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Research project: Theory and Practice in Planning the Suburbs

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The Fight for (Sub)Urban Form:
Urbanizing or privatizing the suburban realm?

Jill L Grant
School of Planning, Dalhousie University

In suburban areas of rapidly growing cities, governments are encouraging development that promotes urban qualities. In these same regions, however, the growing popularity of condominium and strata tenure forms result in a greater frequency of enclaves of homes on private streets, sometimes enclosed by walls and gates. The suburbs are simultaneously urbanizing and privatizing, with significant implications for the form and function of their infrastructure.

The regulation of the land development process creates contexts within which divergent expectations about the nature of urban and suburban spaces ultimately get resolved. This paper examines the ways in which participants in the development process in three fast-growing Canadian suburban regions discuss their experience in planning for and constructing new growth. Their comments reveal the tensions inherent in the transformation of suburban landscapes, and help to account for variations in outcomes in different communities. We suggest that the extent to which new suburban development areas rely on private infrastructure may in some ways be related to the relative ability of planners in a community to insist on the application of urbanistic planning principles.

The dominant contemporary planning paradigms of smart growth, new urbanism, and sustainable development promote the virtues of compact urbanization and an attractive and functional public realm (eg, Benfield et al, 2001; Duany et al, 2000; Ewing, 1996; Wheeler, 2004). Across Canada community plans embed the principles of these paradigms and propose to implement them in approving new suburban projects (Grant, 2006, 2003, 1994). Planners generally advocate urbanizing new development zones and enhancing the public realm with the infrastructure of the city, including a tight grid of streets, sidewalks, and public transportation connections.

Despite planners' interest in extending urban character into new growth areas Canadian cities continue to show a kind of in-between character: not quite city, not quite suburb. A significant segment of consumers and developers appear to resist densification, mixed use, and dense grid layouts, choosing conventional auto-oriented development patterns instead. Furthermore, in many suburban areas we find the development industry promoting privatization of the residential realm, constructing homogeneity, and facilitating segregation. The "creeping conformity" Harris (2004) documented in the 20th century Canadian suburb continues, but in new forms. A combination of cost factors, land availability, and changing market preferences has popularized condominium living,

sometimes in private communities. These clusters of households in similar circumstances in similar units rely on privatized infrastructures of streets, sewers, parks, and sidewalks (Curran & Grant, 2006; Grant & Curran, 2007). An international neoliberal discourse supporting privatization and individual initiative may be influencing (sub)urbanization processes (Harvey, 2005; Kohn, 2004; McKenzie 1994, 2005).

In an effort to understand the gap between theory about good community design and the growing practice of development in private residential enclaves, we conducted a study of participants in the land development process in three Canadian cities in the summer of 2007.[1] Calgary (Alberta), Markham (Ontario), and Surrey (British Columbia) are all high-growth cities with award-winning new communities committed explicitly to the principles of smart growth, new urbanism, and/or sustainable development. Each of them also has examples of private communities, including gated enclaves. We interviewed a total of 31 planners, councillors, and developers in the three cities; analysed plans and policies for the communities; and conducted visual assessments of residential neighbourhoods in each place.

During the course of data analysis on the transcripts of the interviews, we began to note patterns in the kinds of metaphors respondents used to describe the interactions between players in the decision making process. The transcripts revealed a discourse laden with pugilistic metaphors as the participants in the development process describe the "fight" or "battle" for their desired outcomes. Consequently, we conducted a systematic discourse analysis of the texts to examine the verbs and nouns used by respondents. Through that exercise we discovered language patterns that we postulate reflect power relations that operate in the shaping of (sub)urban form in these places. Local debates about the form and function of infrastructure in new suburban neighbourhoods reflect different value positions among the actors and reveal disparate aspirations for the in-between city. In their choice of phrases, respondents suggested that the community most successful in achieving its objectives for the public realm (Markham) gave considerable power and authority to its planners while the community with the greatest proportion of development in private communities (Surrey) marginalized its planners. The next sections describe respondent views in the three communities studied. In the final part of the paper we interpret the results and draw conclusions about the implications of the findings.

