

Nostalgia as Marketing Tool: An Analysis of McKenzie Towne, Calgary

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It feels like a small town, but of course we know that it's not.'

INTRODUCTION

Proponents of the New Urbanism include within their objectives alternatives to the alienating American suburbs which involve an architecture of community and forms of housing and urban settings which are meant to deliver meaningful alternatives to the typical suburbs. These alternatives utilize the established imagery and street patterns of eighteenth and nineteenth century American towns as an antidote to the dehumanizing aspects of the postwar, car driven suburb. The physical manifestations of these objectives, real suburbs developed along the lines of the New Urbanism, are now sufficiently established to enable analysis. This paper examines the physical results and implications of one of these suburbs with the intent of providing a framework for discussion about where these developments may be leading.

The New (sub)Urbanism

What began as a small group of urban planners and architects concerned with the state of our cities has mushroomed into a genuine movement. The proponents of the self-titled New Urbanism have become media darlings and development prophets. Articles in *Time*, *NewsWeek*, *The Atlantic*, *People*, *Smithsonian*, *McLean's*, *Travel & Leisure* have brought "neo-traditional" planning into the mainstream. Housing developers are jumping in and building these communities across North America. At last count, at least twelve such projects are on the books in Canada alone, some of which are nearing completion. "Interest in the New Urbanism represents the biggest shift in planning and development in at least a generation," says Reba Wright-Quastler, president of the American Planning Association's California chapter.²

The goals of the New Urbanism are summarized in the charter adopted by the Third Congress of New Urbanism:

The Congress for New Urbanism views disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental

deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one inter-related community-building challenge. We stand for the restoration of existing urban centers within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy.'

Physical responses to these concerns include pedestrian-oriented streets, increased density, location of services which discourage the use of the car, diversity in housing types and prices, public spaces and civic buildings which encourage community life, and a mixture of uses and activities within a neighborhood. The inspiration for many of the New Urbanist principles comes from the urbanity of the past, from towns which are viewed as having provided more humane ways to live. Peter Katz, a proponent of the movement, writes:

The New Urbanism, though, is not just a revival. While it borrows heavily from traditional city planning concepts – particularly those of the years 1900-1920 (now coming to be regarded as a watershed era in the history of urban design) – the New Urbanists acknowledge that many realities of modern life must be dealt with: automobiles and "big-box" stores, to mention just a few.⁴

Our Towne

A recent development in Calgary takes as its inspiration the sleepy New England town of the nineteenth century and the simplicity of a Norman Rockwell painting. The promotional material for the new McKenzie Towne advertises a place to live which delivers "the Past Perfected," a town which "has been generations in the making for generations to come." Developed and designed by Carma Developers in conjunction with Duany Plater-Zyberk (DPZ), McKenzie Towne does, indeed, deliver. The question is: just what does it deliver?

Calgary's suburbs are typical for the postwar period: vast expanses of well watered lawns, winding roads and cul-de-

sacs, confusing street layouts and street names. Suburban development is still wild with activity, all of it in the same mold with only superficial differences. City planners estimate that the metro area will grow by 500,000 by 2024, with 98% of the growth occurring in the suburbs. Most of these people will be housed in the conventional suburb, with competition for the housing sales intense.

The challenge for the developers is age-old: how to compete in a fairly homogenous marketplace with essentially the same product. Local developers have taken in recent years to naming their developments according to themes: Tuscany, Schooner's Landing and Georgian Bay. Keeping in mind that these developments are placed on bald prairie, the imagery evoked stretches the imagination. The themes are but skin deep, however. With only superficial design touches to distinguish them, the names evoke other places and times while still delivering the same old thing.

McKenzie Towne is the purported exception. Set on the southernmost edge of Calgary, a full fifteen miles from the city centre, still the location for most of the white collar jobs in the area, McKenzie Towne sits in a long line of suburban developments along the Deerfoot Trail. Located directly off this main north-south freeway, the Towne will eventually have 10,000 housing units on 2400 acres in fourteen neighborhoods. The first of these, Inverness, is currently reaching completion. Although the commercial center and service areas have yet to be built, enough of the neighborhood has been designed and built to allow a glimpse into the future.

