

Complete Communities Versus the Canadian Dream: Representations of Suburban Aspirations

Jill L. Grant and Daniel E. Scott
School of Planning
Dalhousie University

Résumé

Afin de créer des communautés plus fonctionnelles et attrayantes, la politique d'aménagement du Canada préconise, depuis les années 1970, une variété de logements en formats compacts, à usage mixte et à grande densité pour s'adapter aux besoins divergents des ménages. Le présent travail étudie les pratiques d'urbanisme contemporaines dans les villes en croissance rapide de trois provinces pour expliquer comment les politiques et le discours des praticiens bâtissent la relation entre les types de logements et les besoins des ménages. Alors que les politiques privilégient des « collectivités complètes », les pratiques en aménagement et en lotissement, quant à elles, constatent et reproduisent le désir courant des banlieusards d'accéder à la propriété : le rêve canadien de la maison isolée. Comme les coûts d'habitation grimpent rapidement dans certaines communautés, ceux qui produisent de nouveaux lotissements suburbains cherchent à redéfinir les attentes quant à la relation entre le type de logements, l'évolution des ménages et la vie urbaine. Plutôt que d'offrir un milieu résidentiel encourageant les gens à s'y établir à long terme, la société construit les logements comme des biens de consommation que les ménages pourront remplacer à chaque tournant de leur histoire (re)productive.

Mots clés: collectivités complètes, cycle de vie, logement

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Abstract

With the aim of creating more efficient and attractive communities, Canadian planning policy since the 1970s has been advocating compact form, mixed-use, higher densities, and a range of housing to suit divergent household needs. This paper examines contemporary planning practice in rapidly growing cities in three provinces to explore how policy texts and practitioner discourses construct the relationship between housing types and household needs. While planning policies advocate “complete communities,” planning and development practice encounters and reproduces suburban aspirations for conventional homeownership: the Canadian dream of the detached house. In the context of rapidly increasing housing costs in some communities, those producing new suburban developments are seeking to rewrite expectations about the relationship between housing type, household stage, and urban living. Rather than a residential environment committing people to place, housing is socially constructed as a consumer good to be replaced as households reach (re)productive milestones.

Key words: complete communities, life cycle, housing

Suburban housing trends are changing in rapidly growing municipalities in Canada. Contemporary planning approaches aligned with smart growth and sustainable development promote a mix of housing types as a means to achieve social inclusion, to encourage land use efficiencies, and to accommodate housing requirements for diverse households (Grant and Perrott 2009; Talen 2008). In some suburban communities, the conventional post-war pattern of spacious single-detached housing (Harris 2004; Sewell 1994) is giving way to new mixes of townhouses, condominium apartments, and detached houses on compact lots. In many parts of the country suburbs are showing development patterns previously found more commonly in urban centres.

Planners in Canada have been promoting compact form, intensification, mixed use, and mixed housing types since the early 1970s (Grant 2002; Isin and Tomalty 1993). The Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver city-regions have been powerful advocates for making suburban areas more urban in their character. For instance, regional planners in Vancouver developed the concept of the livable region (Hutton 2011; Punter 2003), while Calgary planners pushed for sustainable suburbs (Calgary 1995), and the provincial government in Ontario advocated new urbanism (Ontario 1995). Decades-long efforts to create conditions under which a wider mix of housing types and uses appear in new development areas finally appear to be bearing the desired results. Visits to the

suburbs in many parts of the country now reveal mixes of multi-family and detached housing in master-planned communities.

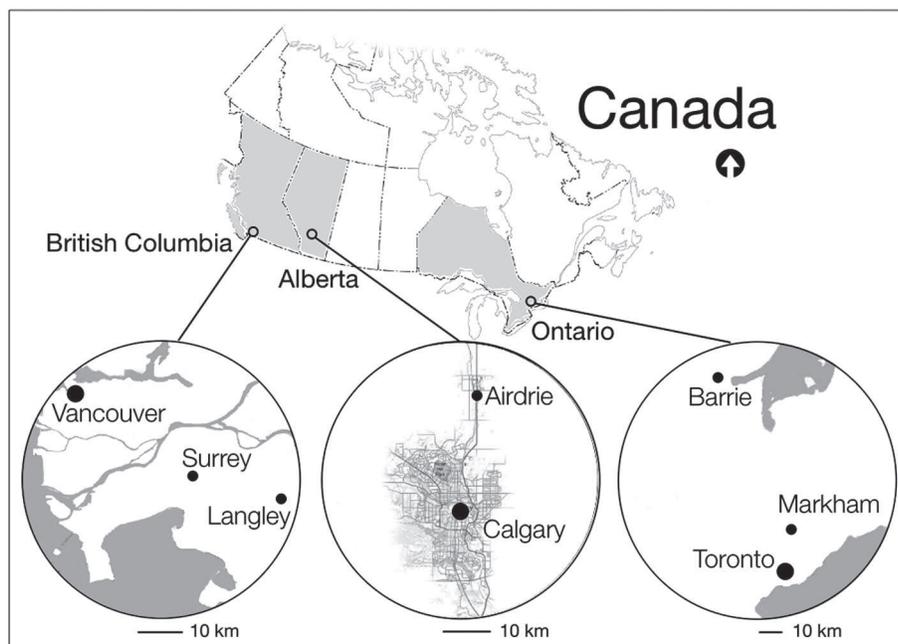
In this paper we review current development trends and practices in three rapidly growing regions of Canada (Figure 1) to understand the factors contributing to new patterns of suburban housing type and mix. We report on the results of interviews with a sample of community “producers”: that is, planners, municipal councillors, and developers who are regulating and building new suburban areas. We aim to better understand the relationships between planning policy, market conditions, development outcomes, housing types, and expectations of household needs. Contemporary planning policy envisions building complete communities in the suburban landscape, but how are developers and councillors responding to the call for greater housing mix and diversity? How do producers socially construct the relationship between household type and housing type? We know that planners have long argued that households experience a wide range of needs not addressed by development patterns dominated by detached housing, but we wanted to explore current understandings of how suburban conditions and patterns are changing. Although development trends may indicate that multi-family housing constitutes an increasing share of the suburban market, housing producers argue that market pressures rather than planning policy may be responsible. When land costs are high, as they are in the communities studied, developers may respond by providing more multi-family units and by encouraging consumers to adapt their housing expectations. In the process of re-envisioning suburban landscapes, we found that community producers articulated a complex version of the housing ladder which households climb to achieve the dream of home ownership.

