

Pedestrians left out of neighbourhoods

Streets must be part of network for walking

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

Several of our recent columns have mentioned a phenomenon called "induced travel."

It describes how providing more roads to ease traffic flow quickly results in these new roads being filled up with more cars.

While the concept of induced travel is usually related to vehicles — it doesn't apply to pedestrians.

Anyone reading this article can do a simple exercise.

Think about a place in or near your neighbourhood where you would like to go. It could be the gym, the video store, the nearest shopping strip, the nearest café or restaurant, the drycleaners — it doesn't matter.

Then try to walk there.

You are one of the lucky ones if you find that your neighbourhood has the following characteristics:

- a continuous sidewalk that is in good repair;
- you don't have to cross a street more than four lanes wide;
- you actually enjoy the walk because it is interesting (with lots of variety and things to look at);
- you can get to where you want within about 15 minutes at a comfortable pace.

If this list describes your neighbourhood, odds are you are living in one of Calgary's older areas, where the roads are a grid pattern allowing a choice of routes, the density is high enough to support a range of services and amenities, and there is a mix of uses.

These are usually places where sidewalks — and often street trees — are on both sides of the street and actually lead somewhere.

Too often, our neighbourhoods are a maze of curvilinear roads through nothing but single-family houses, with garages dominating the front facades and few amenities nearby.

The low density of these neighbourhoods just can't support a business or service.

It doesn't appear as if either the developer or city officials ever anticipated anyone would walk in these areas because sidewalks on both sides of the streets are rare.

To make matters worse, there aren't many places to walk to, and increasingly, neighbourhoods are separated from each other by freeways and huge buffers of land.

This almost completely eliminates the possibility that someone in a neighbourhood would walk to the next one. We are creating isolated communities.

Our roads are basically restricted to being built for car travel only, so the message is "take the car."

But if we apply the induced travel concept to the pedestrian environment, does the same rule apply?

Yes, it seems that if you build it, they will come. For example, the most successful public space in Calgary — the river path system — seemed to fill up with pedestrians as soon as it was built.

On almost any given day, it is packed full of people walking, rollerblading or biking.

The 2005 Calgary Transportation Plan reports that since 1995, more than 500 kilometres of pathways and bikeways have been built, adding that between 1994 and 2002, there was a 55-per cent increase in pathway use.

