

OPINION

# 'Sameness' not good enough for city

JIM DEWALD AND BEV SANDALACK  
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

**S**prawl generally refers to urban growth typified by segregated, low-density, single-use areas.

The combination of these three characteristics results in a heavy reliance on private automobiles, which leads to the need for more thoroughfares and limited access points — which promotes further segregation of land uses, continued low-density development patterns, and so on. This vicious spiral can be observed in virtually every metropolitan center in North America, and unfortunately it doesn't work, and isn't sustainable.

What about Calgary? Do we have sprawl?

The elements that define sprawl include measurable aspects, such as units per acre, vehicle kilometer usage, and distance from the downtown — as well as subjective perceptions and expectations, such as density, overall city footprint, and degree of homogeneity.

But homogenous patterns compared to what standard? Low density as compared to country residential, or to downtown Tokyo?

Automobile dominance? OK, there is no debate here — Calgary has always had a love affair with the car.

Instead of these hotly debated, subjective comparisons, another way to assess sprawl is by looking at the outcomes. What can we observe? What are the trends to watch, and how is Calgary doing with those measures?

In a recent article published in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Anthony Downs of the Brookings Institution outlined three undesirable outcomes of suburban sprawl.

Unlimited outward and "leapfrog" expansion of low-density new development.

Large-scale conversion of open space and environmentally valuable lands to urban uses.

Lack of choice among housing types and neighbourhood configurations.

Worsening traffic congestion and air pollution caused by more intensive use of automobile vehicles for ground travel.

Costly requirements to expand roads, sewers, water systems and other infrastructures outward, rather than repairing and using those already in place.

Failures to redevelop existing older neighbourhoods.

Segregation of land uses, rather than a mixing of uses that would reduce the need for travel.

While Calgary may not display all symptoms, some — such as worsening traffic congestion, costly requirements to expand roads, and lack of choice — are intractable.

Even those who feel we are simply "catching up" on road infrastructure must see that the ever-increasing financial, environmental, and social costs of expansion are not sustainable.

Today's suburbs generally suffer from sameness, lacking a sense of place, segregation of daily activities, and a general imposition of over-engineered standards that serve planners rather than livability.

There are only places to drive, no places to walk to, and little hope of accidental meetings with neighbours.

Sure, many would argue that density figures (about eight units per acre in new suburbs — still exceedingly low compared with world standards) are respectable.

But the land use patterns continue to promote segregating places of living from places of work and recreation, and the wide-sweeping curvilinear street patterns scream sameness.

This all results in sprawl — car-friendly, not people-friendly environments. We can do better. Calgary is growing, and new suburbs are inevitable, but sameness is not good enough for Calgary.

Why can't suburbs be embraced as a tremendous opportunity for creating great places?



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Calgary's suburbs should be embraced as an opportunity to create great places.

The urban design pyramid (see diagram at left) provides both a framework for understanding how places are made, as well as a way of seeing the city so that we can improve the quality of our new suburbs.

Calgary's version of sprawl is primarily lack of attention to the public realm. We have, for the most part, been very successful at creating high quality private places, but less successful at making a memorable public realm. Some "get it," like the creators of Garrison Woods, and that is why Garrison Woods real estate values are blisteringly hot.

To be sure, we are not advocating a new cookie-cutter model. We are challenging the development industry, urban planners and designers, and city administrators to adopt an urban design framework that focuses on the public realm as the core of any new suburban community.

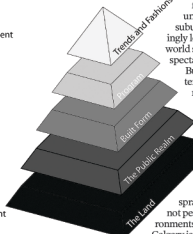
The great urbanist Lewis Mumford said that there are two ways to make good city form —

through a good street pattern, or through an open space system.

Calgary has the chance to build great places that have both, but it will need a paradigm shift through which we embrace a higher density and a greater mix of uses, and where we can build great suburbs that are not segregated by roads. Over time, a macro pattern language will evolve that reveals the new, born-in-Calgary hierarchy of public places from the neighbourhood scale through to the city-scale.

Calgary will continue to grow — but hopefully, in time, this growth will not be taken sprawl, but as something much better.

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## Youth competition opened students' eyes

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CALGARY HERALD

The Alberta segment of an international youth competition to find the world's best in everything from carpentry to plumbing was an eye-opener for a group of Calgary high school students, says a city builder.

"It's a really big thing, and most of the students were surprised at how serious it was and how much interest was spurred," says Chuck Stepper, marketing manager of Stepper Homes. "It's like an Olympic event and it shows the students that real skills are involved in the (housing) industry — and that the industry provides a real career."

Students from Bowness high school recently travelled to Edmonton to see youths ages 17 to 22 vying in the provincial segment of the WorldSkills Competition. Facing a critical shortage of skilled tradespeople, the housing industry is trying to encourage young people to consider careers in residential construction.

Besides Stepper Homes, the trip also involved the Calgary Board of Education and the associate board of the Calgary Region Home Builders Association.

Stepper's involvement with Bowness high school started four years ago.

"We contributed 50,000 to Bowness high school in 2002 to start a building construc-

tion/trade skills department at the school," says Stepper. "Over the past four years, the teachers and principal of the school have created an incredible framing, plumbing, electrical and drywalling curriculum for the students with the sponsorship money provided by Stepper."

The school also has a new shop — the Stepper Trade Centre — where students can work. "This was a natural next step," says Stepper of the field trip to Edmonton. "The associate board is trying to attract more young, skilled people into the industry and this gets the kids exposed to different careers."

The board was formed a year ago under the wing of the field director of directors of the CRHBA.

Young professionals in the industry, including Stepper, are being mentored to eventually take over board duties of the successful organization and are already involved in a volunteer capacity in many areas. Jason Chaplin, a partner in Canyon Plumbing and Heating and a member of the associate board, competed internationally in a WorldSkills Competition a few years ago.

The international level of the event is held every two years, with the next one slated for Nov. 14 to 21, 2007, in Numazu City, Japan.

Calgary will be hosting it in 2009. Last year's event in Helsinki, Finland, attracted 10,044 visitors.



Courtesy, CRHBA

Competitors in the WorldSkills Canada provincial competitions.

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