

Vibrant City Life



In the early eighties I taught for a year at Vanier CGEP. Before we moved to Montreal, I arranged by long distance for a place for my family to live. Being a prairie girl I didn't know much about big cities and I thought a house with a yard was the only safe and decent dwelling for a family. So that's what I rented. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that my very respectable colleagues at Vanier lived with their families in row housing, tenements, apartments, townhouses—everything *but* separate houses with yards. At that time the typical monthly winter gas bill to heat a home in Calgary was \$30. Imagine my shock when I got the bill for \$1,000 to fill the oil tank that fuelled the furnace of my Montreal home. I began to see the sense of those connected Montreal row houses snuggled together saving fuel.

I didn't have a car in Montreal; I travelled by Metro and bus. Rather than stocking up on groceries from Co-op once a week as I did in Calgary, every day after work I bought vegetables from the greengrocer, bread from the boulangerie, cheese from the fromagerie, dessert from the patisserie, on the walk from the bus stop down Monkland Street. Shopkeepers knew me by name.

In Calgary I lived in a suburb, and as a working single mother I often felt isolated. Not so in Montreal. Montreal had street life, cafés where neighbours discussed politics, community parks where children and parents met and played. The sheer density of neighbourhoods meant the likelihood of meeting someone we knew whenever we ventured out of the house. Density also meant diversity and an opportunity to meet and learn from people of various ages, circumstances, occupations, language and ethnic backgrounds and traditions.

My eyes were opened to the potential richness of city life from my sojourn in Montreal.

Alberta now has big cities—big in area and population: both Edmonton region and Calgary are careening toward the million mark. Our cities are evolving and there's still a chance to influence the shape they take. What kind of cities do we want? What are the particular joys and opportunities of city life? How do we create communities to best serve the needs of children, adults and the environment?

Many hundreds of thousands of us still expect to live in separate houses with yards. So Alberta's two main cities are characterized by suburbs encroaching ever further into the countryside. Suburbs destroy natural habitat, and are expensive to service. Every new subdivision needs sewage, electricity, garbage pickup, police and roads. Low density makes public transportation impractical, so we become dependent on cars, which pollute the air. Zoning bylaws prohibit mixed-use communities. Where we live is, for the most part, *not* where we work or shop. This means we *need* cars. We've designed our cities for automobiles and not for people.

Suburbs create monocultural neighbourhoods which aren't always so wonderful to live in, with long commutes to work and busing of kids to school.

Our cities do have some vibrant communities. Residents of Garneau in Edmonton don't need cars. They can walk within the neighbourhood, not only to the university, but to the store for groceries, to a movie, to a restaurant, to the community centre for yoga and dance classes for the kids. In Old Strathcona, Whyte Avenue has a lively street life. In Calgary, Sunnyside has Kensington Avenue and 10th Street, Mission has 4th Street and 17th Avenue, and Altadore has Marda Loop. These areas provide examples of the potential richness of city life here in Alberta.