Markham: new urbanism ascendant

The Town of Markham, on the northern fringe of Toronto, is well known as a centre for new urbanism developments. Since the 1990s new urbanism and smart growth principles have dominated plans, guidelines, and other policies in Markham (Gordon and Vipond, 2005; Grant, 2006). The community of Cornell is one of the largest new urbanism communities in Canada (Figure 1), planned in association with Duany Plater-Zyberk, the premier new urbanism designers. Markham planners are firm believers in urbanistic principles and confident in the Town's ability to achieve its objectives. In examining the language of the four municipal planners interviewed in Markham we commonly found

verbs such as support, help, put forward, educate, make sure, imagine, promote, think, worry, want, work, and believe (see Box 1). Planners used these words to describe their interactions with council members and with the community. None of the planners implied they had faced difficulties in convincing council members of the validity of the principles they promoted, although one acknowledged some resistance from the public. Some of the planners described themselves as being able to innovate and have fun in their work, indicating that they worked in a positive and supportive environment.

[Figure 1: New urbanism in Markham

In describing their interactions with developers, the Markham planners frequently used verbs and nouns that indicated their perception that they had power and influence to achieve their goals. These included words like break down, hold the line, hard sell, face challenges, compromise, educate, try to get, relent, and discourage. The strongest language employed phrases related to taking control, taking risks, breaking rules, doing things differently, requiring, not letting the market decide, fighting, allowing, and getting rid of opposition. The discourse suggested that in the initial efforts to employ new urbanism principles, planners ran into resistance from developers, but because of strong support from council the developers eventually relented and complied with plan policies. In this context, planners had considerable power to achieve their objectives and exact compliance from the development industry in producing attractive, open, and functional urban environments. The words they used reflected their perceived strength.

Box 1: Samples of Markham Planners' Comments

My role is really to support council in their vision for the Town and help them get there through appropriate planning; to help them develop the vision first of all. … So you help them develop the vision, put forward the vision, and then the work is getting it through. … But that's my role, making sure that all the vision is clear, and it's clear from the highest level, down to the minute level on the ground.

I think we're doing a pretty good job, actually. I think that we've had some struggles. We have a lot of work trying to convince developers that there are better ways of doing things than the way they did them in the 1980s, for instance, where we were kind of disappointed with the product that came through.

The second option was saying we're going to hold the line. At that time 16th Ave was our northern boundary of urban development, and the 9th Line was the eastern boundary. Hold the line and we'll do it all by infill. That would have resulted in Hwy 7, Yonge Street, and Bayview, and other streets lined with high-rises: a really significant change to the community's vision of itself from a suburban bedroom community to really urban. That's wasn't obviously the way we wanted to go. So we did the typical Canadian thing, which is we compromised.

The other thing in Markham is that we have quite a cohesive council. We've had developers who aren't as experienced in Markham who have fought the battle of design issues with staff and they think "Okay we're going to bypass staff" and they find themselves in front of council and they just wish they had just done the deal because council will, especially if somebody whispers in their ear, our council can make life extremely rough on a developer who is putting up a poor quality product and force it up to a higher level. Again, that's where places like the City of Toronto have a real disadvantage, because they don't have that cohesive council

The other thing that is happening now is the Provincial growth plans. It's starting to provide a huge amount of direction for us; that's another education with our council and residents. We have resident groups that are still fighting to stop everything. The great fear of that attitude is that if you have a Provincial and now regional government growth policies that take you in a different direction, if you just say "no" that will not be sustained. You'll end up with an appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board, and then you lose all control. Whereas if you work with the plan, you maintain control and you end up with a better product.

Q: So the developers now?
They've all bought in. All bought in. [to new urbanism] We had – when there was the original developer sold to some others and when they first came in they made applications for non-lane-based product. They had some lane-based, and we stuck to our guns and said "no, no, no", and finally they all changed their plans, and they're all doing lane-based now.

The three councillors interviewed in Markham tended to use fewer pugilistic metaphors and expressed greater sympathy with the positions taken by developers than did the

planners. They described working together with planners. One acknowledged that planners led the charge towards new urbanism. Another described the planners as "fussy" in their expectations (see Box 2). The phrases – such as bump on road, out on a limb, out on the diving board -- used by councillors in discussing developers noted the kinds of risks that developers took in implementing some of the new urbanism policies in Markham. Councillors suggested that only the firm application of consistent messages from staff and council ensured that the desired features of the public realm had a chance of being achieved, especially in light of occasional resistance from the public. While councillors rarely employed fight metaphors, one repeatedly used the verb "dictate" in describing the implications of provincial smart growth policy for Markham: here the province has the power to enforce compliance.