Planning policy thought to promote sustainable outcomes may have unintentional consequences. For instance, Moos and Skaburskis (2008) noted that home work—promoted as a sustainable strategy to reduce commuting—was associated with living in larger detached homes (generally viewed as a less sustainable option). Efforts to convince suburban residents to consider denser housing options and mixed neighbourhoods may face similar challenges. As consumers are encouraged to see their housing careers as involving a sequence of purchases of different housing units to meet their changing needs and means we might reasonably ask whether conceptualizing housing as a consumable good may contribute to diminishing place attachment and rising housing costs (as transaction costs are added to home prices).

We begin by briefly considering the development of planning theory around complete communities and Canadian experience with suburban hous-

ing before introducing a comparative case study. We present selected census, housing, and policy data on the study communities in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario and then review what a sample of community producers told us about the kinds of places they are planning and building and the kind of consumers they imagine inhabiting the communities.

Figure 1: Map Showing Cities Studied



Imagining Complete Communities and Suburban Dreams

From the early days of the garden city movement planners have advocated building communities with a mix of uses and housing to accommodate a wide range of community members. Mumford (1949) encouraged planners to consider the life cycle of the household as a template from which to calculate appropriate types of housing to meet the needs of all members of society. His admonitions fell on fertile ground. By the time Perin (1977) evaluated the housing system in the US she found suburban landscapes reflecting an implicit social ordering accepted by housing producers.

The hierarchy of land uses is at the same time the ladder of life: one climbs the ladder as the “natural progression” through the stages of the life cycle—from renting an apartment or townhouse, duplex, or

attached row house, to owning, as still another step, any one of those, along the way to the ultimate rung, that of owning a single-family-detached house. In taking the ladder rung by rung the movement is altogether upward, an evolutionary progress as well, toward salvation from “lower forms” to a “final, divinely ordained form”. (Perin 1977, 47)

Many studies have elaborated understandings of the significance and the problems associated with the dream of detached housing in suburban development (e.g., Cooper Marcus 1995; Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 2000). Clapham (2005) and Fincher (2004) offered useful insights into housing careers and pathways, showing the ways that consumers link family life stages with housing needs. Canadian studies have also linked life cycle effects with housing, showing that family composition—especially the presence of children—is associated with housing type (CMHC 1996; Krishnan and Krotki 1993). Canadian suburban histories (Harris 1996; 2004; Solomon 2007) and studies of community practices (Blais 2010; Sewell 2009) revealed a legacy and idealization of detached homeownership for nuclear families—similar in many ways to the American (Perin 1977) and New Zealand (Fincher and Gooder 2007) experience. In the post-war period various processes—such as declining household size and growing housing unit size—began reducing population densities in Canadian cities as fewer people occupied ever larger houses. At the same time as pricing and zoning mechanisms facilitated low-density growth (Blais 2010; Levine 2006), scattered pockets of high-density housing appeared in suburban areas (Bunting, Filion and Priston 2000).

Multi-family housing in suburban areas is not new in Canada. Don Mills new town built in the Toronto suburbs in the 1950s included a substantial stock of rental apartments (Hancock 1994). After provinces adopted legislation permitting condominium ownership in the 1960s, cities with relatively high housing costs witnessed an upsurge in apartments and row houses. As Skaburskis (1988a, 1988b) noted, condominium tenure allowed younger, less affluent households to gain a foothold in the market and provided options for seniors leaving detached houses.

Over the last several decades households in many communities have become smaller, less likely to include nuclear families, and more socially and economically polarized than they were in earlier generations (Rose and Ville-neuve 2006; Townshend and Walker 2010). Housing costs have increased dramatically in some parts of the country (Moore and Skaburskis 2004; Skaburskis 2004; Skaburskis and Moos 2010; Walker and Carter 2010), contributing to growth in multi-family housing options, smaller lot sizes, and higher

suburban densities (CMHC 2011; Langlois 2010). Condominium living caught on, especially in Canada's larger cities, so that younger households came to see purchasing a condo as a stepping stone towards eventual ownership of a house (Preston 1991; Preston *et al* 1993; Skaburskis 1988a; 1988b; 2004). In Canada's largest cities high housing costs made condominium ownership the only choice for a growing number of households (Daly 2011). By 2010, over half the housing starts in Vancouver (CMA) and 45 percent of those in Toronto (CMA) were condominiums (CMHC 2011). While urban living has become a popular option for some household types, such as affluent seniors seeking to avoid the burden of maintaining a detached suburban home (Fincher 2004) and single women establishing their independence and identity (Kern 2010), lower housing costs (per square foot) in the suburban fringe continue to draw new purchasers.

