

URBAN UTOPIAS / A small band of visionaries has remedies for the unhealthy, damaging symptoms of suburban sprawl, and they want to bring their ideas to Edmonton. But will homeowners buy in?

Recasting the suburbs

It's a warm spring evening in Lago Lindo, home to 5,000 people on the city's northern edge. You know it's a suburb because there's a vast farmer's field flanking the north end of the community. To the south, at 167th Avenue and 97th Street, a collection of stores, banks and food outlets squats in a parking lot.

A typical suburban retreat, Lago Lindo is designed around cul-de-sacs, a man-made lake, two schools and a community league. In the heart of the 20-year-old community is its sandy playground.

Here, youngsters scramble up the steps of the slide with sleeveless abandon. Their parents chat on nearby benches, rising every so often to survey a scarp of knees or medicine a diaper. These families love their area, and if you ask them about the drawbacks of suburban sprawl, they look somewhat crestfallen.

Edmonton father Brad Young and his partner, Lindsay Tomlinson, say Lago Lindo is a great place to raise their two children, aged five and six. Tomlinson likes being away from the "hustle and bustle" of downtown. And there are lots of other kids here for youngsters to play with in Lago Lindo.

It's a nice family environment, says Tomlinson, a social worker based at the University of Alberta.

In fact, there is increasing evidence the suburban environment has a negative effect on families—whose children are getting ever fatter due to a too-dependent lifestyle.

In the creek beside the playground, other Lago Lindo residents are talking about another pitfall in suburbia—what it's like to live within a landscape plagued by noise, smog and cars.

A single thoroughfare in and out of Lago Lindo leads to heavy congestion and high speeds, hazardous for children and adults alike. Mary Ann Multer, a mother of two girls in elementary school, says her kids can't even walk to the milk store because it's too dangerous to cross busy streets. So the family can stroll around the lake, says the Dairy Queen, without taking risks.



Dan Burden, a leading proponent of new urbanism, has a vision for reshaping suburbia. He shares his ideas, like making communities more walkable and less car-friendly, during a recent visit to an Edmonton neighbourhood.

These complaints are hardly news to Dan Burden, an American expert on suburban sprawl who is meeting this particular night with locals to discuss how they can make their own cities safer, more walkable, and better for families. He's been hired by WalkEdmonton, a group interested in easing urban sprawl.

"When we designed these kind of developments, we didn't think about anything except people's lifestyles," says Burden as he tours Lago Lindo, snapping photos.

Pat White, program director of the Lago Lindo/Klaramont community league, says he would help if there were a paved path connecting the area's two schools. Then parents could walk with their bike and push strollers across a broad field to the school, rather than along, which creates daily traffic hazards at both Lake and Bishop Grechuk schools.

"We could just connect places, which would make it that much better," she says.

At the end of the evening, Burden recommends installing clear, circular medians through the community's central street, to slow traffic and give pedestrians an edge.

City planners at the meeting say the suggested changes are good, but they all cost money, and there are many more requests for change. As for the community's other concerns, Burden offers only shrug: the trouble comes from the way the area is sited along 97th Street, which has no sidewalks in places.

his asthma and headaches increased with the dense of suburban sprawl in the 38 U.S. metropolitan areas and pins part of the blame on air pollution. The Sierra Club, an environmental group, says 45 per cent of pollution comes from automobiles, key to living a suburban lifestyle.

The modern concrete, paved in asphalt and concrete, has also been blamed for drainage problems because it's not enough exposed soil to soak up and slowly disperse precipitation in urban centres. This has become a big issue in B.C.'s Lower Mainland, where poor drainage creates floods and landslides and fish habitat with silt, road and other pollutants. Prime agricultural lands are also threatened by the expansion of the burbs, of particular concern to Edmonton conservationists.

And there are social costs.

Critics claim suburban design elements such as giant front garages, which swallow cars at the end of the day and discharge them in the morning, create

distance among neighbours. Furthermore, the expense of building and maintaining roads, services and schools to Edmonton's ever-expanding suburbs pits new communities against residents of mature neighbourhoods, who complain their schools are closing, their curbs are crumbling and their roads have potholes.

The City of Edmonton says that by 2013, it will need to invest \$3 billion to refurbish aging infrastructure. But only \$1.7 billion has been budgeted for those repairs.

At the same time, Edmonton's growth has been climbing along four per cent a year. Housing starts are at record highs and, according to a city report on development called Smart Choices, the total value of Edmonton building permits exceeded \$1 billion in 2002, the largest figure in more than 20 years. Such growth makes it possible for city services such as transit, schools and parks to keep up.