Box 2: Samples of Markham Councillors' Comments

Our planning people are very, what's the word? I don't want to say tight. Fussy perhaps. "We've come out with a plan and with design guidelines and this is what we want to do."

If they [developers] built the Home Hardware into a residential up above, if they came and said "we'd like to change the zoning from a big box store to a big box store with a residence tower on the top of it", we'd fall over backwards for them, but they didn't. Once something is zoned and there's the Ontario Municipal Board and all the rest of that kind of stuff we can't really force a change on them.

We need to grab [retailers] by the ears and say "Make sure you know what you're doing when you move in here." Talk to the real estate agent and say, "this is the object of the thing". Can you do that? No, you can't. It's a free enterprise system. What's the old expression? "You can ride a horse to water, but the pencil must be lead", or something like that. … So we have to really talk to the developers and the builders and make sure they understand: "You've got to follow the plans exactly."

You have to have the plan before you go forward. Before you build a house you have to have the amendments in place. It was staff and council working together… I should mention another group on the resistance side: the developers. Developers in my view, if they have an open house, and you have decided to buy your first house, and you both decided to come in the same day, and say we wanted X in our house, you better believe that by the end of the week they will have X as an option. Developers are the most responsive type of business I have ever seen to public demand and interest. They are doing surveys all the time. They know exactly what the public wants. … They were one of the major resistors to new urbanism because they have been in the custom of building houses with large lots and big back yards, and driveways fronting the street. Cornell has small lots, small back yards, lots of townhouse, and access from the rear. The developers knew that this was not something the public had given much thought to, and they would have to go a little bit further out on the diving board with their investment before they started seeing money come back. They soon found out that the public does like it. New urbanism came from staff, and then council, and the two persuaded the developers. The developers went on to sway the public.

Residents tend not to resist general principles and policies. They will like an idea, but once it gets down to what is going to be built in their back yard or next door they get excited. Those were the issues with Cornell.

Smart growth is a way the provincial government has dictated to those types of groups [planners and developers] that they are going to have to stay within the boundaries. Markham Centre is a good example of smart growth. We are going up instead of sprawling. They influence it. … With the provincial planning changes smart growth is dictated. They say, "Here is the plan…After you work on those things, the rest you can do yourself." They are limiting certain aspects of development. New urbanism, however, was not provincially dictated. It is something we have tried to do on our own, and we have done reasonably well in Cornell and Angus Glen.

We interviewed two development industry representatives in Markham with widely divergent perspectives. A builder proved highly supportive of Markham's new urbanism policies and said little about planners or councillors in answering our questions. The other, a commercial real estate agent, was extremely critical of some of the new urbanism principles (see Box 3). He suggested that the planners bought into a concept that does not work, and then forced it through regardless of the problems with it in order to protect the reputation of the Town. His language disparaged the concept, the planners, and the council for ignoring market realities.

Box 3: Sample of Markham Development Representative Comments

Markham is big on that. They're probably leading edge with Cornell, which was the Duany concept, who is a designer out of Florida, who had this live-mix-work-mix-blah-blah-blah, which doesn't work and it all sucks, but that's a whole different interview.

I guess they got sold the goods, same as they do in all communities. They pay big bucks for these experts' opinions and they now - they look bad if they don't follow the opinions, because they went out and spent a million bucks on having this guy come up here. I mean that was a four-year report and Duany's – I mean how do you think they would look if, all of a sudden, they go "oh, this is stupid." Do you think politically it's a good move? And they buy into it. You see the planner comes up and – again I'm not being anti-just-Markham -- and the planners are, you know, they got out of school and go "well this guy must know what he's doing." So the planner goes "rah, rah rah", and the politicians get elected every three years, now it's every four, so they don't know. Because politicians just listen to the planner because he's been here ten years. So "he must know what he knows and I just got elected". The planner goes, "yes, we like Duany" because the planner once said "let's hire this whole concept." You see they buy into it right? Because they can't – they'd lose their job. How can you go and hire an expert and say "yeah, now we don't buy into it," or change two years later? Even if it's a mistake, how do they change? ...So they've got to force it through. I see it, not only with this, but with other things. They've got to force it through because they've got to protect their jobs right? They went out and started this whole new concept and if it doesn't work how do you go out and say "oops, I made a mistake. We blew millions, and we made people build plazas - it doesn't work." You can't do that. You're out of work. Even with common sense -- I just don't get it, because I sit there and I talk to them. We fight with them all the time. "This doesn't work".

