

Death to the suburb

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Canadians are living in houses bigger than ever, even though our families are shrinking. In this, the final instalment in a three-part series, the National Post explores an alternative to living large.

CALGARY - Hurling past the big box power centres of Calgary's deep south in his Jeep Cherokee, John Brown, a lifelong Calgarian, is lost. "Can I get to Deerfoot Trail from here?" Suddenly spotting the freeway, he lurches the SUV across two lanes to the onramp. Without realizing it, he briefly heads in the wrong direction, away from the bleak, rolling waves of vinyl-clad, mass-produced neighbourhoods and the Wal-Marts and Home Depots that nourish them. These newly minted communities, 30 kilometres outside the city centre, are an alien world to Mr. Brown, an architect turned activist: "I only come out here to complain," he shrugs.

Lately, this foe of sprawl has much to complain about. A few years ago, the thousands of homes flanking this highway did not exist. Subdivisions are springing up on all Calgary's sides to accommodate a booming population, an automatic growth reflex he finds regrettable.

"If I want to get from there, to my friend's house over there," he says, his finger trailing from the grey shingles of the rooftops on the west side to the identical grey rooftops on the east side, "I have to get in my car and drive over the highway."

Turning on to an off-ramp, we pass a few prairie acres imprisoned between highway bridge abutments and Mr. Brown remarks, "You could fit an Italian hill-town into the average North American freeway interchange."

His complaints are no surprise. Urban aesthetes have grumbled about the ghastliness of cookie-cutter suburbs since Arthur Levitt invented the model in post-war Long Island.

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Mr. Brown has made it his mission to persuade society that the suburban model, the world's most popular development concept, is not the only option. In fact, he says, it is the worst. He advocates for what he calls the Slow Home movement, which like the Slow Food crusade that began in Europe in the '80s as a reaction to the increasing commoditization of dining, is aimed at alerting people to the problems of sprawl, while inviting homeowners to be more considerate about the space in which they live.

"Just like fast food separated us from knowing where our food comes from, or the process of how it's made, we're becoming estranged from the process of making our houses," he says. "And all the things that make a Big Mac unsatisfying and unhealthy you also find in these fast houses."

The fallout from such an approach is both predictable and not. Insatiable developers gobbling up farmland is bad for the environment. Today's slapdash houses border on toxic. "That new home smell? That's off-gas and chemicals from synthetic products," Mr. Brown says. Health groups link rising obesity and attendant diseases to the dominance of the car-centred communities where sidewalks are so pointless -- no shops or businesses within walking distance -- that they are frequently left out altogether.

Then there are the economics of stretching utilities, sewers and schools ever further out. "It can cost up to four times more to develop, maintain and service a low-density, segregated-use, car-dependent community than it does to develop a medium-density community that is serviced by transit and gives you walkable options," says Brian Pincott, head of the anti-sprawl campaign for the Sierra Club's Prairie chapter.

Developers have deeply invested in the lucrative sprawl model -- they bought up cheap land around the city years ago and waited for the population to come. But it is consumers who are sold on the appeal of suburban McMansions: "When you are looking for the biggest bang for your buck as a homebuyer, you say 'I can get all of this and a brand new house at the edge of the city' versus 'I can get a smaller house that needs a lot of work,'" says Karen Wilkie, a senior policy analyst at the Canada West Foundation.

For that reason, any change must be cultural, figures Mr. Brown. Much as we have weaned off biggie fries and gallon-sized Pepsis, he says, consumers must understand that there is more to a home than the empty calories of cavernous foyers and "bonus" rooms and that homes fitting their needs are not among the floor-plan options in their builder's pattern book. Just as McDonald's has responded to changing consumer tastes with healthier menus, he says, "If the consumer says, 'I don't want this anymore,' you can bet everyone of these developers is going to do something different. ? The more

that's demanded of them, the more they will come up with new things. That's why we've taken this public activism approach."

Mr. Brown crusades by speaking to audiences worldwide and through the Internet about the scourge of cheap, homogeneous exurbs that has spread globally -- these Calgary neighbourhoods have identical cousins in Arizona, Paris, even China. His Web site, theslowhome.com, streams interviews with architects and planners who have joined the struggle, and features blogs celebrating the careful residential planning and design that has become so rare. One section, entitled Outrage!, offers a photographic catalogue of the worst examples of suburban crimes-against-design from around the world.

But while the suburbs offend, those who live there are innocent, lured by the seduction of wide open spaces, says Gary Burns, a Calgary director whose film *Radiant City*, a quasi-documentary about sprawl starring actual suburbanites, opened in theatres last week. "If you buy into the suburban dreams, what are your options?" he says, "Unless you've got a million bucks, good luck buying a place downtown."

But while sprawl's defenders argue that new developments are necessary for first-time homebuyers, Mr. Brown says affordability is one of several suburban myths. Another is that newer homes offer large yards; in reality they are frequently smaller than in urban, working-class homes. Touring one of Calgary's freshly sprouted appendages, Mr. Brown notes that the cheapest house in the area lists at \$490,000, no cheaper than many downtown homes (Calgary's median price is \$365,000). The most expensive: \$2.2-million. "If these were just being built as starter houses, then you might say, 'fair enough.' But there's no excuse for building an \$800,000 house out here."

In Calgary, where 25,000 new arrivals flock yearly, promoting a go-slow agenda is a mighty task. Though the mood feels right -- 74% of Calgarians told a recent Canada West Foundation poll that "sprawl is a problem" -- city dwellers often dismiss the offered solutions.

A recent municipal proposal to allow homeowners to add secondary rental suites was kiboshed by citizens fretting about the traffic it would bring to their cul de sacs. Plans to increase the density of housing around Light Rail Transit stations are opposed by those in affected neighbourhoods.

Madeleine King, a Calgary alderman and an outspoken critic of suburban sprawl, says that in her downtown riding, "there is a fair amount of discontent" about rising density from nearby condo projects.

Meanwhile, city planners accustomed to rubber-stamping outskirt developments are paralyzed by unconventional plans, notes Mr. Pincott. Calgary's Garrison Woods, a wildly popular inner-city project built in the '90s on decommissioned army land, took three times longer than usual to get approval.

"The reason it was still built is because Canada Lands owned it. They have patient capital," says Mr.

Pincott. Private developers, with anxious shareholders, could not tolerate such a wait, even though the demand for urban housing is palpable. "This is not about slowing down developers. This is not about forcing developers to do something different. This is about getting government out of the way."

There are enough available spots within the city's grid, Mr. Brown believes, to fill with urban projects to accommodate the city's rapid growth and then some. "We could triple our population and not increase our land area anymore than we've got," if only the incentives--for consumers and developers--were there. In the meantime, he has adjusted his own architectural practice to target homebuyers considering the sprawling burbs, persuading them instead to buy a bungalow or split-level within the city.

For the same budget as new, he says, he can tailor a smaller home to suit a family's needs better than any mass-manufactured house, with superior materials. Alone, his firm can only manage 80 houses a year, he laments. But every bit helps. "I tell my clients that every project we do means one less suburban mess."

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