Conventional suburban sprawl has been under attack by planning scholars for many years (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck 2000; Jacobs 1961). As new urbanism and smart growth theories influenced planning practice in the 1990s and 2000s (Fainstein 2000; Grant 2006) planners frequently suggested that increasing household diversity required greater variety in housing types and mix. Where conventional suburbs were criticized as producing sterile, homogeneous landscapes of white, middle-class, nuclear families (Nicolaidis 2006), new communities designed according to urban principles would rely on place diversity to produce social diversity and affordability (Talen 2008). Duany and Plater-Zyberk (1992) argued for building traditional towns, rather than suburban fragments. The Charter of the New Urbanism argued that providing mixed housing contributed to creating an "authentic" community:

Within neighborhoods, a broad range of housing types and price levels can bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction, strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community. (CNU 2001, online)

Recent plans in Canadian cities have shown the influence of new urbanism and smart growth theories (Gordon and Tamminga 2002; Grant 2003; Grant 2009). Some plans, such as an amendment to the plan for Cornell in Markham (planned in association with Duany and often described as the largest new urbanist community in North America), directly echoed the language of the CNU charter quoted above in committing to creating an authentic community (Markham 2007, 38). More commonly, however, Canadian plans and planners discuss providing "complete communities" with a mix of housing types and mixed uses in a compact form, often in association with public transportation nodes. Provincial and regional policies, such as growth objectives in Metro

Vancouver and *Places to Grow* legislation in Ontario, directed municipalities to focus on providing a mix of housing types as a key component of creating complete communities.

This Plan is about building *complete communities*, whether urban or rural. These are communities that are well-designed, offer transportation choices, accommodate people at all stages of life and have the right mix of housing, a good range of jobs, and easy access to stores and services to meet daily needs. (Ontario 2006, 13)

In the context of a planning system which actively promotes mixing housing types to address diverse housing needs, and a market place which operates in conditions of growing social polarization and mismatch between household incomes and housing prices (Vital Signs 2010), how do those producing new suburban areas understand the objectives they pursue and the challenges they face? The next section compares current conditions in the areas studied to set the context within which we interpret our interview results.

Comparing Development Conditions

Tracking suburban trends across Canada reveals an interesting mix of housing types and densities appearing in new developments (Gordon and Vipond 2005; Grant 2009). Here we report on communities investigated with field visits and interviews in 2007 and 2010. Table 1 describes some key characteristics of the cities studied, and compares conditions within the relevant larger census metropolitan areas (CMAs) and Canada overall. In British Columbia we examined the City of Surrey, on the edge of Vancouver, and the neighbouring municipality of the Township of Langley. In Alberta we investigated Calgary and the City of Airdrie, 35 kilometres to the north. In Ontario we looked at the Town of Markham (on Toronto's northern border) and the City of Barrie (90 km north). The communities feature several common attributes associated with suburban environments. They have high rates of homeownership, high average incomes, and a greater than average share of households with children. With the exception of Calgary, they have household sizes higher than the national average. All three metropolitan regions are growing rapidly as targets of migration, increasingly from international sources (Hou and Bourne 2004; Ley and Germain 2000).

Table 1: Characteristics of Cities and Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA) Studied (2006 Census)

Cities studied and larger CMA	Population 2006 census	Percent of owners	Median household income in dollars	Percent of households with couple and children	Average household size
Langley Township, BC	93,726	86	69805	37	2.8
Surrey, BC	394,976	75	60168	35	3.0
Vancouver CMA	2,116,581	65	55231	29	2.6
Airdrie, AB	28,927	89	78097	43	2.9
Calgary, AB	988,193	73	67238	30	2.5
Calgary CMA	1,079,310	74	68579	31	2.6
Barrie, ON*	128,430	76	64832	35	2.7
Markham, ON	261,573	89	79924	46	3.4
Toronto CMA	5,113,149	68	64128	34	2.8
Canadian average	31,612,897	68	53634	29	2.5

Source: Statistics Canada (2007)

* Note: Barrie is not included within the Toronto CMA, which provides the referent CMA for it.

Property values and housing types differed in the cities studied, as shown in Table 2. Communities in the Vancouver region are constrained in outward expansion by the Agricultural Land Reserve enforced to protect farmland from encroachment (Hanna 1997). The region has had a long history of promoting density and livability (Hutton 2011). To achieve growth targets, cities in the region have adjusted policies and practices to rezone areas for higher densities and mixes of uses and housing types in urban nodes. Thus low density suburban areas in Langley have been rezoned as “mixed residential” to permit intensification, supporting new development forms. Housing prices in the region were among the highest in Canada between 2008 and 2010. Langley Township has homes with more rooms on average and larger lots than Surrey (CMHC 2012a). A relatively small proportion of housing starts were in detached forms. Higher housing values in Langley reflect a legacy of large homes on large (2-acre) lots and a significant proportion of high-status adult communities. The area also includes modest bungalow neighbourhoods. While South Surrey has some high status areas, Dowling (1996) argued that Surrey experienced a “lingering spoiled identity” as homogeneous and working class. In recent years, however, Surrey has attracted many immigrants: some of its neighbourhoods have high proportions of foreign-born residents (Welcome BC 2006). Table 3 offers samples of policy statements from the plans in the study communities. Both Surrey and Langley Township refer to the objective of achieving complete communities in response to the regional growth mandate. They emphasize providing a range of housing types to meet the needs of diverse households, and to ensure mixed uses.

