

CITY REGION

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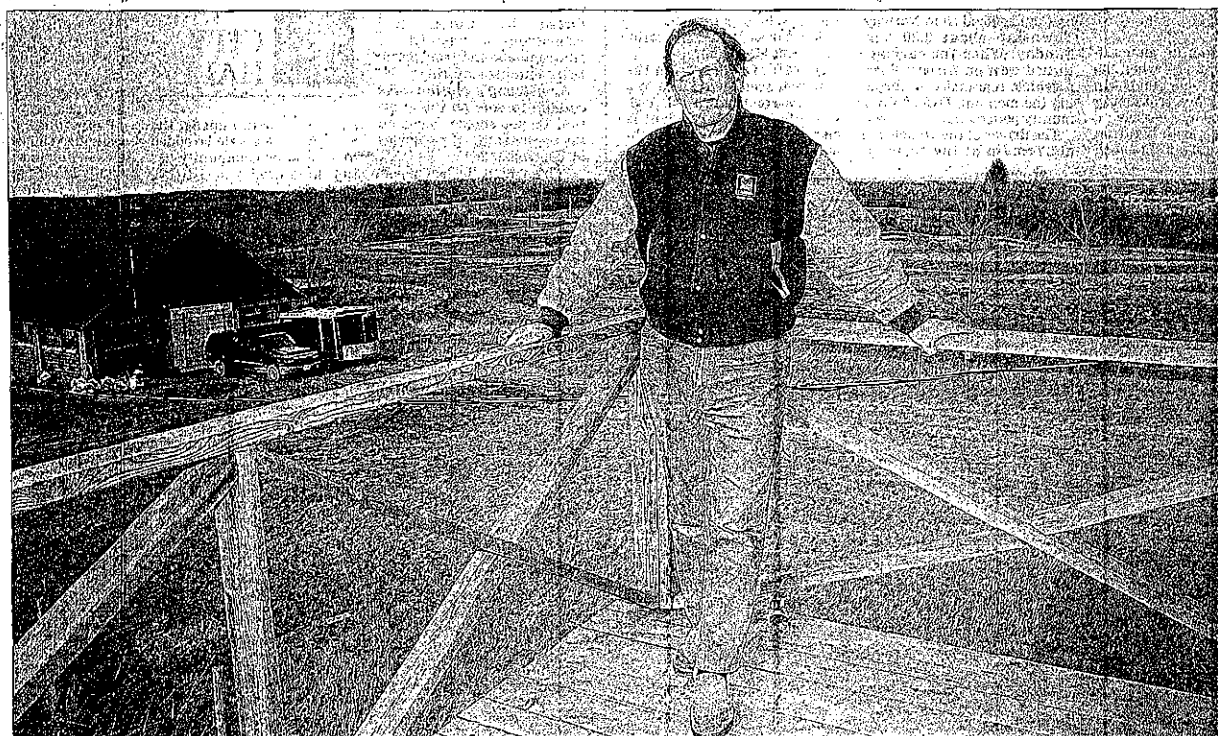
Heritage policy under fire.
Developer Shmuel Fahri slams city hall's stand on saving heritage buildings. B4

Pesticide ban revisited.
Council will take another look at the controversial proposal. B2

City Editor Chris Nixon 667-4



A TALE OF TWO SUBURBS



SUE REEVE/The London Free Press

READY TO TRY: Developer Peter Sergautis stands in front of some of the 80 hectares of property he owns near Adelaide Street and Sunningdale Road. The 40 hectares in the city will be developed into a new urbanist-type development and the 40 hectares in Middlesex Centre will be used for recreational purposes and trails.

Yes, but will it sell?

Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly and developers gotta make money.

Just how much developers are going to make on what London planners are calling placemaking subdivisions will play a major role in any decision to head down one of these new-style streets, says one of the city's biggest developers, Bernie Zailman.

RANDY RICHMOND



"We're all in business to try to make money, people who make cookies or chocolate bars or whatever," says the head of Z Group.

Zailman's Z Group is one of several developers working with the city on a new way of designing and building subdivisions.

The style, evident in the GTA for two decades, is called new urbanism, new suburbanism and smart growth. London planners are calling it placemaking.

Z Group's property on the southeast corner of Commissioners Road East and Jackson's Road will be the test plot for placemaking.

Sometimes this fall, after months of meetings and wrestling with placemaking concepts, a group of planners and developers will design a subdivision unlike any other in London for Z Group's land.

Then the costs and profits of that subdivision will be calculated and compared to the traditional design already made for the land.

"Then, Z Group may build a placemaking subdivision.

"We want to develop a sense of community that may not be there in a typical subdivision where you've got rows and rows of houses that are jammed together," Zailman says.

"Placemaking is more important today than it's ever been because people are looking for something different, a different flavour of architecture, a different flavour of community."

A strong market demand can translate into quick houses

sales, which can make additional costs for developers worth it, Zailman says.

Besides quick sales, there is much Zailman likes about placemaking, from the small parkettes that give a neighbourhood a small-town feel to the wide and shallow lots that showcase the front of a home, not the front of a garage.