Back to the Future

Although the New Urbanism does not formally support a particular stylistic approach to housing design, its track record indicates a predisposition towards the large scale reproduction of the tried and true designs of the distant past. McKenzie Towne falls right into step with its predecessors of Seaside, Kentlands and Mashpee Commons. In addition to producing authentic looking reproductions of the prewar housing styles common to Calgary, McKenzie Towne offers a few additions straight out of Norman Rockwell. The Georgian and colonial mini-manor houses bear no relationship whatsoever to their geographic, let alone temporal, locations. The particular import of these houses is clear: the nostalgic yearnings for a Beaver Cleaver lifestyle are to be satisfied within the walls and streets of a stage set for life of another time and place.

The developer has taken great care to ensure that this image is not interrupted. New houses are subject to stringent guidelines which must be met in the design phase before construction is allowed. The Statement of Intent of the guidelines reads:

McKenzie Towne is a community embodying traditional town planning principles. The intent of these guidelines is to address the quality and harmony of the elements which compose exterior public spaces and will ultimately determine the true character of McKenzie

Towne. Design creativity is encouraged within a framework that ensures compatible design character throughout the development. Exact reproductions of historic architecture are not required, however, when interpreting a style, care must be taken that details from only that one style are used.

The subtle shift between the first two sentences of this statement throws into relief the inherent problem found throughout McKenzie Towne. The developer has interpreted the intent of "traditional town planning" to mean a town that *looks* like a traditional town, not one that functions as such. In fact, as this analysis will show, the developer does not seem to have understood the very nature of the traditional planning principles which are continually cited in all its advertising material.

Stylistic concerns aside, there is an irony inherent in the actual sales patterns of these houses. Although only two hundred housing units have been sold to date, the agents are clear about what does and does not actually sell. Those houses which match interior to exterior in terms of "authentic" style do not sell. The boxiness of the old fashioned house with its separation of functions and rooms does not do well, according to the sales agents. Those which look old on the outside but provide the "open plan" of the contemporary dwelling sell the best. Apparently, we want the image without the accompanying inconvenience.

The Edgeless Center

One of the primary tenets of the New Urbanism is the provision of open and public space at the heart of the neighborhood. This space is seen as a fundamental requirement for the creation of "community". Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Andres Duany write:

*The neighborhood has a center and an edge. The combination of a focus and a limit contribute to the social identity of that community. The center is a necessity, the edge not always so. The center is always a public space, which may be a square, a green or an important street intersection... The center is the locus of the neighborhood's public buildings, ideally a post-office, a meeting hall, a day-care center and sometimes religious and cultural institutions. Shops and workplaces are usually associated with the center, especially in a village.*⁶

The Inverness Village Square is an attractive little park complete with the old fashioned band shell at the center. Ringed by radiating paths which connect the center to the corners and midpoints of the surrounding street, the square looks like a public place. But is it? The search for the environment which engenders public life is an elusive one, but there are guidelines borne out of experience, some of which DPZ alludes to in their treatise. Camillo Sitte also offers some clue as to why public spaces work:

A considerable share of public life continued, after all, to take place in the plazas; because of this there persisted some measure of their public significance as well as many natural relationships between the squares and the monumental structures that framed them.'

The commonality between these two quotes is the nature of the edges of the public space. It is the edges of a square or plaza which activates the life to be found within it. Mute edges will only serve to frame the space, and not enliven it. Without lively edges, the space must be artificially programmed in order to have any appearance of life at all. Unfortunately, this is the fate of many public spaces today. Reams of jugglers, bands, puppet shows, food fests and so on, are the only means available to bring, and keep, people into the space. Without such programming, the spaces simply become places to pass through, and not to inhabit.

This would appear to be a potential fate facing Inverness Village Square. The buildings surrounding the square are almost entirely of a residential nature. The Georgian townhouses and "manor" houses are to be found here, artfully decorating the four edges. The only interruption in this residential Maginot line is the sole commercial building in the neighborhood, crowned by a clock tower."

Designed to accommodate one corner store and several offices, the building is the only component on the edge of the square which may enliven it. Apart from the inherent social aspects of the being only store in town, the developer made two moves which will ensure that most of the residents frequent this building on a regular basis. All the mailboxes for the neighborhood are housed within the store, a nice bit of social engineering which actually saves the post office the expense of delivering mail house by house.