**Table 2: Proportion of Housing Starts by City and Housing Type
(2008 - 2010 Inclusive)**

	Single-detached	Semi-detached/ Townhouse	Apartment and Other	Single-detached as % of total	Median price of single-detached (2010)
Langley Township, BC	641	607	1002	28%	\$699,000
Surrey, BC	4,599	2,934	4,222	39%	\$610,000
Airdrie, AB	1,963	368	292	75%	\$389,700
Calgary, AB	11,328	3,695	6,831	52%	\$441,820
Barrie, ON	839	204	590	51%	\$368,695
Markham, ON	2398	1,427	1,461	45%	\$539,990

Source: CMHC (2011)

Housing starts in Alberta showed a preponderance of detached homes (see Table 2). The average house price in Airdrie—where detached units accounted for three-quarters of recent housing starts—was lower than the average price in Calgary. Consumers can buy larger homes and lots for their dollars in Airdrie than they could in Calgary: one developer selling similar products in both communities listed front garage homes from the mid \$300s in Airdrie but from the \$400s in Calgary (Hopewell 2012a, 2012b). Calgary has a mix of suburban neighbourhoods, some with large homes and some with smaller homes targeting different segments of the market (CMHC 2012b). Both Calgary and Airdrie are partners in the Calgary Regional Partnership, which in 2010 commissioned a study on complete communities. Calgary planning policy has a legacy of promoting new urbanism, sustainability, and smart growth policies encouraging higher densities and mixed housing types (Calgary 1995; Grant 2006). Its plan explicitly addresses the aim of providing complete communities (see Table 3). By contrast, the Airdrie plan calls for a range of housing opportunities but does not use the term complete communities.

Table 3: Sample Policy Statements from Official Plans

<p>City of Surrey, <i>Official Community Plan</i> (2010, p 47)</p> <p>“The City is committed to making Surrey ‘complete’ at the City level and within the various towns and neighbourhoods. A complete community offers a wide range of business opportunities, local employment, housing choices, convenient services and viable alternatives to cars for transportation. ... Provide a range of choices in the type, tenure and cost of housing.”</p>	<p>City of Calgary, <i>Municipal Development Plan</i> (2009, section 2.2, and 2.2.4)</p> <p>“Providing ‘complete’ communities” ... “Complete communities are vibrant, green and safe places, where people of varying ages, incomes, interests and lifestyles feel comfortable and can choose between a variety of building types and locations in which to live, and where daily needs can be met.”</p>	<p>Town of Markham, <i>Official Plan</i> (2005, section 3.14.3.b.viii)</p> <p>“Residential development within a planning district will be designed to encourage a broad range of housing, by type and tenure, suitable for different age levels, lifestyles and family structures.”</p>
<p>Township of Langley, <i>Official Community Plan</i> (2010, p 4)</p> <p>“The Official Community Plan promotes development of complete communities and increased community diversity by: ...setting objectives to provide for an economic range of housing types, densities and sizes..., to provide for sufficient commercial development to meet the needs of residents ...”</p>	<p>City of Airdrie, <i>Municipal Development Plan</i> (2009, section 2.1)</p> <p>“Providing for a range of housing opportunities is necessary for a balanced community, both socially and economically.”</p>	<p>City of Barrie, <i>Official Community Plan</i> (2011, section 4.2.1.b)</p> <p>“To encourage the creation of complete communities through a mix of land uses serving the residential planning areas in order to maximize convenient access to community facilities and services.”</p>

Growth management legislation in Ontario promotes complete communities (Ontario 2005). Markham is within the area governed by the growth plan, but Barrie lies north of the protected green belt (Macdonald and Keil 2012). Markham has committed to new urbanism and smart growth principles for many years (Grant 2006). It actively advocated intensification and mixes of housing types, although its 2005 plan did not use the language of complete communities (see Table 3). Despite municipal efforts to diversify the housing supply, detached units remain the most common types built in Markham between 2008 and 2010 (see Table 2). With only 51% of its housing starts in detached units, Barrie revealed a market largely split between detached units (appealing to households with children) and condominium apartments aimed at those retiring near the lake (see Table 2). The average detached house cost some \$70,000

less in Barrie than in Markham, and featured a larger unit and lot. Like plans for several other communities studied, the Barrie plan advocated complete communities (see Table 3).

To gain greater insight into the way that planning policies and market conditions affect understandings of the relationship between housing types and household needs we interviewed a sample of those involved in planning and building housing in the six communities.

Hearing the Perspectives of Producers

In 2007 and 2010 we interviewed those producing suburban environments: planners, municipal councillors, and developers (including builders and consultants).¹ We visited Surrey, Calgary, and Markham in 2007 as part of a study of suburban development trends in mid-sized cities. In 2010 we extended our research to smaller cities within the commuter-shed of the same urban region: this time we included Langley Township, Airdrie, and Barrie. We used a mix of purposive sampling (finding likely participants by internet searching), convenience sampling (working through our own social networks), and snowballing strategies (asking participants to refer us to others). The sample of 59 respondents (Table 4) participated in semi-structured, in-person interviews, which we recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. The interviews took between 40 and 90 minutes and included questions such as: What are community residents looking for in new suburban areas? To what extent do producers try to accommodate a variety of household types? What are some of the benefits of promoting a mix of housing types? The next sections reflect on the perspectives offered by the respondents. To protect respondent confidentiality we use codes that begin with city (e.g., C for Calgary), then year of interview (07 or 10), respondent category (e.g., C for councillor), and finally unique interview sequence number identifier for respondents in each community.

