

Subdivision sprawl brought planners



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SPECIAL TO WESTCOAST HOMES

REAL ESTATE MATTERS

To call a community “master-planned” is to impose on it an almost Orwellian association. Here, the appellation suggests, every second of every life in the community is accounted for by some ominous but invisible auditor there to ensure every resident is meeting the goals of a daily life plan.

Not true, of course. The master-planned community is little more than a land-use planning concept that emerged in the late 1960s in response to sprawling growth.

Some developers began to realize that tract after tract of homes, every one a copy of the one before it, were sprouting up across endless miles of green fields and it became increasingly difficult to distinguish the features of one subdivision in comparison to another.

Not only did those subdivisions lack any distinguishable sense of place, they lacked typical amenities such as shopping, offices, recreational facilities, etc.

So was born the master-planned community. Developers began working with planners to plan up-front for many features of a typical community while planning for the largest feature — the homes for new residents. So a small shopping centre became part of the plan. A rec centre or golf course typically became the fitness feature.

Once in a while these communities also contained housing in different forms, departing from

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the sea of bungalows or ranchers that made up most of the housing stock, to fit in a small cluster of townhouses or even an apartment building here or there.

Typical in all of these planned communities were tight design controls meant to ensure quality. Unfortunately, they also resulted in the kind of uniformity that points to instantaneous evolution. By looking at the design of homes in the community you could not only point to the era during which the community evolved, you could almost pinpoint on an annual calendar the day the first shovel went in the ground and the day the last shingle was nailed to the roof of the newest home.

In the U.S., these master-planned communities have grown to encompass huge tracts of land. In 1990, the Howard Hughes Corporation began developing Summerlin,

the 22,500-acre master-planned community that sweeps across the western foothills outside Las Vegas, Nevada. Almost 100,000 people live in Summerlin today in close to 40,000 homes. About 20,000 of those people also work in Summerlin. When this massive master-planned community is built out in 2020, about 200,000 people will live there.

I visited Summerlin in its early days and the first thing that struck me was how different the place looked. It was so different from its desert surroundings because of the man-made greenways and the massive artificial lakes that defined a brand new landscape that started at the edge of the new community. It was serene in terms of the temporary respite you immediately felt from the oven-like desert that surrounded it. But it was also contrived and too foreign.

Today, many master-planned communities in the U.S. are often defined by the sense of security

they provide their residents. That security is evident the moment you arrive at a gate and huge wall that separates the master-planned community from much of what surrounds it.

We are fortunate in this part of our country to have adopted the term master-planned without adopting most of the characteristics of the early communities in the U.S. that are so labelled.

Size alone makes things different on this side of the border. Rarely have we seen new "greenfield" developments that come any where near the size of those in the U.S. We simply don't have the population.

Many of the newer large scale developments that can be called master-planned — where all elements of the eventual development are planned up front — have been in the form of "brownfield" developments — where abandoned industrial sites or waterfront sites have been converted to new residential neighbourhoods. What

makes these developments different is that they don't usually stand apart from the communities that surround them.

Part of the success of the master-planning for these communities is the planning that goes into integrating these new developments with the surrounding community. Often the new master-planned community offers features and amenities not just for those who will live in the new community, but also for existing residents in the surrounding community.

Concord Pacific Place, what many call the new Yaletown, is one of Vancouver's most successful master-planned communities in that a comprehensive development plan set out pretty well every aspect of this new community that transformed the old Expo site and industrial wasteland along the north shore of False Creek.

This master plan was successful in opening up a huge part of an otherwise isolated waterfront to a

broad range of public uses, including the forever popular seawall.

The Arbutus Lands, developed by Concert Properties, successfully transformed the old Carling O'Keefe brewery site into a medium-density residential and mixed-use community in the heart of Vancouver's west side. There, the master plan ensured a mix of housing types, new retail development and an urban design quality that makes this a special neighbourhood.

A master-planned community doesn't necessarily need to look like it was master-planned. Often, those places that have a sense of their own and a special character — like Granville Island — might not have evolved without the master plan that envisaged how special they could be.

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