The store is also the location for the only bus stop in the neighborhood, both for city transit and school buses. Ironically, the entry to the store and the bus stop are located on a side street and not actually on the edge facing the square. There appears to be a lack of understanding on the part of the developer and/or designer as to the potential contribution which the foot traffic from this building can make to the life of the square. Instead of becoming a focal point and destination for pedestrian traffic, the commercial building is but a side trip on the walk to a lifeless park.

TO ZONE OR NOT TO ZONE

It is the car which is seen as the evil progenitor of much that ails our cities. The accommodation of the gas guzzling beast has resulted in "suburbs designed more for cars than people, more for market segments than for real communities."¹⁰ One facet of city planning made possible in part by the North American infatuation with driving, is zoning, perhaps the most criticized aspect of the typical postwar suburb. Residential, shopping, commercial and service areas are all segregated by roads, necessitating a drive from one to the other. This has been decried as alienating, environmentally wasteful both in terms of land use and gasoline consumption, and a

monumental waste of time.

The New Urbanism has come about in part as a reaction to zoning and its implications for community life. We have become a society which has seen fit to decompartmentalize our complicated lives according to function. And, of course, form follows function. The corollary to this is that function often follows form, a circle which the New Urbanists are attempting to break. Another tenet from DPZ discusses the relative locations of the functions upon which traditional community is based:

The neighborhood gives priority to public space and to the appropriate location of civic buildings. Public spaces and buildings represent community identity and foster civic pride. The neighborhood plan structures its streets and blocks to create a hierarchy of public spaces and locations for public buildings... Public buildings occupy important sites, overlooking a square or terminating a vista. The suburban practice of locating government buildings, places of worship, schools and even public art according to the expediencies of land cost is ineffective. The importance of these civic and community structures is enhanced by their suitable siting, without incurring additional costs to the infrastructure."

But change is never easy, particularly when the issues involve decades of societal living patterns. "The New Urbanists' challenge is daunting. In trying to change the fabric of suburbia, they are taking on decades of business as usual."? And it would appear that it is business as usual in McKenzie Towne.

The Towne Centre High Street lies at the heart of a circumscribed major commercial development in Southeast Calgary, servicing McKenzie Towne, McKenzie Lake, and other southeast Calgary communities. The main point of entry and exit is a large traffic circle ringed by properties designated for churches, a fire hall, police station and "civic functions." The commercial core is bisected by the High Street, anchored at one end by a Public Park and at the other end by a Food Store. It is telling that the property for the food store is set in a sea of parking and is easily twice the size of the park. This would seem to indicate the relative importance of these functions, as perceived by the developer.

Although the emphasis of the design of the High Street is on the pedestrian and accommodates only a few cars, an examination of the plan reveals several large parking lots, discreetly placed behind the buildings. The developer clearly anticipates a large amount of vehicular traffic.

The only designated areas for civic/institutional/public buildings are two plots in the core and two around the traffic circle. These community-building public functions, so important to the philosophy of the New Urbanism, have not been given any more importance in this development than they have in the typical suburb. Unless one considers a lot around a traffic circle as "suitable siting," the public buildings will simply occupy leftover space. The reading of the situation is

that this is still planning by "expediency of land cost" and nothing more socially redeemable.

Zoning is so ingrained in the thinking of developers that they appear not to notice it at all. The contradiction between advertising the walkability of the development while producing glossy brochures selling space in the self-contained commercial/service core is not apparent. When questioned about the decision to locate the churches and public buildings around the traffic circle, a car drive away for most residents, Carma's Sales & Marketing Director was very frank: the decision for the traffic circle came first and then "suitable" land uses were designated for the lots surrounding it. In other words, the transportation engineers are still making the critical decisions and the car still dominates.

On the Road Again

The New Urbanists aim to reduce our dependency on the car, thereby reducing environmental and societal costs while giving us more time to spend with our families and neighbors. There's just one problem: people still need to get to their jobs. Although much is said in New Urbanist material about the location of jobs within "true" neighborhoods, the reality of today's cities practically precludes this. While it is true that most of the jobs held by people who lived in small towns were in the town, today's jobs are scattered throughout most metropolitan regions. In an era of two-job families and an average job change every five years, locating dwelling and working within the same neighborhood is a logistical impossibility.