Table 4: Interview Sample by City and Respondent Category (2007 and 2010)

	Planners	Councillors	Developers	Total
Langley Township, BC	3	3	3	9
Surrey, BC	2	2	6	10
Airdrie, AB	3	1	7	11
Calgary, AB	7	1	4	12
Barrie, ON	2	5	1	8
Markham, ON	4	3	2	9
Total	21	15	23	59

Planner perspectives:

The 21 planners interviewed reported that they promoted diverse housing types and densities to meet the needs of different household types. Planners from Surrey, Markham, and Calgary explicitly discussed their aims of achieving complete communities, neighbourhoods, or cities. For instance, a Surrey planner (S07P03) rejected any implication that Surrey was suburban, saying, “We are trying to build Surrey as a complete city.” A Calgary planner (C07P02) talked about creating adaptable communities that can accommodate residents throughout their lives as needs change. A Markham planner (M07P02) worried that a concentration of small condominium units would not create the complete community the town envisioned in its centre.

Planners often directly linked a mix of housing forms with a mandate to accommodate diverse households and populations with changing needs. In Markham and Surrey immigrants were perceived as affecting the market. A Markham planner explained.

(M07P08) We’re quite multi-cultural... [That] supported our move to diversify our housing stock. ... Mr and Mrs Markham of a decade or two ago, they wanted their piece of the Earth with their single-family house. ... Their children and many of the immigrants we have coming to Markham, they like apartment life. ... They like a smaller lawn, maybe still a good sized house.

In the smaller cities planners affirmed the importance of diversity in housing supply without talking about complete communities. Several planners noted that the residents of their communities had not given up on traditional notions of suburban homeownership. Planners in Airdrie and Barrie commonly pointed to the survival of the American or Canadian dream of the detached home. One planner in Barrie (B10P22) argued that young families specifically moved to Barrie to buy detached houses in neighbourhoods of people just like them. Planners in the smaller cities recognized that people resist integrating housing types at the neighbourhood level. A planner in Airdrie noted:

(A10P02) Out here, it really is that American dream feeling. Everyone wants the single-family house with the attached garage and the yard. ... We did this question in [a community] survey and we ... said, “If your house is here, what is appropriate next to you?”... And people were saying, “Well, you know, right now, if I am living in a townhouse, anything is appropriate next to me, or whatever. But as soon as I reach that status where I can own my deluxe house then I don’t want any of that near me. The only thing I want to see around me is more single-family homes, more double-car garages.”

In the two BC communities planners suggested that those buying homes had begun to adjust expectations in ways that supported goals for mixing housing types at higher densities. Despite the resilience of the suburban home ownership dream in Langley, a planner there said:

(L10P03) The ideal is still there for everyone to own: not a quarter-acre anymore but at least a postage stamp that they can call their own. And they can dig and nobody can tell them what to do about it. That is still the goal. ... I think people are realizing that perhaps they won't be able to get their house first, and they'll have to go into a townhouse or an apartment.

Another Langley planner affirmed the challenge of achieving the Canadian dream, noting that the mixed housing policy at the neighbourhood scale sought to offer options.

(L10P02) As a family, maybe your first purchase is a townhouse. You can stay in the same neighbourhood and buy your single family house. And as you get older, you can buy a multi-family rancher or an apartment as the kids leave the home. And all that can happen in one neighbourhood. That is the primary intent of [the housing mix policy].

Some planners indicated that they hoped that developers would become more willing to try new strategies to test the market's willingness to accept diversity. A Calgary planner (C07P09) argued that the city was changing as young people moved in looking for trendy loft apartments rather than detached houses. A few respondents, such as one Langley planner, envisioned bold new ways of living in the suburbs.

(L10P01) You can actually find a good critical mass of articles about raising children in a very highly urbanized area. ... So this whole thing about raising kids with a backyard is changing. So I think hopefully it's a fact of life, and those with single-family homes will be a minority. ... Maybe people can raise kids in three-bedroom apartments in the future: many other countries do that.

Other categories of respondents were less convinced that Canadians were ready for radical changes in housing expectations.

Councillor perspectives:

Only 15 municipal councillors participated, yielding a smaller sample than for other categories of respondents and constraining our ability to make robust comparisons across cities. Several councillors articulated support for the complete community concept. For instance, a Surrey councillor explained that while the community remained low-rise it was mixing uses and housing types in ways to attract residents from Vancouver and to re-house older households.

(S07C02) We are doing a lot more housing oriented towards the empty-nesters, because we are seeing more of that. Also, we want to get the empty-nesters out of the homes. ... We are getting the people that used to live in Yaletown, but she is now pregnant and they want to have their piece of grass, so they move to Surrey. That is where our pressures are, so we want to get our empty-nesters out of their homes. As a result we are building a lot of lifestyle-type of places now. If anything, I would say that is a growing trend in Surrey—building those lifestyle, higher density, complete communities, all within a subdivision, not like building communities in a large area, but building communities in a very small area.

Several councillors in the rapidly growing communities echoed planner voices in wanting to help residents imagine new housing options that let them go, as one Calgary councillor (C07C11) said, “full circle in life” in one community. An elected official in Airdrie articulated the most explicit scenario of the household / housing life cycle within the discourse of the complete community.

