



NEW SUBURBANISM

By David R. Hardy

Summary

New Suburbanism advances a set of ideas to deepen the conversation about the synergistic relationship between core areas, suburbs, and rural areas. It challenges the prevailing ideology that density is a virtue. It appeals for an update of planning practice, given the pandemic push and new technology pull. A set of actionable ideas referred to as the Elements of New Suburbanism are presented.

Sommaire

Le nouveau « suburbanisme » propose un ensemble d'idées pour approfondir le débat sur la relation synergique entre les zones centrales, les banlieues et les zones rurales. Il remet en question l'idéologie dominante selon laquelle la densité est une vertu. Il appelle à une mise à jour des pratiques de planification, compte tenu de la pression exercée par les pandémies et les nouvelles technologies. Il présente un ensemble d'idées concrètes, appelées « éléments du nouveau suburbanisme. »

Eight years ago, a group of independent planners and architects residing in Scarborough, ON were convened by a community organization to discuss why this suburban and racialized part of the City of Toronto was declining while the core of the city was thriving. We observed

old suburban hospitals with overcrowded emergency rooms, declining job growth, little higher-order public transit, and increasing poverty, while Toronto's higher income, white, urban core enjoyed strong investment in institutions, arts and cultural establishments, modern hospitals, public transit, universities, and world-scale businesses.¹

With 630,000 people, Scarborough has a large population and is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse areas in North America. The student planners among us wondered why they weren't learning more about suburbs in school, given that most people in North America live in suburbs and love living there.

¹ Research by David Hulchanski, describes the increasing polarization within Toronto since 1970. J. David Hulchanski, *The Three Cities Within Toronto*, 2010.



New thinking on the suburbs

In 2016, we launched the *Institute for New Suburbanism (INS)* as a forum for dialogue on suburban planning, design, and development (www.newsurbanism.ca). The INS is a Scarborough-based think-tank that promotes dialogue about the suburbs and metropolitan centres, and how these communities interact. It is a small, nimble, informal organization of planners who have met on-line monthly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our mission involves critically examining the dominant planning ideology according to which density is a virtue that can solve most problems, including everything from car dependency to loss of farmland and municipal infrastructure debt. In this fixation on density, we saw that planners and architects were missing opportunities to enhance sustainable, climate-supportive suburban landscapes, advance progressive architecture and invest in suburban arts and culture. The success of Scarborough's *The Weeknd*, (a globally recognized singer headlining at the 2021 Superbowl half-time show) showed the significant suburban creativity that could be released.

Given that the world's car and truck manufacturers are retooling to produce electric vehicles, we questioned the critique of suburbia as being necessarily linked to high vehicle carbon emissions. Countries such as France and Canada have policies to stop selling carbon emitting vehicles by 2040.

We also questioned entrenched ideas against greenfield development that appear to be hindering a full discussion of how we can achieve affordable housing. Further, we observed the migration of urban residents to rural areas, pointing to the need to plan for rural as we plan for urban. In sum, the planning profession is in the midst of disruptive and fundamental changes due to the pandemic push and technology pull affecting how we live in core, suburban, and rural areas, a transformation to which we need to pay attention.

Looking outward, we saw the need for investment, planning, and economic development in the inner and outer suburbs as well as in rural areas across the country. Hosting people from all over the world, the suburbs have become ethnically and culturally diverse. Yet, like

Toronto's suburbs, there is a rise of poverty in areas where the immigrant population was high. We concluded that there is a need to strengthen core, suburban, and rural communities – together – as an opportunity to improve how we plan our regions, an observation that contrasts with the conventional thinking that investments in the core trickle out to the suburbs and rural areas.

Our cities and regions need to make space for both single family suburban homes and higher density dwellings. As noted by Roger Keil, York University Research Chair in Global Sub/Urban Studies, times have changed:

The call for a renewed urban theory is once again before us today. The 'explosion' [of the historic city leading to the creation of the suburbs] was merely the starting gun of a much more far-reaching process of complete urbanization that turns the categories of geographical centre and periphery upside down and creates new relationships among various parts of urban regions.¹

So, we asked ourselves, could we identify and advocate for a better way to plan our core, suburban, and rural areas by looking at these systems synergistically?

After years of lectures, dialogue, and scholarship, we concluded that the idea of a 'new suburbanism' has merit; a school of thought that advocates for broader investment that is fairly distributed across core, suburban, and rural areas and sets aside ideological beliefs that discount suburban voices.

We developed a broad global network of practitioners and academics who share these beliefs. For example, the author of "New Suburbanisms,"² Houston, TX. author and architect Judith K. De Jong was the first international speaker at the Institute. She observed:

Rather than seeking to replace suburban design or adopt urbanization, which I would argue is the philosophy of new urbanism thinking, New Suburbanism extends beyond the discipline of urban design and identifies pragmatic ways to build and improve suburban communities.

London, England's, Paul Hunter, a subsequent Institute speaker, stated:

Beyond technocratic changes, there is a social justice case for a suburban renaissance. Without intervention, growth will not be inclusive and will leave people behind. And this is not just an individual loss and a driver of inequality. The squandered talent of individuals and wasted investment in suburbs weakens the prosperity of our cities. Any suburban renaissance must therefore be underpinned by social justice city-wide and built into the on-going urban renaissance."³

Key elements of New Suburbanism

New Suburbanism has a set of actionable ideas referred to as the *Elements of New Suburbanism*. They are:

1. Advance a positive suburban narrative.

Canada's suburbs are and continue to be, well planned, desirable, and sustainable places to live. Canadian suburbs (particularly new suburbs within the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, such as in Milton) are already much denser than US suburbs. The conversation about the suburbs needs to push back on these density-at-all-cost and other negative memes and shine a spotlight on the positive quality of life and important sense of place that suburbanites enjoy.