"The streetscape. That to me is the No. 1 benefit. It is much friendlier. The architectural details of the house, rather than the garage, are more outstanding. It gives you the ability to do those details."

But a conversation with Zailman also reveals some concerns about placemaking that must be addressed before big developers take to the ideas in a big way.

For example, Zailman doesn't seem willing to abandon the cherished theory that lots and houses backing onto parks will bring in more dollars than houses that front the park across the road.

Roads along a park or woodland or lake that have houses on one side are called single-load roads because they have houses on only one side.

Single load roads mean half the load of money for builders.

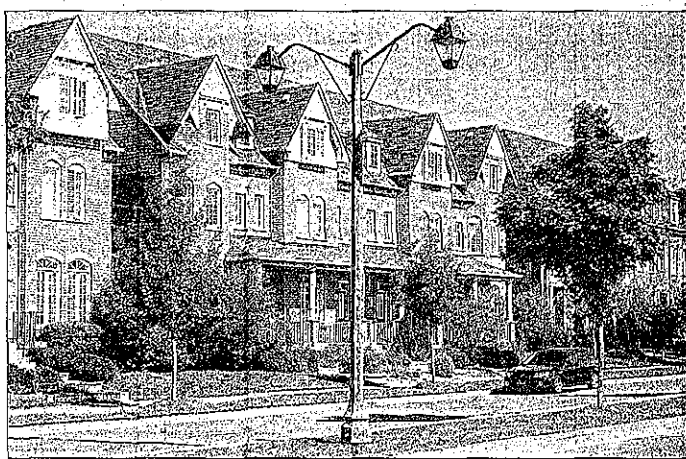
"I think that single-load roads can be useful, but they can be very expensive," Zailman says. "You are paying for the same road that would put houses on either side. There has to be a situation where you are getting a great benefit from the parkland or open space area."

Urban design expert Michael Hannay argues that developers actually make more money by setting up parks that give houses fronting the greenspace and near the greenspace a higher value.

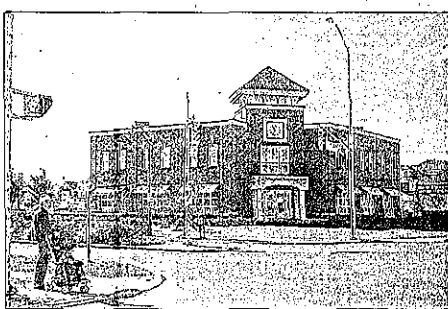
"I have always been interested in seeing how these communities evolve," says Hannay, who has designed several new urbanist neighbourhoods. "I knock on doors, go into sales office."

Hannay says he learned houses on streets running perpendicular to the parks sold almost as fast as those that front parks.

"They are selling fastest, because they are close to the park or have a partial view or across the street with a view."



How much developers will make by incorporating placemaking concepts, such as wide, shallow lots, above, that showcase the front of a home, and shopping, right, within walking distance of homes, will play a key role in any decision to move to the new-style developments, one city developer says.



A park open to more houses creates more houses that can be sold at a premium, he says.

That allows new urbanist subdivisions to actually make more money than traditional ones, Hannay concludes.

Zailman isn't so sure. "I am not convinced of that. When you back onto a park or back onto a ravine, it is very significant in premiums."

Zailman also isn't sure about giving up entirely on cul-de-sacs, the bane of new urban developments.

Cul-de-sacs, say new urbanists, hinder people from walking around their neighbourhoods because they have to go so far just to get to neighbouring streets.

"The cul-de-sacs are a lot more saleable" than straight streets, Zailman counters.

"From the buyer point of view, it is a big thing. Cul-de-sacs are a big demand."

Other concerns of Zailman include back lanes and the insistence by some new urbanists that each neighbourhood have a commercial centre inside the subdivision.

"I don't like the back alleys. I think it's a waste of pavement. . . . It creates more runoff. It makes it more expensive for the homebuyer."

It just adds to the cost of maintaining the roads. Some people believe it increases crime rates. It creates these dark areas where criminals can hang out."

Zailman also points out that where developers will make changes, sometimes the city will not.

The city doesn't like maintaining small parkettes, for example.

And engineers resist narrower streets and homes close to those streets.

"I think it is a waste of land being so far back," Zailman says. "If you could reduce those road widths and get a few more houses per acre, you could reduce the housing costs. Instead of chewing up

the acres of farmland every year, we could reduce that."

Zailman already had plans for a new-style subdivision on the test plot, but slowed down the process to work with the city. The relationship allows him a bit of a safety net.

"Innovation is a dangerous thing for developers because the process is so long. It takes three years to get a shovel in the ground and you don't know if it will work. If you've got to give up a significant amount of profit, the business case of doing a development may be questionable."

Even so, Zailman is both a little tired of the old design and a little worried about losing market share — a combination that seems to have inspired other developers to try a new style.

“I want to pick up the things that have been lost in the new subdivisions and duplicate what made Wortley Village one of the more attractive areas to live in.”
Peter Sergautis, developer

THE SERIES
Saturday: Placemaking. What is it?
Yesterday: London's hopes and the barriers in the way.
Today: What do developers think?
Tomorrow: How it works elsewhere, pros and cons.