(A10C01) I mean it really is about that whole complete community. When I’m explaining it to people, I say, “You’re just getting out of university, you’re getting your first job, and you live in maybe a small one-bedroom apartment condo. And then you find the love of your life, and now you want a little bit more room. And maybe you’ve moved up to a townhouse condo. And now you discover that you’re about to have a whole whack of kids. And perhaps a garage-less single-family house is your first stop on a house. And then after a while, wildly successful careers, you work your way up to the big estate home on top of the hill. And then your kids bail on you and you are alone. And the next thing you know, you are finding yourself back into maybe a two-bedroom condo apartment sort of thing. So you have to allow for all of that to occur within our community.”

While councillors interviewed in western cities described a changing housing market, some Ontario elected officials challenged notions of mixed housing

embedded in the complete community concept. One Markham councillor explained the rationale behind income and housing type segregation on the basis of an expected housing career.

(M07C06) For instance in Berczy there are a lot of townhouses, especially on Bur Oak. You end up with a lot of single-family. Then you get bigger single-family. There are options there. People will tell you there are not as many as there should be, but you have to ask yourself what you want your community to be. I didn't move to Markham from downtown Toronto because I wanted to move into a community where there was a great mix of housing—because I thought I was moving up in the world at the time.

Barrie councillors acknowledged retiring seniors were creating a market for luxury condominium apartments near the lake, but they saw most households as committed to the Canadian Dream. One explained:

(B10C14) People want to live in single-detached homes: that is part of the story of Barrie. You move to a place like Barrie because it's safe and you can own a home for \$300,000 and have a yard and raise your kids in it. ... You know, the Canadian dream is generally to raise your family in a home with the space to do it. So that, I think, has brought many, many, many families to Barrie.

In the context of Canada's larger metropolitan regions suburban housing markets may be targeted at particular consumers in ways that local political leaders understand and support. In the BC communities, where attached housing starts are more prominent, political leaders were attuned to housing markets that were accommodating new pressures on consumers to moderate their housing ambitions. In the Ontario communities councillors continued to describe detached houses as normative in a context where those house forms constitute a significant proportion of housing starts. The two councillors in Alberta presented something of an anomaly: they spoke out as advocates of greater housing mix and densities even as detached forms dominated new housing starts in their communities.

Developer perspectives:

The 23 developers interviewed included large-scale developers of master-planned communities, development contractors, development consultants, house builders, and developers of suburban commercial areas. Some operated across multiple cities while others did business within a single municipality. Their perspectives on housing mix and types reflected their divergent positions

within the market. Most developers did not use the term “complete communities”. They recognized the housing market as highly fragmented and typically staked out particular segments of it, such as empty-nesters or move-up consumers, for their business model.

Developers from Surrey to Barrie often argued that the single-detached house remained the Canadian dream despite planners’ efforts to regulate to promote mix and density. For instance, a developer in Surrey noted that changes would occur only when the market was ready.

(S07D01) People still want single-family. It is starting to evolve. If you go downtown now—or in some of the higher density areas in some of the other communities—you see baby strollers. You didn’t see that five years ago, right? Before it was just singles and new couples without kids; now you are starting to see kids in these places. [In Surrey] they still want to have the piece of dirt in the backyard for the kids. Is that changing? Yes, it is changing. Will it disappear at some point? Maybe, but that won’t be for a hundred years. The planners want to see that vision of theirs come true, but it is not going to happen in the next five years, or ten years, or maybe even 50 years. You have to wait a few cycles, and then people’s expectations start evolving.

Some large-scale Calgary developers argued that the amount of attached product would likely increase in the city as housing costs escalated. One developer (C07D08) noted, “For the younger families starting out now they’re looking more at necessity to have some equity built up in a condominium apartment style unit, or a town-home. Then eventually start to move up.” Some other developers believed that Calgary would remain primarily a market for detached housing. One explained the factors connecting some household types to detached homes:

(C07D05) Calgary is a winter city and people still love their attached garage, preferably out front. ... We’re a young city, a lot of young families and people like that convenience of being able to pull their vehicle in, close the door, unload the kids and groceries and so forth in February and not have to worry about shuttling people back and forth.

Developers acknowledged several factors as driving change in housing mix and household choices. Some described immigration from Asia as playing a role by bringing in people with different expectations about housing. Bank financing and mortgage rules were cited as affecting the size and types of units on the

market, as well as the numbers of households able to become homeowners. High land values and inflation in housing markets were the most commonly mentioned factors altering choices. Developers did not describe policy as driving gains in housing diversity in suburban markets. Despite the decades-long influence of policies promoting mix in Markham, for instance, developers called the town a high-income area where people moved to enjoy a particular lifestyle. One developer (M07D07) criticized planning policy as unrealistic. Similarly, a Surrey developer dismissed any notion that local planning policy to promote intensification and complete communities was influencing market changes.

(S07D01) Recently, when the developers are doing the multi-family the city is turning around and saying... "You are finally listening to us." I say to them, "No, not at all. We are listening to you, but that's not the reason why. It is land values."

While many developers expressed resistance to mixing housing types on a street, the larger master-planned community developers were most likely to talk about providing a range of housing types and densities to encourage diversity, remain competitive, and sell "community." They accommodated risk and captured greater market share by organizing segregated pockets of diverse housing types in ways they believe that consumers can accept. A developer in Airdrie (A10D10) explained the motivation to appeal widely: "If you don't have house types that can attract or something that they can attain then you are boxing yourself out of [a market]."

