



New Sub-urbanism

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Suburbs have been part of planning thought and development since the concept of Garden Cities was introduced by Ebenezer Howard in 1902. These garden cities were designed away from major cities but combined the amenities of urban life with easy access to natural environments. The form of these cities [Figure 1] was divided by functions and radiated outward from the center, which contained major civic buildings and a park. The civic center was the surrounded by a ring of social and commercial amenities, residential areas, and industrial areas respectively. These were all set within the natural country side.² Today's suburbs have similar features, but the needs of people who live in them now have different priorities. The forms of these suburbs have not changed to reflect these needs, especially for the aging population of people who live in them.

Aging Environments

Overall, the Canadian population is increasingly becoming an older population. In 1967, 7% of the population was aged 65 or over. By 2017, this number has more than doubled to 16%. This trend is expected to continue to rise to closer to 25% of the population by 2041.⁶

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Suburbs are currently home to about 66% of the population of Canada.⁶ The current condition of these suburbs cause issues for the older adults that call the suburbs home. These issues will only become a greater concern as the people who call these suburbs home age. The suburban form is a major cause to these issues. The way we build suburbs today, residents are dependent on an automobile to grocery shop, go to the doctor, and meet their recreational needs. **As people age and lose the ability to drive, suburban older adults lose their ability to be independent,** and will require more care.

While the basic design of suburbs as stayed relatively similar over time, the way people are living has changed. Aging adults are now working longer and choosing to stay in their homes longer until health or economic circumstances require a change.^{3,6} Not only do many older adults live in suburbs, but so do their children and grandchildren. Families are becoming major care providers for their parents and grandparents, so either moving to the suburbs, or staying in the suburbs is one of the only options for aging adults.³



Photo Credit: Gutenberg.org

Figure 1: Typical layout of Howard's Garden City



Figure 2: Villa Italia Mall, site of Belmar “downtown district”



Figure 3: Belmar “downtown district” of Lakewood Colorado

Retail Retrofitting

One of the common pieces to the suburban puzzle is the strip mall or the regional mall. Over the past 20 years in the United States, hundreds of malls and strip malls have been closed, and a predicted 225-274 will close over the next five years.⁴ This leaves large, empty places in the already uninviting public spaces in suburban areas. Thankfully, developers are investing in these vacant or declining building and giving them a second life.

In the Dallas suburb of DeSoto, TX, is Brookhollow Shopping Center. Brookhollow was a 50,000 square foot strip mall with a 26,000 square foot anchor space which is typical of a suburban strip mall. Purchased in 2016 by a small developer, Brookhollow was developed with an “incremental urbanism” strategy which focuses on local people investing in local businesses. In addition to opening the retail space to many small restaurants and businesses, the project also added pedestrian space to the large parking lot area, and several residential buildings intended to be affordable for employees of the shopping centre. By transforming this mall into a walkable destination, Brookhollow now acts as a hub where the community can gather together.⁵

In Lakewood, Colorado, a suburb of Denver, the Belmar community was developed on the site of a former shopping mall that closed in 2001. The mall was demolished, and the site was transformed into a “downtown district” with 22 city blocks of mixed-use, pedestrian friendly space, along with over a thousand residential units in various types of housing.⁷

While the two examples are at very different scales, they both address a similar issue. That issue is of car dependency in suburbs. Both Brookhollow and Belmar made walkability a clear goal for development. The mixed-use priority of Belmar is especially key. This style of development could provide future suburban older adults with the services they and all others require, within a walkable area. This decreases the dependency on the car, encourages a more active lifestyle, and provides social spaces for the residents of these developments.

“incremental urbanism... focuses on local people investing in local businesses”



Figure 4: Rendering of Brookhollow Shopping Center in DeSoto, TX



Figure 5: Before photo of a sidewalk in Montgomery County



Figure 6: Rendering of planned sidewalk retrofitting

Suburban Streets & Sidewalks

Since suburbs are very car oriented, there is no shortage of roads and space for cars. This greatly limits how people can navigate their way through where they live. People need cars to not only get to farther destinations, but to get to places in their own communities. For older adults and people who don't drive or have access to a vehicle, this is an issue as they potentially become dependent on other people to transport them. Retrofitting suburban streets and sidewalks to become more pedestrian friendly and accommodate other forms of transportation is important for the future senior residents of today's suburbs.

Montgomery County, near Washington D.C. is currently undergoing a retrofit of its suburbs and have placed a high level of importance on the street scape:

“Streetscapes and public rights-of-way are valuable real estate, although people often forget they are not just about moving motor vehicles”¹

The changes Montgomery County are making are by no means large scale changes. Their plan includes small changes made over time to improve the pedestrian environment. These modifications include narrowing roads to slow down traffic, widening sidewalks to accommodate a wider range of users, planting along sidewalks and median, and adding bike lanes.¹



Figure 7: South Miami pedestrian oriented sidewalk

“small changes over time to improve the pedestrian environment”

Final Thoughts

Suburbs are already home to many older adults, and this number will only increase as people choose to stay in their homes as long as they can. By retrofitting empty suburban shopping centres and roads, it is possible to extend the longevity of these physical environments and make them more accessible to everyone, regardless of age or physical ability.

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