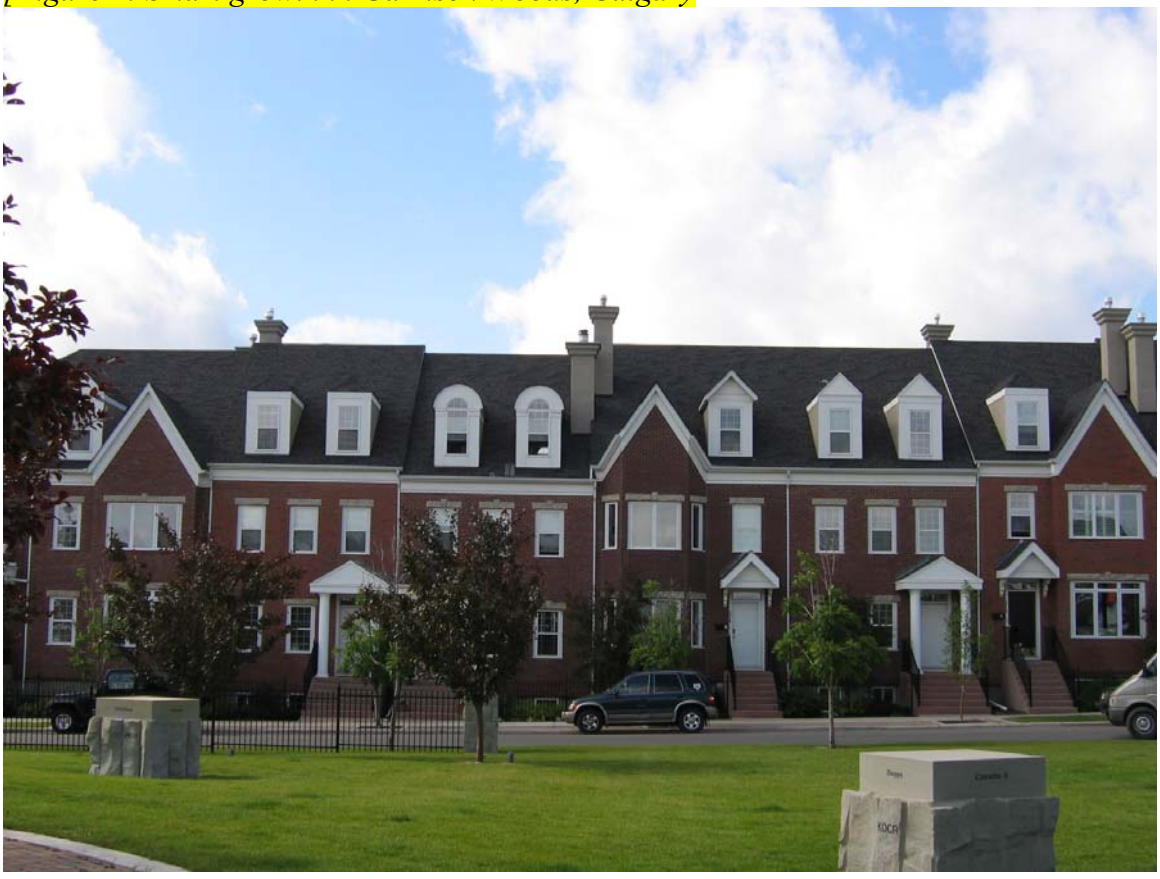
Summary for Markham:

In Markham the interviews conducted revealed an alliance between planners and council members in pursuit of new urbanism and smart growth principles. We found planners strongly committed to the principles and using language that reflected confidence in their abilities to implement them most of the time, even over resistance from developers and the public. The support they received from councillors gave them the authority to insist on a quality public realm and to limit the use of private infrastructure. The Markham councillors saw themselves as being educated and assisted by planners in the effort to implement the vision, but also acknowledged that they must work with the development industry and are now being led by the province into new directions. Representatives of the development industry seemed generally resigned to the situation they face in having to work with new urbanism principles: some appeared to accept the rules as issued and found a market within them, while others expressed frustration over their inability to influence policy directions.