Officials are searching for solutions.

Recently, city officials suggested new homebuyers pay another tax that would help pave new roads in suburbs, an idea originally supported by council. Coun. Ron Harter has proposed a halt on new suburban development until somebody figures out a way to pay for burgeoning costs of servicing that growth.

Smart Choices points to public transit-oriented development and other solutions to counter sprawl, including more housing in mature neighbourhoods and increasing population density through multifamily housing. But so far, it's just talk. The city is obliged to consider the costs of urban sprawl or deteriorating mature communities when making decisions about anything.

"We know we can't afford the taxes, and we know our city is crumbling and we can't afford the new subdivisions," says Ross Wein, a professor of resource at the University of Alberta and a board member of Legacy Lands Conservation, a

local environmental group.

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"As oil resources get depleted, what people will want is more central developments at high density. The last thing they'll want is far-flung mansions that cost a lot to get to and cost a lot to heat."

Richard Harris, associate director of the school of architecture at McMaster University

and World War, when pent-up demand for housing was unleashed after soldiers returned home. The economy—and the population—began to boom. The suburbs gained life, content as homeowners, a new Chevrolet and a dog named Fluffy came to define the Canadian family.

The design of suburbs seemed to make sense at the time, says Patrick Condon, a landscape architect and University of British Columbia professor. Wide streets, which now feel industrial and encourage speeding, once were thought necessary for emergency use by one of the defining features of the time: people like green space, so big yards blossomed. Keyhole crescents were seen as a safer place for kids to play street hockey. So now such loops have all but replaced the grid system of road design, making it hard to walk anywhere because of the circuitous routes and leading to traffic tieups on the freeways that do dissect suburbia.

The existing way the suburbs have been developed is a result of careful and correct consideration of smart problems," says Condon. "But the aggregate of those solutions has been to create a much larger problem... indeed I would say, a crisis in sustainability."

"That opinion is shared by many. Suburbia was the engine that drove post-war consumption as new cars, appliances and furniture became must-haves, requiring many trips to the suburban mall and eventually, the big box conglomerates. Once upon a time, that was perceived as a good thing.

But now those same items—the big boxes, two cars, relentless consumption—are being seen as a collective 21st-century bogymen. In the new documentary *The End of Suburbia*, James Howard Kandler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere*, calls suburbia "the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world."

"America took all of its post-war wealth," says Kandler, "and invested it in a living arrangement that was only 10 per cent of the site has been built so far, already looks quite different than other suburbs. It's more expensive because of the circuitous driving cars and heating or cooling big homes. Kandler predicts a "magma scramble" to get out of the suburbs.

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urbanism is seen as a partial solution to contemporary woes.

In many ways, new urbanism is largely a homage to times gone by, when communities were compact and densely populated, geared towards walking and featured a mix of uses, from shops to offices to homes, within a small area. Efficient, accessible public transit is key to the new urbanist movement, which also aims to put good architecture and eco-friendly technologies at the centre of ideas.

One such new urbanist experiment can be found in Surrey, B.C., a bedroom community 30 kilometres south of Vancouver with a population pushing 400,000 residents. There, city planners, local developers, landowners and experts from the University of British Columbia have created what they hope will be a model community for the continent. It's called East Clayton, a 200-acre 150-acre subdivision in the uplands of eastern Surrey, the opening gambit of a 250-acre project that will eventually house about 13,000 people.

The germ of the idea started in the 1990s, when Condon, a leading light of the new urbanist movement, assumed the UBC's James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Livable Environments, formed in response to the United Nations' call for environmental change. Condon began to cast about for a community willing to do something different, something that focused on issues of sustainability, environmental protection and community.

At the same time, Surrey was facing a huge road block to further development. Drainage problems caused by one of the defining features of the time: much concrete which blocks the natural process of dispersing water—had led to floods and lawsuits. The city, forced to pay out tens of millions of dollars in compensation, knew it was in trouble and welcomed Condon's expertise.

"It was fitting, it was everything coming together," recalls Surrey senior planner Wendy Whelan. "We were poised to do a plan for the area anyway and we were looking at a new public process as well, so we thought let's do these things together."

In the end, East Clayton was born of seven guiding principles created after much consultation and during an intensive roundtable discussion with all interested parties, known in the design community as a charrette. In a charrette, everyone with a stake in a project, from engineers to planners to landowners, gets together to design the bones of a project, sometimes in as little as a few days.

Today, the seven principles, including walkability and environmental preservation, can be seen on Surrey streets. And by the way, those tree-lined streets are easier to negotiate than typical suburban roads because East Clayton is designed on a grid system with numerous entry and exit points.