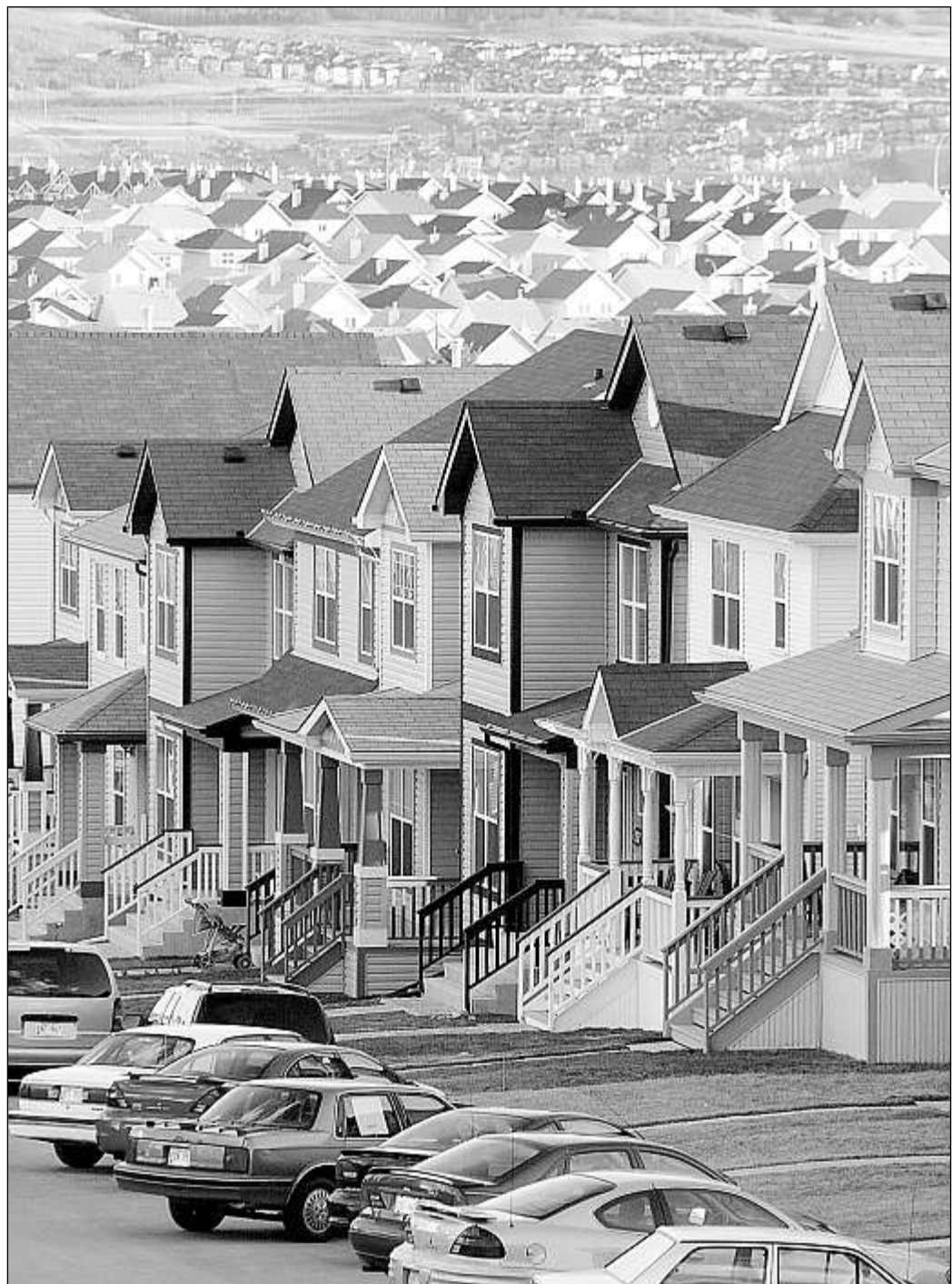
It's striking example of induced travel of pedestrians.

In terms of suburbs, a comparison was recently made between two neighbourhoods, Garrison Woods and Somerset.

Created from a former military base closer to downtown, Garrison Woods is a recently retrofitted, older-style neighbourhood consisting of a modified grid of streets that offers a mix of housing types and uses.

Located south of Fish Creek Park, Somerset is a newer, more conventional suburb consisting of curvilinear roads and predominantly single-family housing.

The comparison showed that — no surprise — more people reported walking as an activity in Garrison Woods than in Somerset.



Photos, Calgary Herald Archive

New communities tend to be planned around vehicles rather than pedestrians.

But shouldn't all of our neighbourhoods, especially the newer ones, be walkable?

The 2005 Calgary Transportation Plan reiterated one of the key policy statements made in the 1995 Transportation Plan, which called for "more compact, mixed use developments to support sustainable travel choices such as walking, cycling and transit."

It seems that we still have a long way to go to make these policy statements a reality.

Walking is the easiest physical exercise for humans. However, if the environment is not supportive of walking as an activity, no one will go there.

There are public health implications to this issue, too.

Much recent research has shown that people living in sprawling places have a greater

likelihood of having health problems due to physical inactivity.

These include being overweight, as well as suffering from heart disease and hypertension.

Some facts behind the problem can be found in a U.S. study in 2003 called Measuring the Health Effects of Sprawl.

Barbara McCann, former director of information and research at Smart Growth America, and Reid Ewing, former director of the Voorhees Transportation Centre at Rutgers University, found that the odds of developing high blood pressure are six per cent higher for every 50-point increase in the degree of sprawl, as measured in the study.

Yet Calgary's current planning system doesn't have much likelihood of producing good streets that allow people to walk.

Streets are now planned according to traffic flow and road safety, rather than according to architectural principles that make them more attractive to such users as pedestrians — either as a contributing element of urban form, or as an individual architectural urban element.

Street design has been neglected and now falls somewhere between transportation planning and architecture.

The design is usually entrusted to engineers, who are good at engineering but have minimal professional insight into architecture and urban design.