In the BC communities developers adapted their marketing model to recognize that high demand suburban communities like Surrey and Langley are urbanizing because professionals have little choice but to moderate their housing aspirations even as they relocate to the suburbs in pursuit of the Canadian dream. A Langley condo developer described the implications for suburban housing markets, suggesting major challenges to the dream lay ahead.

(L10D05) The traditional sort of progression would be that you would be in a condo [apartment], then a townhouse, and then a house. As your family got older and more mature, more people were in it. Now... for the first time, we are building 3-bedroom condos because some buyers are recognizing that they are going to probably stay in a condo. They are not going to go through the traditional progression of condo to townhouse to detached home. And so we are starting to accommodate that now.

Developers in Airdrie acknowledged the dominance of the detached housing market in that city, although some suggested that rising costs could be constraining choices for young families. A group of executives from one company explained their understanding of the market.

(A10D05C) But for the most part, people go to places like Airdrie, Cochrane, and Spruce Grove, whatever... I don't think it has changed for years: the real formula is they go there for a better quality of life at less price. They think they get a better environment to raise their kids in. ...

(A10D05A) 80% of our buyers want that single-family, single-lot experience.

(A10D05B) Yes, they like the white picket fence and their own yard.

Developers described themselves as responsive to markets. When costs force people to choose smaller or attached units, developers seek to provide such units. An Airdrie developer (A10D09) suggested that townhouses were selling well because they “hit the affordability button” for young families. Some developers argued that if the economy improves people will again want to buy detached houses: “That is everybody’s dream” (A10D05A). What’s more, some developers said, people prefer to live in relatively homogeneous areas. Some developers denied there was a market for attached housing in Airdrie, and cautioned authorities to avoid forcing planning principles on a market that was not “mature” (A10D10).

Understanding Contemporary Practices

If Canadian suburbs at some point were relatively homogeneous environments of detached houses, they do not currently reflect that stereotype. Contemporary planning and building practices in fast growing suburbs of some of Canada’s largest urban areas revealed a mix of housing types and household types. Detached houses remained the principal component of the new housing product mix in areas where the cost of housing was perceived as somewhat affordable relative to middle class incomes. In areas of high housing prices relative to incomes, however, attached units and condominium apartments comprised a larger share of the market, and advertising messages more explicitly targeted particular household types for particular housing products. Housing types in most communities continued to be produced in separate pods: clusters of large lot houses, clusters of small lot houses, clusters of attached houses, and apartment buildings on busier routes. Marketing messages and the comments of those interviewed often linked housing types to particular household types.

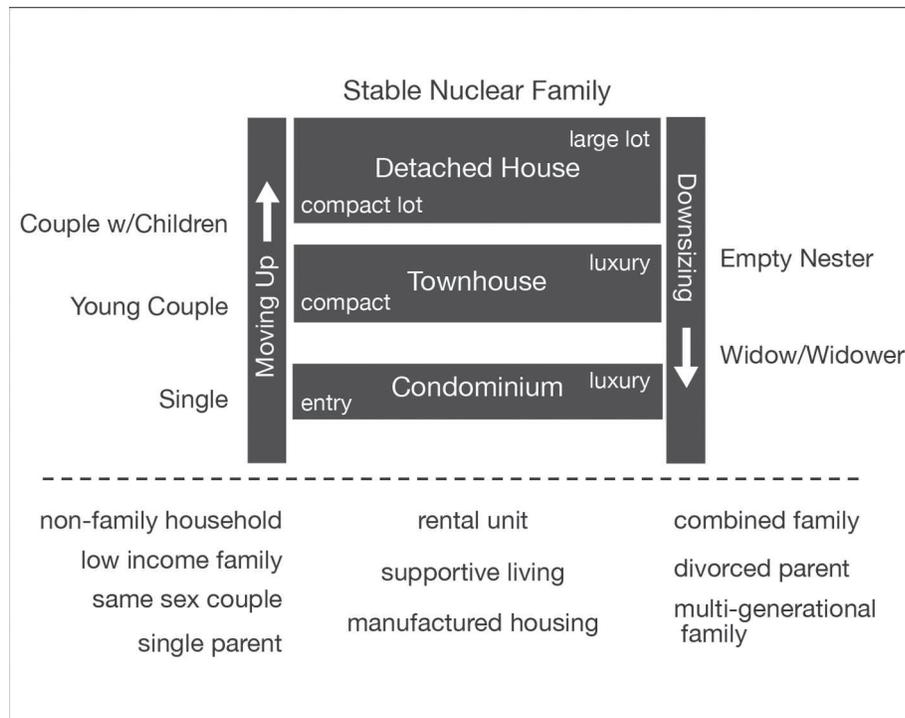
Planners envisioned a diverse mix of housing types and other uses integrated within a relatively fine-grained urban fabric to create complete communities where people live, work, and play and where public transportation and walking provide viable alternatives to automobile use. Planning policies in each of the communities actively encouraged such mixing. Many planners interviewed believed that their communities were making progress in achieving aims to produce complete communities, but some lamented that the market was not receptive to the idea of fully integrating types of housing or types of uses. In the commuter districts of Airdrie and Barrie planners understood that conditions did not yet support the patterns of housing mix occurring in other areas where higher land values enforced compromises. In general, however, planners held that the pattern towards greater diversity and mix in housing types was not only normative but was a natural process as markets matured and the region became more urbanized.

