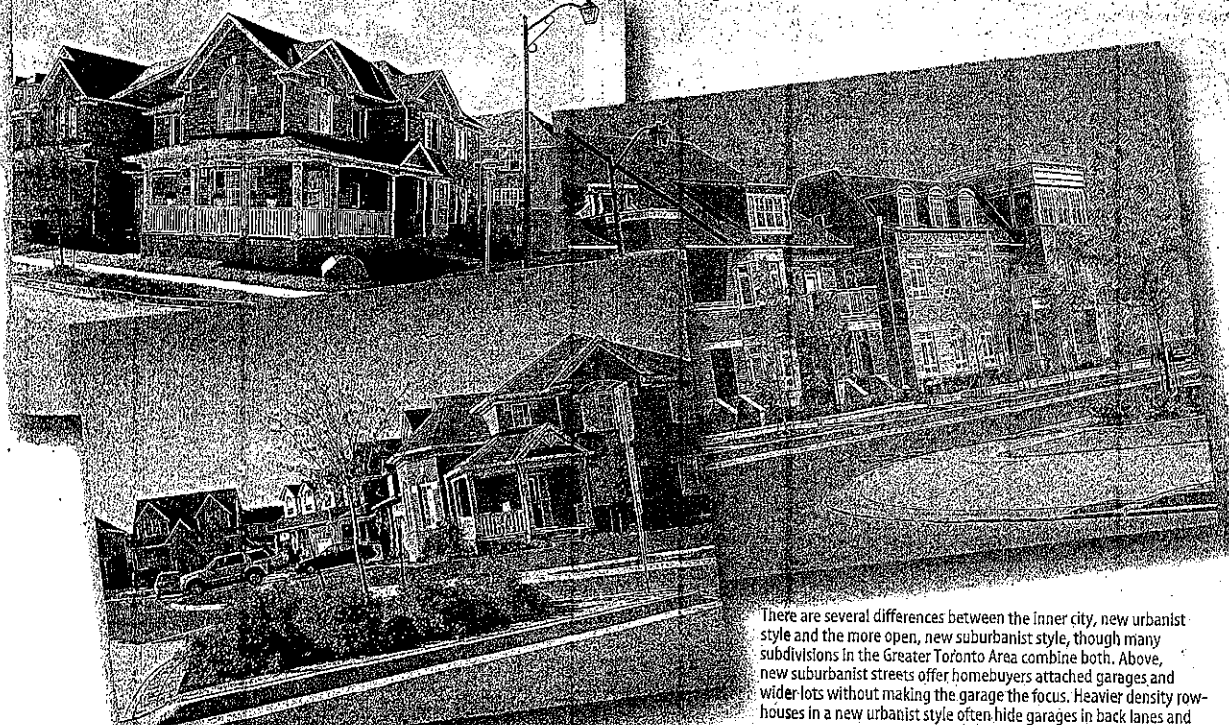


# A TALE OF TWO SUBURBS

## Where would you live?

New urbanism and new suburbanism might sound similar, but there's a big difference, as some Ontario communities have learned.



There are several differences between the inner city, new urbanist style and the more open, new suburbanist style, though many subdivisions in the Greater Toronto Area combine both. Above, new suburbanist streets offer homebuyers attached garages and wider lots without making the garage the focus. Heavier density row-houses in a new urbanist style often hide garages in back lanes and present a more citylike streetscape.

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**C**ornell is a prime example of new urbanism. Its brochures even sell it as being like the "inner city communities" of Toronto in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

It's immediately clear this neighbourhood is nothing like Londoners are used to, even those living in old south and old North.

On one of the main entrances, narrow, three-storey gingerbread houses are stacked side by side and only a few steps from the street.

To Londoners, the first impression might be that it's pleasant, but a little crowded.

In older areas, the gingerbread designs are overwhelming, as if Norman Rockwell went overboard.

In the new areas, the homes are more stately and refined, with a cleaner look of brick and stone.

The streets wind around parks, parks that are not obstructed by monster homes.

Off each street are roads that turn into back lanes that lead to garages.

What brings young buyers here?

"The white picket fences," says Michelle O'Sullivan, walking up to the coffee shop with friend Steven Gamble.

"The design concept," Gamble says. "No garages in the front, and I can afford to live here."

They have some complaints, though.

"The houses are a little too close together," O'Sullivan says.

"When you want to see people, that's there. When you want privacy, it isn't here," Gamble agrees.

In some parts of Cornell, the back lanes have the look of walls of double car garages, the kind of uninviting landscape that some suburbs present in the front yards.

"There isn't anywhere to put the snow in the rear lanes," Gamble notes.

Despite its promising start, Cornell's history is somewhat checked.

The original developer, Larry Law, bailed out and now eight builders are involved.

Sales of single detached homes in Cornell are a little slow, admits a representative for one of the eight builders.

Sales of townhouses are brisk because they are inexpensive.

From a drive around the community, it appears most new builders are creating far more townhouses than single detached homes.

An hour south and west, at Hawthorne Village, sales are brisk all around.

"If we have it, we will sell it," says Nick Hill, a sales rep for Mattamy Homes Ltd, which

owns properties in both Hawthorne and Cornell.

In December, the office sold 48 lots in a day.

"There are lineups all the time."

In the office at that moment are Linda and Josh Rego.

They just sold their semi-detached home in Hawthorne and are moving up to four bedroom detached.

"We just need more space."