2. Replicate the most desirable aspects of existing suburbs for the planning of new suburbs.

Planners of today's suburbs focus on families, health and recreation, community building, natural spaces, employment spaces, and institutional spaces. These suburbs work. One of Canada's first planned suburbs and now an inner suburb of Toronto, Don Mills, continues to provide a high quality of suburban life for residents. At its core is a shopping district and denser housing, surrounded by single-family and mid-density housing. Pathways, parks and great restaurants are part of a subdivision that works well. The integration of college and university classrooms, local gardening, meeting space, employment space, and housing as part of the redevelopment of Toronto's 'Golden Mile' transit village is another good Canadian example.



3. Seek out the best examples of suburban design around the world and apply them to new and renewing suburbs.

Suburban design innovation is happening around the world. The Better Suburbs Initiative in Brisbane, Australia is a good example showing how low-density housing, integrated employment areas, and suburban entertainment space can work well together. New Suburbanism examines the valued characteristics of suburban design and advocates that they be reproduced and enhanced.

4. Advance socio-economic equality between core, suburban, and rural areas.

Equitable and functional partnerships are needed between the core, suburban, and rural areas. Investments are required to diversify the economic opportunities, celebrate the arts and cultural scene, and improve health care services and other public infrastructure that are lacking in many suburban and rural areas.

5. Celebrate and champion suburban cultural diversity.

Vibrant cultural life and creativity take place in the suburbs, particularly in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities, of which one of the best examples is Scarborough. However, urban cultural planning often ignores the suburbs or assumes that cultural themes and investments that work in the core will work in suburban areas.

But they don't. Suburban areas need suburban solutions.

6. Embrace technological disruption as an opportunity for suburban and rural form to adapt and benefit.

Future net-zero suburban design opportunities were profiled in the February 2022 Institute for New Suburbanism talk by Alan Berger, Professor of Landscape Architecture and Urbanism at MIT. Dr. Berger spoke to the INS about designs optimized by Artificial Intelligence and autonomous vehicles so as to produce suburbs that minimize carbon emissions, maximize lawn space, and maintain affordability. He envisioned a net-zero suburb with electric personal mobility devices, delivery vehicles linked to non-emitting regional transportation networks, and homes linked to net-zero utilities or producing electricity themselves. For example, Ontario Power Generation is well on its way to being net-zero and has set its sights set on being a zero-emission utility.

7. Further integrate the ecology of suburban communities and natural areas.

In contrast to the point of view that suburbs are developed at the expense of ecological features, new suburbanist theorists are exploring how suburbs can coexist with nature, pointing to examples of suburban landscapes that incorporate agricultural activity in yards or on public

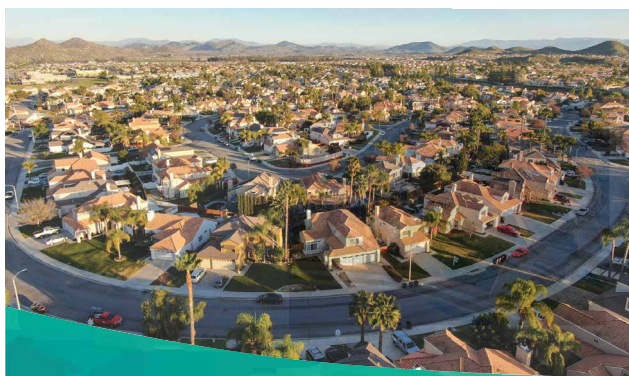
lands, and other opportunities to retrofit older suburbs by enhancing natural attributes as opportunities arise. INS speaker and professor of landscape architecture at the University of Michigan Joan Iverson Nassauer observes that, compared to built-up core areas which have lost opportunities, suburban green landscapes can provide far more substantial ecosystem services related to human health, biodiversity, stormwater management, and carbon storage to contribute to climate change mitigation.⁴

After a number of years of stimulating discussions, we believe the Institute for New Suburbanism has succeeded in kicking off an unconventional but necessary conversation in Canada about planning our urban cores, suburbs, and rural areas so that all can benefit.

Dave Hardy RPP, MCIP, is President of Hardy Stevenson and Associates Limited and is a Registered Professional Planner. He is also the Executive Director of the Institute for New Suburbanism.

Endnotes


- ¹ Roger Keil, "The Global Suburb: Divesting from the World's White Picket Fences," in *Infinite Suburbia*, eds. Alan Berger, Joel Kotkin, and Celina Balderas Guzman (Princeton Architectural Press, 2017), 371.
- ² Judith K. De Jong, *New Suburbanisms* (Routledge; London and New York, 2014).
- ³ Paul Hunter, *Towards a Suburban Renaissance: An Agenda for Our City Suburbs*, The Smith Institute, July 2016, 4. <http://www.smith-institute.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Towards-a-suburban-renaissance.pdf>.
- ⁴ "Joan Iverson Nassauer, "Greening Sprawl – Lawn Culture and Carbon Storage in the Suburban Landscape," in *Infinite Suburbia*, eds. Alan Berger, Joel Kotkin, and Celina Balderas Guzman (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2017), 506. ■



HARDY STEVENSON AND ASSOCIATES

**Urban and Environmental Planning
Public Consultation and Facilitation
Socio-Economic Impact Assessment
Engineering and Geoscience
Economic Development**

INS
Institute for New Suburbanism

Scan for more details: 

Hardy Stevenson and Associates Limited
davehardy@hardystevenson.com
1-877-267-7794 / 416-944-8444 x 222