Calgary: transitioning to smart growth

Planners in Calgary have been committed to new urbanism and sustainable development principles since the mid-1990s when the city produced its *Sustainable Suburbs Study* (Calgary, 1995). McKenzie Towne in southeast Calgary, designed in association with Duany Plater-Zyberk Associates, was one of the first new urbanism communities in Canada. The infill project, Garrison Woods (on the former CFB Calgary base), has proven the most successful new urbanism development in the country (Figure 2), building out ahead of schedule (Grant and Bohdanow, 2008). With high development costs, Calgary has also seen a boom in condominium development, creating the conditions within which several gated communities have appeared.

[Figure 2: Smart growth in Garrison Woods, Calgary



The six interviews we conducted with Calgary planners indicated a lesser degree of confidence than expressed by Markham planners. Verbs that planners used to describe what they do included work, look, try, manage, resolve, need, say, promote, talk, know, deal, lead, achieve, think, get, and set direction. Although the city had policy promoting new urbanism principles early on, implementation presented challenges for planners. Nonetheless, the planners identified themselves as taking leadership roles, pioneering in new directions towards smart growth. Some planners used the verbs “push” or “force” (see Box 4), but moderated the phrasing to indicate a position of relative weakness in which others do much of the pushing and planners are not able to force issues or change

economic realities. The cases where they used words like force or battle proved limited and often referred to situations where the planners prevailed.

The planners in Calgary have remained committed to new urbanism ideas as those principles morphed into smart growth. They noted that as the development industry finds notions of higher densities, mixed uses, and transit orientation more attractive, council has become more supportive of the ideas of smart growth and new urbanism, and hence more supportive of the planners. Planners suggested that market factors played a major role in driving smart growth in Calgary: developers support the policy innovations that benefit the bottom line.

Box 4: Sample of Calgary Planners' Comments

In my view, we've led the pack in terms of policy. We're often criticized for what we call the "say-do gap," where we say one thing and then development does a different thing. Our policies for the past 15, 20 years have been very oriented to smart growth. We've got a sustainable suburbs study that we adopted in the early '90s, which really pioneered suburban sustainable types of smart growth. In fact our McKenzie Towne in the south east is perhaps 12, 15 years old and was really at the leading edge of new urbanism in suburban environments at that point. Calgary has got a lot of really good smart growth policies. It's only now actually being translated on the ground.

What this tried to do and push ten years ago, we're really locking onto it for the next time round. Instead of just saying it we really want to link it into implementation. We want to tie that into projects that actually promote some of those smart growth projects.

The publicity that McKenzie Towne and Garrison Woods get is a strong signal to council that there are people who are interested in it and they come from all over North America to see it and see the successes behind it. They do support it as something adding to Calgary… some uniqueness in terms of the positives we have. Yeah, but new urbanism by itself, I don't think is an entity that council is pushing towards.

Q: Is council fairly supportive of new urbanism and ideas of smart growth?
They are because the market place and the development industry is there right now. I'm not sure that we've articulated what those principles are clearly for council. So it might be partly our fault. It's hard to measure an elected representatives' commitment to a concept that's somewhat unclear, but I would say that generally, yes.

A lot of this is market induced, then probably public policy induced. The developers are coming forward with new ideas and those new ideas are being accepted by the city. How much of this is a result of mandatory policy and the developers being forced to comply against their wishes? Probably more so it's the market driving it, today's market.

So, you have a package of incentives that pull a design up rather than pushing your baseline mandatory controls to try to force the developer to do it.

There's a constant tension between societal objectives which seem to favour mass transit and a more condensed housing form with individual preferences for single-family homes and the private automobile. Public policy does not seem to be able to resolve that conflict. It seems to be better resolved through an equalization of the economic system. In areas where you have condensed housing and high use of rapid transit, it's because land economics have forced consumers into that form of housing or that form of transportation, more so than public policy. It's almost like the economic system of costs and subsidies to the consumer is working against the public policy system. The economic system will, in my mind, purely my opinion, will usually win that battle because it's adjudicated through elected representatives who are inherently shorter term in some of their thinking because they have to run for office.

Only one Calgary council member was available for an interview during our visit. The councillor suggested that in past council weakened the plan, the planners, and the city by not defending and implementing the plan. He pointed to political factors in explaining council's failure (see Box 5).

Box 5: Sample Calgary Councillor Comments

The tough thing politically, although I think it's easy really, is that we have to forget … we're not going to get elected each three years based on what we forced for smart growth, because the benefits will manifest themselves 10 or 20 years later when most of us are gone doing something else or dead. But that's still no excuse not to do it, because a lot of the pains we're having now are from not doing it by council, planners, and developers 20, 30, and 40 years ago.