One of the main objectives in neighbourhood layout is to maximize the developer's financial return on the land.

While this isn't necessarily at odds with good street design, without the professional expertise, how is a developer or engineer to know that?

What can we all do?

First, we should all try to find the good streets in Calgary and figure out for ourselves what makes them good.

Secondly, we should then ask for more of these good streets.

We can decide as a community what is important, based on the detailed knowledge that we have of our city — and then make it one of the demands we place on our politicians and city administrators.

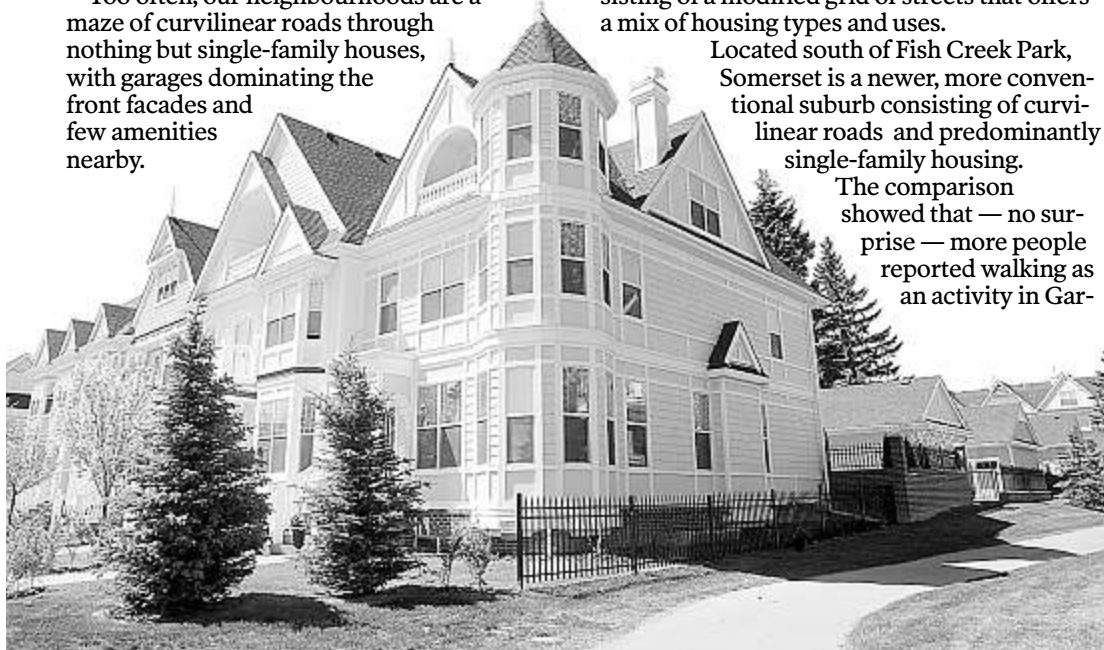
Thirdly, the design professions should re-learn the craft of urban design, including the design of streets.

Sustainable streets — that is, streets that can meet a multitude of demands or activities, and that have high environmental quality — are required in order for Calgary to become a sustainable city.

Streets as a public space need to be part of a network for walking and they must include sidewalks, street trees, and planted boulevards.

Otherwise, they become simply devices for moving cars — and hostile environments for people.

We should all try to find the good streets in Calgary and figure out for ourselves what makes them good



More people tend to report walking as an activity in the Garrison Woods neighbourhood.

CAROLINA HOMES

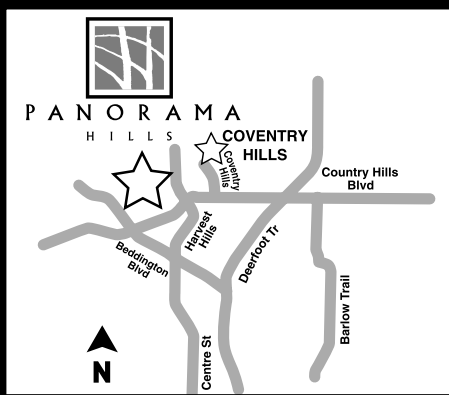
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