Public transit is a viable means of connecting people and their jobs, provided the links are fast and the stations are convenient. Perversely, most cities will not build fast commuter systems without the critical density of population (read: tax base) to support it. This means that in order for far flung suburbs to have access to fast public transit, there must be enough of them to warrant the costs, thereby encouraging both the development of these suburbs and the interim use of cars.

Critics of the New Urbanism find the inclusion of transit stations to be one of the few redeeming features of the developments.¹³ A Light Rail Transit (LRT) station is indicated on the plan for the McKenzie Towne Centre, a feature which the developer uses in promotional material. Calgary has an LRT system which services one north-south and one east-west corridor, both running through the city core. The southbound line runs along MacLeod Trail, four miles west of the north-south connector for McKenzie Towne, Deerfoot Trail. There are plans by Calgary Transit to eventually run a line parallel to Deerfoot, but the projected timeline for a station in McKenzie is twenty-five to thirty years. This is transportation engineer-speak for: not in our lifetime. While there are plans for this south line, there are no plans as yet to connect the line with the downtown. It is difficult to believe that the developer of McKenzie Towne is not aware of this and yet continues to include the LRT station as a viable

feature.

The conclusion to be drawn from both the design of the commercial core and the lack of viable access to public transit is that McKenzie Towne is but another suburb designed with the car as the primary mode of transportation. The very location of the development immediately adjacent to the major north-south freeway positions it perfectly for the commute to the city core. Therefore, contrary to the proclaimed intent of the development, McKenzie Towne is the perfect suburb, in the historical sense of the word. It actually participates in the sprawl that the New Urbanism fights against. One critic summarizes the situation as follows:

The problem is that, while these developments mimic the old 19th-century streetcar neighborhoods, they keep the same transportation system that produces conventional suburbs. In other words, current New Urban developments follow the standard pattern for subdivision development. They sit right off a main highway. They often have but a single entrance. They have winding roads that are just slightly less confusing than cul-de-sacs. They are, in effect, subdivisions masquerading as small towns, except with the homes pushed up to the street and a few front porches thrown on. So what you get, at best, is a neighborhood that looks like a Georgetown, but functions like any other subdivision off the Beltway.¹⁴

So, why are developers jumping to build these subdivisions? The commitment to the philosophy of the New Urbanism is apparently missing, so just what is driving these developments? The answer may be found in the very nature of the housing developer. Any company that survives to make a profit in this highly competitive business has mastered at least two very critical issues: cost containment and marketing.

The Cost of Living

If one looks just below the surface of the attractive environments produced by the New Urbanism, an incentive to build these developments begins to come into focus: the infrastructure is less expensive than in the typical suburb, and the profit per acre is higher due to the increased density. In other words, for a given parcel of land, the profit margin is higher.

A 1995 study commissioned by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, an arm of the federal government, aimed to "assess and compare the cost effectiveness of two patterns of community development: (i) a conventional suburban development pattern; and (ii) a mixed use, more compact development, planned according to the principles of New Urbanism."¹⁵ The results are interesting:

The infrastructure in the alternative plan, featuring a denser development and a broader mix of house types and land uses, is more cost effective for both the public and private sectors ... The per unit cost savings associated with the alternative plan is attributed to the in-

crease in residential density, which spreads the cost of the infrastructure over more units, and to the increase in land use mix, which reduces the residential sector's share of capital, operating and maintenance costs."

The savings were primarily within the costs of infrastructure emplacement, but also represented schools and school transportation life-cycle costs. The savings are substantial: "\$11,000 per unit generates approximately \$77 million when spread over a community of 7,000 dwellings. Over a 75 year period, this translates to annual savings of over \$1 million for the alternative plan." The authors of the study optimistically estimate that the approximately \$5,000 per unit saved by the developer is an opportunity to pass savings on to the consumer. Of course, the alternative is for the developer to absorb the savings into the profit margin.

