

THE "TYPICAL" RESIDENTIAL SUBDIVISION IN CANADA
Controlled Suburban Residential Developments
Around Major Cities From 1945 To The Mid-1970's

A Thesis
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Thomas Gordon Young
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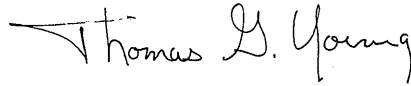
DEDICATION

To my wife, Wynne, for her
encouragement and enthusiasm.

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In addition, thanks goes to Bev Chenkie and Mrs. Bev Shimkus for their typing of the manuscript.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Thomas G. Young". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned centrally on the page.

Thomas G. Young

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an analysis of certain problems of the "typical" residential subdivision which was mass produced at the suburban edges of many major Canadian cities during the post-World War II period.

Its purpose is to:

- 1) define and demonstrate the "typical" subdivision in the context of the general suburbanization phenomenon,
- 2) examine and explain the relationships and evolution of various elements of the "typical" subdivision,
- 3) illustrate some of the major problems that the mass production of "typical" subdivisions has contributed to and how they could be remedied,
- 4) show an alternative way of proceeding with subdivision design, and for what reasons.

The steps in the thesis comprise

- 1) a review of basic literature to establish concepts for "subdivision", "suburb", "suburbanization" and "typical" subdivision along with basic assumptions regarding their use in this thesis;
- 2) a historical analysis of post-World War II suburbanization to demonstrate the contexts from which "typical" subdivisions evolved;
- 3) a study of the elements of the subdivision (ie., the house, the lot, the street, etc.) as well as affiliated community and commercial facilities. (This indicated that despite

minor changes in its detail the "typical" subdivision retained its primary role as a site for detached single family housing. That role overwhelmed attempts for developing a sense of community and urban belonging.);

- 4) an analysis of issues in land, energy, economics, and sociological aspects, and their relationship to mass produced subdivisions in suburbia to illustrate some of the failings of the "typical" subdivision, and the current issues they must face;
- 5) a summary of the findings critically examined so as to lead toward a new approach to subdivision design;
- 6) A proposal illustrating a new direction that might be taken for subdivision design in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This thesis comprises a study of the "typical" subdivision in the context of post-World War II suburbanization in major Canadian cities. As its first objective the thesis explores the general suburbanization phenomenon in Canada in order to distinguish historical and contextual references for a-typical and "typical" subdivisions. Chapter II, entitled "Suburbanization", examines the general historical aspects by focusing upon clusters of events which affected suburbanization in three periods. The first period, the War, is seen as a period which brought economic prosperity and technological innovations, initiated the return to urbanization, and created a potential for suburbanization after 1945. The second period, 1945-1959, is seen as one in which general economic prosperity continued and in which few controls were placed upon suburban expansion. The third period, 1960-1970, is seen as a period of growing economic upheaval in terms of the general economy and in terms of suburbanization.

The second portion of Chapter II examines the contexts in which "typical" and a-typical subdivisions are distinguished.

Essential to the understanding of the demonstrations of Chapter II are a number of definitions, assumptions and background views. These prerequisites form the discussions of Chapter I. Included are definitions of suburbanization, subdivision, the image of a "typical subdivision", and an outline of the factors which were chosen to illustrate the historical aspects of suburbanization in Chapter II.

The second objective of the thesis is to examine further the

physical features associated with "typical" subdivisions and their evolution in the two post-war periods. Chapter III undertakes this task by examining the housing, the lots and lot designs, the streets and street furnishings, the grouping of houses, and the subdivision as a whole.

The third objective turns the focus to present and future concerns of many people, that the "typical" subdivision does not represent a good-fit with the needs of our society for the 1970's. While this concern can not be fully explored and tested in the course of this thesis, Chapter IV reviews the statement in discussions on energy, land, economics in land development and housing, and sociological concerns.

As a final objective the thesis undertakes a design proposal based upon hypotheses evolved from Chapter IV in the four areas of energy, land, economics, and sociology. The proposal is sited in St. Vital, Winnipeg. The design of the proposal has been restricted in time and so it does not purport to be a "solve-everything" solution. As such the thesis concludes with an assessment of the proposal as well as a summary of the thesis in its entirety.

As this thesis encompasses a wide frame of reference and entails an historical review it has relied heavily on other sources in its data gathering approach.

BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

- Definitions of Suburb and Subdivision
- Factors Affecting Post-World War II Suburbanization
- The "Typical vs A-Typical" Debate
- Major Issues Affecting Subdivisions of the Seventies

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

A. Definitions of Suburb and Subdivision

The two terms, "suburb" and "subdivision" have accumulated with them a host of myths and blurred understanding. Although they have both been used to refer to the same or similar physical features they are not synonymous. As both terms are employed extensively in this thesis it is important to distinguish them early and to explain their use as employed in the chapters which follow.