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Prairie Crossing: a daring suburban dream slowly rising from the range

Ask Elizabeth Stearns what she likes about living at Prairie Crossing, a new organic farm and community in the northwest of Chicago, and she can't stop talking about the "honour bus."

It's small and dark green and sits on a low table in front of an old farm building at this highly unusual suburban development, a conservation area with a farm to urban organic market garden at its heart.

Day or night, if Prairie Crossing residents need organic eggs, or wild rice, they can help themselves and leave money in the box. Stearns appreciates the honour bus, not only for her own use, but because of what it says about the place she lives.

"I like it because it speaks volumes about what we're trying to create and maintain here," she says. "A trusting community that meets your needs and feeds your soul."

It's an idyllic perspective, but as a symbol for Prairie Crossing, the honour bus is just the beginning.

It's not perfect—organic farmer Peg Scheffer says people have been known to steal from the honour box. Certainly, Prairie Crossing doesn't solve all of the problems of suburbia. It doesn't live up to all of its carefully crafted promises, but it's a step in the right direction. And according to its developers and residents, it hits most of them, most of the time.

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Elizabeth Stearns, about Prairie Crossing's "honour bus" that lets customers make purchases at the market garden after hours

like a bad weed across the prairies, destroying local habitat and contributing to increased traffic congestion and air pollution, they decided if a bad weed was going to take a stand, they would take a shot.

George Urie, a conservationist, owned a farm in the area and in the late 1980s he and a group of investors, including the Raineyes, acquired the Prairie Crossing property for \$5 million. Slowly, the \$10-million project, which now has nearly 400 homes and roughly 10 condos, began to take shape.

In March, a local environmental group called Legacy Lands Conservation, along with the Sierra Club, brought the Raineyes and Edmontonians to the table. The Raineyes, councilors and local landowners at the Prairie Crossing. Organizers of the visit hope it will drum up interest in a new way of developing suburban communities geared to public transit use and environmental and logical preservation.

The Raineyes started with 10 principles to frame their community. One of them was economic viability, and the couple says that after carrying a lot

of debt for many years, they turn the same kind of profit as most developers. Startup costs for the development were higher, but George notes the homes go for 30 per cent more than similar properties in the Chicago burbs.

Even so, some parts of the operation are just starting to make a go of it.

Though Chicago offers a booming \$8-million-a-year market for organic produce right down the road, the organic farm lost money for years. In 2004, the Raineyes began leasing the farm to Sarah Hill Organic, owned by Peg and Matt Scheffer, who quickly turned a profit from 14 hectares of produce and fresh cut flowers.

"It's a real, working farm and it provides a living for us," says Peg Scheffer. "The integrity of this place is very important to us, if for no other reason than to show people this is what agriculture is all about."

Linked to the organic farm, but run separately, is the Learning Farm, a small organic chicken operation that gives residents the opportunity to volunteer and learn about food production.

This raises another of the core principles of Prairie Crossing—lifelong learning. Prairie Crossing is in the midst of the Liberty Prairie Conservancy, 2,350 hectares in Illinois's Lake County that includes a 1,000-hectare of open space protected by public lands and private landowners. Prairie Crossing houses the office for the conservancy, which hosts educational programs on such topics as native landscaping. The conservancy also connects regularly with students at Prairie Crossing's charter school, which goes from kindergarten to Grade 8.

Another principle was environmental protection

and enhancement. The local prairie had deteriorated to the point where there was little diversity in flora and fauna. Now, the nine-hectare man-made lake in the centre of Prairie Crossing is home to ten northern shoveler, a fuscus duck that won't nest in polluted areas. Numerous varieties of prairie plants are multiplying naturally. So one bird, in part due to homeowners who maintain special nesting boxes in the common areas.

This success has come about, in part, by having a full-time environmental nurse leader at Prairie Crossing. Mike Scheffer is responsible for many of the development's nature initiatives, including a drainage system that has storm sewers. Rather, man-made wetlands filter runoff and then drain into the lake. Earlier this spring, Sands directed the annual controlled burn, which sees parts of the local landscape

removed stress from their daily lives.

"We believe in simplicity, and a lot of things here were about that, like the smaller homes," says Hank, whose 2,500-square-foot home is smaller than many American suburban dwellings. "And when you've got mass transit within walking distance, it simplifies life a lot."

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Bill, the development has not fulfilled all of its promises. The Raineyes had hoped to build a community that was economically diverse, but only people of some means can afford Prairie Crossing. When the first homes went on sale in 1996, they ranged in price from \$180,000 to \$480,000. Now they

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