Many of the producers socially constructed the transition of suburban form and pattern towards greater mix and density as evolutionary in character. Planners envisioned complete communities as advanced, progressive, and unavoidable alternatives to conventional suburbs; they saw themselves as agents of change helping to shape markets and transform conditions. Developers talked about consumer preferences evolving or maturing as markets became more expensive: they saw themselves as responding to but not leading changes in suburban markets. Councillors ranged in views between those perspectives.

Housing producers we interviewed continued to believe that homeownership remains the suburban dream (especially for families with children), although they argued that consumers now need to take several steps up the housing ladder to achieve that ambition (Figure 2). Developers structured the products they delivered to facilitate and mobilize upward consumption of housing types through consumers' housing careers. They often described themselves as building communities, but in doing so they sorted the market into product categories linked to particular consumer profiles. Their range of products became broader in recent years to accommodate greater fragmentation in the market; however, as Figure 2 suggests, their discussions about the housing ladder omitted some household types (such as same-sex couples and single-parent families) and some housing types (such as manufactured or rental units) as options. Producers acknowledged growing demand for attached housing types in suburban areas. They argued that the detached home remained the dream for young families with children and for households moving up the housing ladder.² They also believed that households adjusted housing ambitions to the means available, aided in that adjustment by new cultural values supporting living at higher densities. Consequently, in some markets developers offered and advertised diverse housing products intended

to meet the needs of different household types and means. Rather than advocating the integration of product types, developers argued that the market required a degree of separation to alleviate consumer social and investment anxieties about mixing. Developers tended to see financial forces rather than policies as the major factors driving consumers into non-traditional housing forms. As suburban communities adopt more options to accommodate a range of households, they simultaneously facilitate the process whereby housing is marketed and understood as an investment made by households moving their way up the housing ladder.

Figure 2: Producers' Normative Housing Ladder



Councillors' perspectives shared elements of the views offered by planners and those voiced by developers. Some councillors strongly supported planning policy promoting complete communities while others raised personal or community concerns about the effects of mixing housing and household types. Despite the high costs of housing in these communities, few councillors (or other respondents, for that matter) discussed the need for affordable housing or rental housing for those of low incomes or modest means. The new suburbs

of these fast growing communities may be diverse in housing types, in ethnicity, and in household types but they remain relatively homogeneous by class. Like their planning staff, councillors envisioned their suburban communities as becoming more urbane and vibrant, yet they offered little idea of how they would accommodate less affluent households in the mix.

Images of exuberant city living appear to be influencing suburban development as planners, councillors, and developers seek to convince community residents and home purchasers that fringe neighbourhoods feature positive attributes increasingly associated with urban revitalization and downtown living. Density has been recast as vibrancy and choice; difference redefined as diversity and entertainment; attached housing relabelled as convenient, low-maintenance, and neighbourly. Jane Jacobs (1961) might approve of the sentiment, if not of the neighbourhoods actually being produced. As urban attributes become more highly valued in society, marketers have attached those attributes to suburban living. Thus the planner's task of directing developers to consider smaller multi-family units in higher density communities may be aided by changing cultural conditions and marketing discourses that seek to convince households to make non-traditional choices, and by market forces that affect purchasing power. Further research with suburban community residents could provide additional insight into the demand-side of the housing equation: how do housing consumers conceive of the relationship between housing and household type? To what extent are homebuyers ready for complete communities or committed to the Canadian dream?

Research into planning practice provides useful insights on how policies do or do not influence development outcomes. Many authors have argued that new development areas would be denser and more mixed if planning practices changed (Duany et al. 2000), if zoning regulations were eased (Levine 2006), or if pricing mechanisms were altered (Blais 2010). Policies and regulations certainly play a role in influencing market outcomes. As our analysis has shown, however, cultural behaviours and expectations influence those producing housing (as well as those inhabiting it). The policy and regulatory context interacts with other factors to produce residential spaces.

As planners seek to fulfill their goal of creating complete communities instead of pockets of suburbia, they can benefit from understanding the market dynamics altering consumer choices and the ways in which developers interpret and shape housing aspirations. Moreover, planners might more fully evaluate the potential implications of the ways in which contemporary discourses link housing mix and density to behaviour and expectations of place. Producers are collaborating in socially constructing the inhabitants of suburban residential communities as upwardly mobile, investment-conscious, cosmopolitan citizens with discrete needs according to age, income, ethnicity³, and household

type. At one time producers expected residents to spend a large part of their lives in a single home, but today they describe residents who change homes several times as they navigate (re)productive processes. What happens to attachment to place when houses are viewed as appreciating commodities? To what extent does moving up the housing ladder increase the costs of housing as purchasers add transaction costs to their resale prices? The greater affordability envisioned as an outcome of housing options may diminish as greater housing mobility becomes part of the ownership pattern.

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Notes

¹ In 2010 we also interviewed a small sample of residents in each of the six communities. Those results are not included in this analysis.

² While we have begun interviewing residents to understand whether they share producers' understandings of the housing ladder, at this point we have a sample size that is too small for inclusion in the analysis. Anecdotal evidence suggests that segments of the consumer market are shifting preferences, but further research is necessary.

³ Despite the significant contribution of immigrants to communities such as Markham and Surrey, housing marketers have been somewhat reluctant to focus advertising on that market (Perrott 2007).

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