Developers interviewed in Calgary commonly used verbs like support, approve, accept, require, negotiate, and say in describing their interactions with planners and council members. Their comments about traffic engineers in the city proved much less positive: words such as force, fight, debate, resist, roadblock, hurdle, and don't buy in appeared (see Box 6). Many of the disagreements involved public infrastructure such as street widths: developers willing to implement the new urbanism features encountered traffic engineers who insisted on conventional standards. Market factors encouraged developers to innovate and go for compact form as promoted by smart growth principles, leading to a strengthening alliance with planners. Turning to condominium townhouse developments on private access ways provided opportunities for some developers to optimize densities and achieve the narrow right-of-ways they sought.

Box 6: Sample of Calgary Development Representatives' Comments

They were big fights. They took a lot of time. What happens to most developers is that time is money. You have shareholders you're reporting to and you can't wait. You can't fight battles for years on end trying to get small features, so you just cave and put in the big wide road.

Really one of the biggest hurdles is the traffic engineers. They do not have the holistic

view of the streets that we think is necessary. They see it as a way to move traffic faster and better. The more traffic they can move, the better they like it. That is just totally contrary to what we want. We like congestion.

A lot of people were in such a hurry to get plans approved through the city that any thing that was innovative and was causing any kind of roadblock or resistance was simply abandoned and a straight up plan that everybody was comfortable with and met all the guidelines went through and was approved. If there was any one opportunity for innovation, to really try things, it has passed, because you could have done it in that market. Then it gets a little more challenging going forward because everybody wants to fall back to the safe position again. I think we've lost an opportunity, in some contexts, to put out some really innovative ideas and test them. Not everything is going to work, but when you're in an extremely hot market, that's the opportunity to do it.

Summary for Calgary:
Metaphors with pugilistic references occurred less commonly in the Calgary interviews, and were most frequently used by development industry representatives in describing their interactions with traffic engineers. Calgary planners proved cautious in using metaphors related to conflict, suggesting for example that they cannot force developers to act but may fight injustice and discrimination. In terms of who pushes whom in Calgary, respondents implied that the developers pressure and push city; planners push concepts and visions through policy, and the economy pushes consumers into different choices. While the interviews made clear that planners strongly advocated new urbanism, smart growth, and sustainability principles, respondents also suggested that market factors play an even greater role in affecting land use patterns and the popularity of particular housing outcomes.

Surrey: the business of development

Surrey, British Columbia, is well-connected to Vancouver to its west by highway and Skytrain. Its East Clayton Village development is an award-winning example of alternative development standards (Figure 3); the city is known for supporting sustainable development principles in its neighbourhood plans (Gilliard, 2003). To facilitate the provision of infrastructure, Surrey adopted innovative financing practices (Young, 1997). The search for affordable housing in a high-cost market, along with tools to encourage the development industry to provide suburban infrastructure, consequently generated significant swathes of private communities in Surrey (Laven, 2007).

[Figure 3: Sustainable development in Surrey

Due to short staffing, only two Surrey planners could make time to speak with us during our visit. Their language choices seemed cautious, and included verbs like think, try to change, strive, convince, create, and write. In describing their dealings with developers they used phrases related to concerns, challenges and resistance (see Box 7). Planners described citizens and developers as pressing or pushing, while they spoke of themselves as trying to change things or trying to convince developers. The planners' discourse revealed a perception of powerlessness.

Box 7: Samples of Surrey Planners' Comments

When Clayton began, especially with the concepts of the grid system and back lanes, it was a real concern amongst the development community. While I wasn't here at the time, I hear stories that there were real concerns that it would not be marketable, that it wouldn't sell, but it sold quickly and people seem to like it.

When the development industry wants to come in here and put a shopping centre, or a housing project, they still think of Surrey as suburban in character. That kind of mindset we can't help but think of having an auto-oriented kind of community. We are trying to change that. Like I said earlier we want to be more of an urban community, more street friendly with shops lining streets as opposed to backing away from the street. I think that that is a trend that we want to strive for and hopefully achieve in the next 20 years,

although, we're running into a fair amount of resistance from the developer who seeks commercial development, who likes to back their commercial shop away from the street and put parking in front, or to provide more parking than the bylaw commands. It is an auto-oriented kind of community. We're not quite there yet.

