Although the impact of this unprecedented demographic shift will be felt to a lesser degree in fast-growing suburban communities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area in Ontario and the Lower Mainland in British Columbia, this is because these places continue to attract large numbers of immigrants in their family-formation years.

In Peel Region, for example, located immediately to the west of Toronto, only about 10% of the population is 65+, considerably less than the national average. But change is occurring rapidly. This number represents a 30% increase over 2006 in only five years. In less than 20 years, in 2031, the percentage of Peel residents 65+ will have increased to 20%.

There are two dimensions to these forecasts that should concern those responsible for planning the built environment and delivering social services.

The first is that by 2031, nearly nine percent of older adults in Peel will be 75+. This has significant implications for personal mobility in a region where a significant majority of residents depend on driving to get around. Ministry of Transportation projections suggest that by 2036 as many as 42% of residents in car-dependent communities like Peel will no longer have driving licenses.<sup>1</sup>

The second dimension relates to Peel's physical make up – and the fact that even though all three constituent area municipalities of Peel are “suburbs” – they are all very different. These differences pose both challenges and

opportunities but also make it harder for Region of Peel planners to develop a one-size-fits-all strategy.

To put this in perspective, at one extreme, the percentage of Mississauga residents 65+ currently living in single family dwellings in Mississauga is 48% while in largely rural Caledon, the percentage is 88%, while Brampton is closer to the national average at 59%. This suggests that variations in built form across the region will impact both the demand and delivery of healthcare and other social services, particularly for those living below the poverty line and/or for those who have some form of disability. In addition, Peel Region has the largest percentage of newcomers in the GTHA, a large percentage of whom may not speak either of Canada's official languages, further complicating the challenge of effective service delivery.

In thousands of car-dependent communities like Peel Region across Canada, the concept of mixed use is still just that: a concept. Vast residential subdivisions, assembled in 100-acre blocks of land that a decade ago may have been growing apples are places where rates of car ownership start at two per household. There are no greengroceries to walk to, neither are there amenities of any kind that can be reached except in a car. When residents are no longer able to drive for whatever reason, we realize too late that suburbs are no place to grow old.

<sup>1</sup> These projections do not necessarily take into account whether residents have previously held a driving license.

### the way forward

Strategies for dealing with aging populations in suburbs need to be place specific and will be different from municipality to municipality:

- Mississauga has entered a “reurbanization” phase in its growth, with increasing emphasis on intensification to create development patterns that are more transit-friendly (and potentially age friendly).
- In contrast, Brampton is still very much a fast-growing greenfield community, and although the municipality is moving to “change the paradigm,” the rapid pace of growth in Brampton is already placing straining the city's social, educational and other “soft” services.
- Caledon is also growing, but actively seeking to channel growth to a few well-defined population centres while maintaining its rural character.





## conclusion

SEAN HERTEL & ROGER KEIL

### Towards a sustainable postsuburbia in the Greater Golden Horseshoe

#### **Building it: the suburb in urban society**

Following the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, we now live in urban society. Suburbs are an undeniable and – need we stress – unmovable part of urban society and of our region. Even if most of them undergo significant urbanization, partial centralization and densification, they will, for the time being, be there in their single family home and singular tower dominated, strip malled majority. The large superblocks make it hard, says University of Waterloo professor Pierre Filion, to break down the overall pattern of homogeneity. But it is happening. Post-suburbanization has arrived and the periphery is continuously being stitched into the urban fabric as a less and less separate and an increasingly integrated urban region.

#### **Living in Postsuburbia**

“Let’s take a drive through the sprawl through these towns they built to change,” rhyme the Arcade Fire on their magisterial album *The Suburbs*. Living in postsuburbia means living in and with change. A far cry from the common image of the unalterable suburban landscape of cul-de-sacs and picket fences, the burbs have become the most dynamic part of the urban region. Change abounds in private homes, public streets and commercial spaces. The space economy of the postsuburban region is faced with some of the most convulsive changes and challenges our modern society has been going through: deindustrialization, commercialization, the crisis of the oil economy, climate change: all issues the suburbs of Toronto are confronted with on a daily basis. In addition, living in postsuburbia is framed by a power shift that affects the entire urban region: “centrality is increasingly reserved for immaterial networks of power and the physical assets that support them, while bodily existence within the postmetropolis is increasingly moved to the periphery” as we learn from urban thinker Rohan Quinby. And he further observes that now a “suburban-like order of horizontality and dispersal” reflects the “horizontal strategies of surveillance, dispersal, and consumption” that contextualize our postsuburban reality. The horizontality of the suburb creeps into the general sociality of our times. We live in postsuburbia even when we are not in it.

#### **Getting there: Planning**

The term “suburban planning” is not, contrary to popular notions of suburbia, an oxymoron. In fact, it could very well be argued that the suburbs as we know them today – the ones built after 1945, and especially since the predominance of “smart growth” in the 2000s – are more a product of planning than the very cities they sprung up around, and certainly their downtowns. While sprawling

many of these suburbs may be, they were nonetheless very deliberate creations of government and the market, and were very methodically and meticulously planned. The first “master planned” suburbs in North America like New York’s Levittown and Toronto’s Don Mills met a need, and they met that need very well: providing affordable housing for growing families, in tandem with new highways to provide access to city jobs and services.

And now these early planned suburbs are growing up and changing to respond to the needs of a new generation and a new way of thinking. The grandkids of the first suburban pioneers, for example, are being courted by new and evolving live-work-play options to settle the suburbs as well; a growing competition to downtown’s apparent monopoly on an “urban lifestyle”. So, the planning that occurs now in the suburbs, and across the GTA in particular, is very much “urban planning”. It tackles the same challenges the “city” planners grapple with every day – everything from congestion to affordable housing to retaining employment. The values and process of planning, then, should be a public interest enterprise that transcends urban and suburban divides; intervening in a region that is, increasingly, looking and functioning like one city.

#### **Governance: Democracy**

That points lastly to governance. Historically, suburban governance, following Mike Ekers, Pierre Hamel and Roger Keil, has been an amalgam of three modalities: the state, the market and private households that secede from the public realm. In the end, the suburbs and the urban region can only be governed through democracy. The models we have engaged over the years to make processes of building, maintaining and maturing the suburbs work, are tired and need reevaluation. The “growth machine” of investment, electoral politics and land development delivers crisis more than solution in postsuburbia. Instead, solutions must be found that re-engage and politicize suburban communities beyond the mantras of cheap taxes, local autonomy and privatism. Good services, regional responsibility and public engagement must be the principles on which suburban governance is built. Democratic procedures are at the basis of this emphatic reengagement. They need to be constructed through a mix of constitutional principles (allowing, in the future, for more self-government and less provincial interference) and bottom-up innovations in civil society (open cities, pop-up suburbanism, right to the suburb). Suburban governance must learn to be part of the governance of urban society.