Quick resells are another sign the development works, Hill notes.

Hawthorne Village has a very different feel from Cornell.

There are high-density areas of townhouses and the detached homes are closer than in London subdivisions, but there seems to be more space than in Cornell.

The homes are close to the street, but the lots are wider and garages are attached to the side.

The wider lot also allows for wider front porches and larger front windows. Imagine Westmount or Oakridge, with the houses closer to the street, the parks not hidden by homes and the architecture more interesting. And the streets a little narrower.

No two houses of the same style are allowed side by side.

In general, the feel is more like that of the suburbs, even more so in places such as The Orchard, an older example of new suburbanism near Burlington.

"That, to me, is one of the best examples in Ontario," Zaifman says. "I think they did it right."

London will have to find its own mix, says Michael Hannay, an urban design expert based in the city.

Hannay has designed high-density new urban developments with rear lanes and lower density developments that might be considered new suburbanism.

City hall is counting on his expertise to help it develop at least one and maybe more new style subdivisions.

"I am very interested, in ideas, but I am not an ideologue," Hannay says.

The new urbanist movement has come under fire for its dogmatic approach to building subdivisions and its insistence only city living allows a good lifestyle.

That ignores many good suburban experiences, in areas such as Oakridge in London, Hannay says.

"You can make better places, not by throwing out everything, but by thinking about the components that will work."

The key, Hannay says, is to have a vision of what you want before you start.

Whatever London comes up

with, it must come up with something beyond the standard, garage-first subdivision, he says.

Hannay helped design Oak Park in Oakville, a new urbanist community.

An odd mix of property lines means Oak Park ends halfway down a street and instantly turns into a traditional subdivision.

The visual clash is startling. A long row of attractive brick townhouses with porches close to the street and tucked away garages stands beside a row of garages hiding the fronts of houses.

For Londoners, Hannay has a simple question.

"Where would you rather live?"



## Creating new styles a juggling act

Build a beautiful new subdivision of houses with wide front porches, garages tucked to the side or in rear lanes at the back, straight streets and all the elements that evoke neighbourhoods of the 1940s.

Build another subdivision next door, with garages in front of the houses on narrow lots along crescents and cul de sacs, evoking the neighbourhoods of the 1980s and 1990s.

Charge homebuyers \$5,000 to \$10,000 more for that 1940s feeling.

Then watch, says builder Alan Churchill, as some people buy the 1940s style and many, many more people flock to buy the 1990s style.

No matter how nice some new urbanist or new suburbanist subdivisions look, people compare prices, Churchill says.

"The bottom line is people are value conscious," he says.

Churchill should know. He's a past president of the London Homebuilders' Association.

As a partner in Reid's Heritage Homes of London, Churchill inherited Talbot Village in southwest London.

Talbot Village was planned as the first new urbanist development in London.

The plans fell apart, but Reid's decided to use some of the new urbanist elements, such as a more old-fashioned street grid and wide porches and garages tucked beside houses.

Other elements, such as rear lanes and roads that showcase parks for everyone were abandoned.

Why?

Money and the suburban lifestyle.

There are many things people moving to the suburbs don't want to give up.

Privacy in the backyard is one of them, Churchill says.

That's just one reason why rear lanes only work in small doses, he says.

"You are living in a fish-bowl. You have little privacy, little security."

All the nice front porches in the world won't change a simple fact.

"People really want to barbecue and be in their backyard. They want their rear yard privacy."

New urbanism centres on the rear lanes as a way to hide garages. New suburbanism drops the rear lane in favour of a wide and shallow lot that puts the garage at the side of the house.

Even that can cause problems, Churchill says.

"You put on a deck, you could almost pass drinks back and forth to your neighbour."

The wide, shallow lot can also make it difficult to build a properly balanced house. The house may have space upstairs for five bedrooms but limited room downstairs for shared spaces.

In Talbot Village, Reid's has built and sold houses on somewhat wider and shallower lots, with large front porches.

The houses are selling well, but wide, shallow lots put up the price of each house because a builder can't get as many units in the subdivision, Churchill said.

The front porches and architecture that take the focus away from the garage also raise the prices, he says.

Talbot Village has a nice

water retention pond and plans for a park around it. But plans for a road around the park that allowed views for everyone in the neighbourhood weren't financially feasible, Churchill says.

"I love single-load roads," he says, referring to roads that have houses on only one side.

But losing half the houses on the park ring road would have forced Reid's to raise the price of existing homes out of the range of most people.

Reid's was also careful about mixing densities, another key element of the new urbanism.

Mixed density appeals only to a point, Churchill says.

A buyer doesn't want to spend \$500,000 for a home on a 50-foot lot, only to have a \$200,000 home on a 30-foot lot next door, Churchill says.

Rightly or wrongly, buyers think the value of their home will go down if there are lower priced units next door.

Despite the concerns, the homebuilders' association has a place at the city hall table in discussions about creating new-style subdivisions in London.

"In Toronto, a buyer can buy a traditional lot, a wide shallow, a rear lane," Churchill notes.

Builders here want to offer Londoners the same.

"People should have a choice."

“You can make better places not by throwing out everything, but by thinking about the components that will work.”  
Michael Hannay

**THE SERIES**  
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The streetscape of Hawthorne Village in Milton, above, typifies new suburbanism. Though the subdivision has high-density areas, many streets have the feel of the suburbs, rather than an inner-city sense of being packed in together.