Some developers are quite candid about the cost advantage to building a New Urbanist development. Henry Turley, the developer for Harbor Town in Memphis, says that the narrow, rectilinear street grid of the development was "a personal preference on my part. It always bothered me that you had to pay for asphalt and lay it on the ground you could otherwise

Others voice concern over the potential for using the concept to merely sell houses. Frank Clayton, president of Clayton Research Associates of Toronto claims that "developers will take up the narrower streets and smaller front yards because of competitive market pressures - not because they are smitten with the concept."¹⁹ Even proponents of the New Urbanism see the potential for abuse. Stefanos Polyzoides, co-author of the essay, "The Street, the Block and the Building" in Katz's *The New Urbanism* has said, "They [builders] put up a couple of Victorian clocks or a town square or a nice lake and then rape the landscape around it by sprawling all around it."²⁰

In other words, the pedestrian-friendly streets, attractive, nostalgic houses and urban features are reduced to marketing tools. What is actually being sold is a Disneyfied version of the typical suburb. It's a very nice suburb, with a few different twists thrown in for variety, but it is still fundamentally a car-oriented suburb. The only costs which are saved are monetary, not environmental, and go into the pocket of the developer. It is a rather sad fate for a utopian vision.

Conclusion

The New Urbanism may, indeed, deliver the promise of community life, a sense of place and belonging, an environmentally sustainable way to live. Until the very real issues involved in land development are addressed, however, the progeny of the New Urbanism will continue to be seriously compromised by the greed and lack of vision of the developer. This alternative will not be truly tested until the physical development actually becomes a manifestation of the theory. We may all be the poorer for it.

NOTES

- ¹ Donna Wallace, McKenzie Towne resident.
- ² Larry Gordon, "Putting a Human Face on Suburbia," *Los Angeles Times* (1995, March 18), p. 1.
- ³ *Third Congress of New Urbanism Charter*, as quoted in *Suburb in Disguise*, p. 1.
- ⁴ Peter Katz, *The New Urbanism - Toward an Architecture of Community*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994) p. x.
- ⁵ P. Goldberger, In Beverly Hills, a Theme Park for Rich Adults. *New York Times*, (1990, November), p. H6.
- ⁶ A. Duany & E. Plater-Zyberk, "The Neighborhood, the District and the Corridor." *The New Urbanism - Toward an Architecture of Community*. P. Katz, Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994), p. xvii.
- ⁷ Camillo Sitte, "City Planning according to Artistic Principles, 1889." George R. Collins and Christiane Crasemann Collins Trans. *Camillo Sitte: The Birth of Modern City Planning*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 151.
- ⁸ It is interesting to note that, although designed to resemble the steeples found on New England churches, this clock tower sits on top of what may be considered the church of today: commerce. In fact, there are no churches in sight and only vague plans for any.
- ⁹ A. Duany & E. Plater-Zyberk, "The Neighborhood, the District and the Corridor." *The New Urbanism - Toward an Architecture of Community*. P. Katz, Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994), p. xviii.
- ¹⁰ P. Calthorpe, "The Region." *The New Urbanism - Toward an Architecture of Community*. P. Katz, Ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. (1994), p. xii.
- ¹¹ A. Duany & E. Plater-Zyberk, "The Neighborhood, the District and the Corridor." *The New Urbanism - Toward an Architecture of Community*. P. Katz, Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. (1994), p. xix.
- ¹² J. Chidley, "The New Burbs." *Maclean's*, (1997, July 21), p. 19.
- ¹³ A. Warson, "Escaping Suburban Sprawl." *Building*, (1995, December/January), p. 20.
- ¹⁴ A. Marshall, "Putting Some 'City' Back in the Suburbs: Sounds Interesting - Too Bad It Doesn't Work." *The Washington Post*, (1996, September 1), p. C1.
- ¹⁵ Essiambre-Phillips-Desjardins Associates Ltd. "Infrastructure Costs Associated with Conventional and Alternative Development Patterns: Final Report," *Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton*. (1995), p. 1.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 30.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 31.
- ¹⁸ "The 'New Urbanism' Comes to Texas," *Front Porch Column*, <http://www2.dcci.com/Frontporch/fpnewurb1.html>, p. 3.
- ¹⁹ A. Warson, "Escaping Suburban Sprawl," *Building*, (1995, December/January) p. 20.
- ²⁰ Larry Gordon, "Putting a Human Face on Suburbia". *Los Angeles Times*, (1995, March 18), p. 2.

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