

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

NEW DIGS: DEVELOPMENT After years of resistance, developers embrace a new suburban vision After years of resistance, developers and home buyers alike are now embracing a suburban vision of mixed housing types

Friday, June 1, 2007

Page: G10

Section: Globe Real Estate

DEREK RAYMAKER

As a rule, developers and city planners need little encouragement to drop the gloves and mix it up on the philosophical question of what home buyers want.

For the most part, Toronto's residential developers echo the party line espoused by the Greater Toronto Home Builders Association, which unequivocally states that new-home construction must tilt toward detached single-family low-rise housing in the suburban context. Furthermore, they say, urban infrastructure development should be focused on servicing that mould, meaning the expansion of the 400-series highway system and arterial roads.

That vision has come under attack over the last decade by city planners who have been empowered to bring together all community elements - commercial, recreational and institutional - in new blended greenfield developments. With a few exceptions, suburban municipal planners have embraced residential intensification and mixed-use, transit-friendly development under the umbrella concept called New Urbanism.

Last week, we took a look at architect Witold Rybczynski's take on the uphill battle of some developers to implement New Urbanist ideals in the United States in his new book, Last Harvest

New Urbanism, in essence, is an architectural manifesto intended to reverse the monolithic, one-dimensional tract housing neighbourhoods that have become synonymous with urban sprawl. A New Urbanist community aims to be built around a small but vibrant commercial core evoking a main-street. Streets are designed to promote pedestrian use, with a heavy emphasis on public transit. And there is a mixture of housing styles; low- or high-rise condominiums on top of street-level retail platforms with small-lot townhouses or semi-detached housing nearby.

At their most ambitious, New Urbanist communities include large swaths of parkland and public squares, surrounded by small office buildings or live/work dwellings. The whole idea is to make these communities self-sustaining.

In Greater Toronto, the York Region municipality of Markham is widely recognized as having embraced the New Urbanist mantra long before it became a mainstream development trend.

In the 1990s, when Valerie Shuttleworth, Markham's director of planning and urban design, first voiced the city's preference for mixed-use communities - including a modest condominium element - she was met with apocalyptic warnings from developers.

"They said, 'you can't do that. You're trying to shift the market. You have to respond to the market.' We said, 'you're right, we are trying to shift the market,'" she says now.

Today, there are three fairly large New Urbanist communities in play in Markham. One, Cornell Centre, northwest of Highway 7 and Ninth Line, is well established as a townhouse community on the east end of the city.

Markham's recently completed Secondary Plan for Cornell, aims to bring a strong midrise condo presence to the latter half of the community's development.

"We're bringing together a lot of the leading edge intensification practices here," says Ms. Shuttleworth. "There is no evolution in this community. We're going straight to intensification, and skipping the sprawl phase."

More recently, plans for Markham Centre have evidenced more ambitious aspirations that will include a commercial, office and residential mix, aiming to be home to 25,000 new residents over the next decade. It's located along Highway 7 between Woodbine and Kennedy Road.

The third, Main Street Milliken, is a redevelopment of former industrial lands north of Steeles Avenue. The objective is to revitalize the area with mixed-use elements to transform Old Kennedy Road into a main-street-style hub of small businesses.

"The most important goal is that we have to be friendly at the street level," Ms. Shuttleworth said. "The whole idea is to maintain the human scale of what a community should be."

Unlike New Daleville, the New Urbanist suburban Pennsylvania community profiled in Last Harvest , projects in Cornell Centre and Markham Centre have been well-received by buyers.

The Remington Group's Downtown Markham development was the first component of Markham Centre to get under way, and sold out of its two mid-rise condominiums soon after they launched last summer.

Liberty Development and Tridel Corp. have also had successful condominium launches in Markham Centre over the past year.

One thing that developers and planners do agree on is that York Region's VIVA rapid transit system, an express bus system travelling regional arterial roads such as Highway 7, has been essential in making more intensive developments attractive in the region.

draymaker@globeandmail.com

© 2007 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.