Clayton came about when there was a need, and a push by the residents of the area to press the city to come up with a neighbourhood concept plan to urbanize their neighbourhood, in this area. There was also some push by the developer in providing a new way to develop.

Developers still come here, but they think, and they still think in their mindset – suburban residential -- people getting in their cars. The difficulty I have in talking to the developer, in trying to convince them is, it is a suburban community in transition to becoming an urban community. Please, if you have a shopping center, don't make it auto oriented! Let's cut down the number of parking spaces. Let's bring up the number of shops close to the sidewalk. Let's create a pleasant walking environment. Let's do all those wonderful things you see in an urban area like Vancouver, or higher density area. And, they always meet that with a lot of resistance.

Two Surrey councillors with divergent views agreed to interviews. One councillor used several fight metaphors (eg, the guts to stand up, throw in the towel) in describing the weakness of planners in Surrey in a context where development interests have considerable power and council does not appropriately support its planners. The other councillor described planning staff as essentially technical personnel gathering information from developers but not expressing opinions. By contrast, in discussing council's role in persuading Wal-Mart to follow particular rules, the same council member spoke of what council allowed and required. The discourse of both councillors suggested that planners have limited ability to advocate the principles of the plans because of their weak political position.

Box 8: Sample of Surrey Councillors' Comments

Any planner that had the guts to stand up to this process didn't have a hope. They would talk to you privately about this, but the politics of it make it hopeless. How do you plan in that environment? You can't! There is too much money to be made by people who have a direct link to the political levers.

There is so much development here. The turnover of professional staff has been appalling. There has been 50% turnover in five years. What do you have left? Architects, social planners, they just throw in the towel. And so we are now in the hands of the land development engineer. Planners know what should be going on, but they don't speak out.

The enforcement comes from within the planning department. Once you have the plan, when they come to get their subdivision the question becomes, "how does the subdivision line up with the NCP?" As long as it lines up and comes through to council. If there is any variation to it, they have to go out to the community and have a public process,

which they have to advise us of and our staff attends, sees, and listens. Staff is not there having an opinion one way or another, they are simply there as observers, and they give broad, general information that they would give to anybody. This is so that when the report comes in, we have staff that can say, "Yes, that is what happened, and this is what went on."

I'm not sure if this has been done anywhere else in North America, but we got Wal-Mart to change their plans. Where Wal-Mart traditionally comes up and says, "We want five parking stalls for every 100 square feet." We said, "You are allowed three, and that is all you are allowed outside. Everything else goes under the building. Your building is going to have a parking lot underneath it, because that is the first thing we require. And further, everything else goes into structured parking." This was totally anathema to Wal-Mart. We said, "If you want to come to our community that is what you are going to do."

Representatives of the development industry in Surrey favoured pugilistic metaphors in describing their relationship with city authorities (see Box 9). Most of the six respondents spoke of being forced to do things and fighting for particular choices. They suggested that they understood the market, but planners pushed ideas that had little chance of success with consumers or that need more time to germinate. In the interests of getting permissions, however, developers indicated that they had to do what the city required. In general, the development industry representatives presented an image of a conflict-ridden relationship where they fought regularly to protect their interests.

Box 9: Sample of Surrey Development Representatives' Comments

Planners think it [live/work] should be work first, so we have had this fundamental challenge, tug of war if you will, over the last three and a half years…

Well, for instance, the city likes to push the neighbourly thing, you know, no fences between the yards, with the neighbours interacting all the time. We fight that all the time.

The city does not allow gated communities anymore. They do not think it promotes neighbourliness. They don't want to see walls, gates, and security. That is not the image they are trying to portray. A lot of these things are a battle between what the city wants, and what the city's vision is. …I asked [about putting a gate], and they said, "No bloody way."

The lanes were a hard sell. Nobody wanted to do them. I don't think you have that hard of a fight anymore, with the developers. Everybody has accepted it, as what the city wants.

The way it works out here is, the city tells you what to do and you do it.

The city of Surrey planning staff is progressive in that sense; they want to achieve [smart growth], but they run into the historical nature of what Surrey is. There is a political reality here, which is evolving. The council is being more receptive to those sorts of

things. It is taking a foot hold, but it is not like Vancouver which is really pushing it hard. So the planners talk about smart growth and sustainability and all the other things…and they want it to happen, right now! I have come to find out that planners -- and I am a planner myself --are impatient. They want it right now. They don't recognize what is going on around them, the big picture that is happening around them —basically that is the economy. They don't consider what the expectations are of the people who are going to move into these communities are, what they want.

