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The High Price of Our Own Patch of Green



When I was an instructor at Mount Royal College, I spent a year on exchange, teaching at a CEGEP in

Montreal. I made arrangements for accommodation by long-distance. I had young children at the time and I asked my contact in Montreal to find us a house with a yard. "With a yard?" she asked quizzically. "Yes. I have a family," I explained. One of my deeply held values—and unexamined assumptions as an Albertan—was that every respectable family needs a separate house with a patch of green around it.

After we were settled in Montreal, I discovered that none of my very respectable colleagues lived in single family houses with yards. They lived in apartments, townhomes or row housing. They took their children to the parks to play. Neighbourhoods looked entirely different from Calgary's, with bakeries, greengrocers, fish shops and cafés. Few people I met owned cars. They walked or took the métro (subway), which was fast and convenient. Part of what makes Montreal so interesting is the vitality of the street life. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs says that "on successful streets, people must appear at different times." With high-density housing, urban campuses and workplaces in communities, Montreal streets are used by workers, students and residents throughout the day.

Contrast this with the typical empty street of an Alberta city suburb.

Suburbs have no street life. Stay-at-home moms could die of boredom. Teenagers hang out at the 7-11 or the shopping mall. A recent study showed that the average white male living in a suburb weighed 4.5 kilograms more than one living in a community close to shops and offices. Bland and ugly, the suburb is an anonymous, amorphous mass without identity. Yet the

idea of the single family house, the mindset that leads to suburban sprawl, is so embedded in Alberta culture that most of us can't even conceive of an alternative.

Factors other than cultural myopia have contributed to the shape of our cities here. Michael McMordie in *building/art* says of Calgary: "The anti-planning mood arrived with neo-liberal economics. In conditions of economic recession the city's planning staff was decimated, the role of the survivors reduced to administering existing regulations in reaction to development proposals from the private sector.... The sense of unlimited space and cheap land and the unquenchable desire for private plots (with services subsidized from public funds) have driven suburban expansion.... responsibility for the full design conception has been left largely to private commercial interests. This reflects the prevailing political and economic ideology of the city and the province, but leaves the public interest to go by default, and the city government to a residual and marginal role."

Not that city government even sees a problem. In Alberta we have mayors who assert that urban sprawl doesn't exist—"it's just growth."

Municipal tax systems are designed to encourage people to live in the suburbs. Municipal services—water, sewage, electricity, gas, roads—cost more to deliver to far-flung suburbs. People might choose inner-city homes if their prices reflected their real cost to the city and the environment, which is less than suburban homes. But it's difficult to stop sprawl, because it is lucrative for developers. It's time to set limits.

Cities in England have been successful in setting a boundary or outer limit beyond which the city cannot grow.

Alberta cities might well consider doing likewise.

Jackie Flanagan