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Public spaces are important, too, in community planning



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URBAN VIEW

In the summer in this part of the world, the outside becomes our living room.

While many of us cherish private-yard space, increasingly public space is the only real outdoor gathering space for those who live in higher-density housing. This public space is elevated to a special importance in the summer.

But how much attention do we pay to these spaces that make places when we plan our communities, design our neighbourhoods and buy our homes?

The parks, seawalls, trails, sidewalks and patios are merely an esthetic enhancement to the landscape most of the year. It's only in summer these public places actually become activity hubs, drawing people from behind the closed doors of their homes to recreate, lounge and interact.

Few of us inquire about the per capita ratio of park space in a neighbourhood when we decide to live there. Fewer still study the connections between streets and the widths of sidewalks in our neighbourhoods to assess how pedestrian connections facilitate interaction with our neighbours.

During the last half century, the automobile won top billing when it came to designing the public realm. Our communities became a collection of pure "destinations" to be linked by only one form of

transportation — the automobile. Traffic flow was the single-minded mission of planners and engineers. Pedestrian concerns were relegated to the bottom of the list.

Only in recent years have attitudes shifted slightly and people have become aware of the wonders of discovery available in the urban environment when people are able to move from place to place on foot. Urban planners and architects are beginning to pay some attention to the physical design of public spaces that can accommodate pedestrians.

Unfortunately, much of the emphasis still seems to focus more on the artistic and esthetic qualities of that design. We don't pay enough attention to the activities, use, comfort, image and sociability that might be encouraged by properly designing the public realm.

Recently, I took part in an exercise to develop a vision and some guiding principles for the design of a new townhouse development that has the potential to become a mini-community within a community.

Much of the discussion around planning the community focused on the location of public amenities and their design appeal. There was some market intelligence and a lot of speculation around what would appeal to the eventual homeowner, but it was really "curb appeal" that was being talked about.

The deeper questions around how you might foster a sense of community, facilitate social interaction and encourage civic engagement through urban design really didn't seem to register.

After watching the passing traffic for an hour or so at a sidewalk café on one of Vancouver's busier

pedestrian streets the other evening, it became clear to me that this particular street, as lively and diverse as it was, lacked a dimension.

The passing foot traffic revealed a good cross-section of teens, young adults, middle-aged people and a few young seniors, but there were hardly any young children and older seniors in the area.

Obviously, neighbourhood demographics largely dictate the mix of people on this street, but so does the range of uses in the area and the type of amenities.

There are few public places for a senior to sit and relax on this particular street. The sidewalk surface is buckled somewhat by the roots of mature street-trees, making it hard for both youngsters and seniors to negotiate.

The street activity, some of it obviously representing that neighbourhood's brand of disorder, also probably creates a sense of insecurity, discouraging seniors and young families from frequenting the area during certain hours.

What creates an aura for a place that relaxes people immediately? What draws people out and allows them to express themselves in a public place? What makes people feel safe and comfortable in a public space, even when it is crowded? What encourages feelings like peace, serenity, excitement and involvement?

These are questions we need to be answering when we design public spaces.

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