Summary for Surrey

The discourse of the Surrey interviews revealed a systemic tension between developers and the city, with local councillors in a brokering position. Although Surrey has made progress on some elements of its sustainability agenda like density (small lots), grid layouts, and lane-based housing, the respondents suggest that market factors may play as significant a role as planning policy in driving outcomes. Developers described a combative relationship with the city, and especially with planning staff, as they seek to implement proven economic principles. Councillors admitted to pushing some sustainability principles but noted they may not fully support staff planners in promoting other principles from the plan. Planners used measured terms to discuss the challenges they faced in trying to persuade developers and council to disseminate some of the ideals articulated in community plans. In Surrey, it appears, planners have a relatively weak position in promoting their agenda.

Power relationships and neighbourhood outcomes

Respondents in all three cities indicated that new residential development trends were urbanizing the suburbs. Residential densities are on the increase in the Canadian suburbs generally as land costs increase (Bourne, 1999; Skaburskis, 2006). Several planners interviewed noted their hopes that they could convince residents and developers that they were building cities, not just car-oriented suburban enclaves. The community design principles planners sought to implement explicitly sought to generate dense, walkable, mixed, and open cities.

The degree of success in achieving urban characteristics and conditions differed in the communities. Our visual assessments of the suburbs of the three cities revealed more private streets in Surrey than in Markham or Calgary. Large swathes of new development in Surrey occurred in condominium clusters with private streets and amenities (including entry gates in several cases). By contrast, Markham had only two gated enclaves; most of its townhouse projects employ public infrastructure and open streets. Calgary had more private communities than Markham but fewer than Surrey. In each of the communities developers have turned to condominium formats to reduce infrastructure costs. The ultimate disposition of the resulting streets and urban amenities as either public or private spaces depended on the political and policy context of the cities.

In the Markham context, planners held strongly to the new urbanism view that planning should work towards an attractive, mixed, and inclusive public realm. One planner explained the lineage and seminal importance of the idea of the public realm in the context of rejecting gated communities.

> *I can remember having a discussion with Andres Duany, and he very much, very much has that view that privatization of what should be public is dangerous for society. I don't think we've ever had that discussion as a staff and council, but yet it comes out. Anytime there's any kind of proposal that smacks of being closed in you can just feel the queasiness, and the questions start coming from council and staff, and things are made public.*

At the same time that planners advocated public infrastructure, though, Markham has the largest gated community in Canada, at Swan Lake. In explaining how Swan Lake got approved, one planner began with strongly pugilistic language but concluded with a description of the kinds of compromises that reveal the limits to planners' authority to insist on open residential environments even in cities committed to a vibrant and open public realm.

> *If I was here then I would have fought against Swan Lake. … I mean Swan Lake was quite successful but we don't get a lot of – we haven't had any applications for gated communities in the time I've been [here]. And any kind of inquiries we get, we get rid of them. So I don't think there's a huge market. You know the condominium developments you could argue that they are sort of on their own a small gated community, but even with those we've worked to make sure that their courtyards and open spaces are public, or at least publicly accessible. We have only one, down in the downtown. It's on the other side of Warden South. It's not – all the plans are approved and the land's being graded, but you don't see much coming out of the ground yet. There's one in there that we agreed to allow them to close the gate from 10 at night until 6 in the morning on the courtyard: there's a courtyard between the buildings, which we had long, long discussions about and we finally relented. … So we kind of negotiate compromises.*

Local land use planning involves complex and continuing negotiations between actors with conflicting agendas and interests. All of the players point to the significance of the market in shaping the urban outcomes, whatever the policy environment. In the current economic context where local governments face burdens from the down-loading of services from higher levels of governments and deficits in infrastructure investment, the temptation is great for councils to permit or require developers to provide private streets, parks, and other amenities. The ascendance of neoliberal sentiments that accept and celebrate market dominance came through in several of the sample respondent comments included here. Where development interests have strong political influence the case study communities indicated that private infrastructure proved more commonplace. The study thus leads us to hypothesize that the growth of private communities reveals relatively weak political commitment to the principles of sustainable development, smart growth, and new urbanism. The rhetoric of these principles in the plans of communities like Surrey (and also in Calgary until quite recently) belies a system which continues to implement a relatively conventional growth machine agenda.

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