"Suburb" is a relative term used to describe the setting for some type of human activity or activities beyond an existing urban form where, in comparison to the latter, homogeneity, openness, and specialization are its distinguishing physical features. The suburb's affiliation with an urban system distinguishes it from being labelled rural. Its relationship in form and intensity of activity, being somewhere between rural and urban, is similarly expressed in its geographic location between the two. These features have been associated with suburbs of many cultures and down through many centuries from Ancient Egypt and early Biblical times to the present (Sobin, 1971: 16). Hence, the term suburb is defined here as a type of lower urban unit distinguishable from a truly urban form geographically and in the sense of having more homogeneous, open and specialized form and activities. As noted by S. D. Clark, an urban sociologist studying suburbs of the early 1950's around Toronto, suburbs may not have strict boundaries delineating them from the urban center

and the rural environment. Rather, they may flow into the countryside and the city in a smooth transition.

In distinguishing "suburbs" from "subdivisions" in a broad sense it is essential to note from the above the urban-suburban-rural context in which the former term is contained. "Subdivision", on the other hand is exempt from the necessity of such an affiliation. While it, too can be compared to urban form and rural settings, a subdivision need not be associated to a particular city geographically or activity-wise. Thus, it is possible to find a subdivision in an isolated rural setting around a lake. Upon comparing the physical characteristics of the subdivision, however, they could resemble that of a suburb, and in fact are "sub urban" (ie, less than urban in the physical sense).

"Subdivision" is employed in reference to land division. It can either be the process or a product of the process of dividing up land for particular purposes. As defined by Kevin Lynch (1962: 229), "subdivision" is "the process whereby vacant land is divided into lots and public rights-of-way, providing sites for future individual buildings. . . ." The focus of "subdivision", therefore, has traditionally been land.

"Subdivision", related to "suburbanization" is simply the method by which suburbs grow. Each time a parcel of land in the suburban area and adjacent rural area is "subdivided" a new subdivision is created and the suburb is expanded.

The focus of this thesis is upon residential suburban subdivisions which have been produced around or just beyond major Canadian cities in the post-war period. More specifically it is the more controlled developments, those created by plans, which are the issue.¹ Subdivisions of this

1. Generally there are three descriptions given to the methods of

type can comprise a multitude of features from various housing types, to various types and levels of services, to the layout pattern of streets and public rights-of-way, to the organization of churches, schools, parks, and commercial facilities. The features focused upon in this thesis extend from the three basic elements of Kevin Lynch's definition and from other publications of which V. J. Kostka's Planning Residential Subdivisions is particularly significant. In the latter, the subdivision comprises individual lots, streets, and layout patterns for housing, schools, parks and other community facilities (1954).

B. Factors Affecting Post-World War II Suburbanization

The factors affecting post World War II suburbanization are numerous and complex. As well, they may be described from various points of view. There are, for example, technological factors such as the improvements made to the automobile and the subsequent effect on prompting widespread, low density development. There are also economic factors which range from general economic prosperity initiating urbanization and suburbanization, and lower land values on city outskirts which favor development there. Political factors also can be isolated in terms of housing policy, planning responsibility and other issues. There are institutional and organizational factors such as the influence of large builder conglomerates and the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, as well as parks and recreation departments, and school authorities. Finally, there are social factors such as the values associated with home ownership, and suburban living. Summed up, suburbanization after

subdivision. These are 1) metes and bounds, 2) townships or river lot system, 3) explanatory or subdivision plan. Of these only the third description is associated with production of controlled subdivisions (Haggerty, 1976: 143.).

World War II was a result of many societal factors and influences. It would be impossible to explain all of these intricate factors through the course of one thesis. An alternative approach considered here is to explain the essence of the phenomenon during the post-war period up to the 1970's. Toward this end, the following specifies the phenomenon as perceived in this thesis.

Suburbanization in its most basic sense, is dependent upon a continued flow of people to the outskirts of urban areas. This is a result of 1) growing pressures in urban areas for expansion and 2) the favorability of the outskirts to accommodate that growth. With regard to the former, increased mechanization and industrialization during the war led to rural-urban migration. This influx of people combined with a severely restricted housing construction industry to produce an enormous pressure for expansion of housing in the urban areas.

From the above the first of the two basic ingredients for suburbanization was afforded during events of the war. The second ingredient - creating a favorable atmosphere for development in the outskirts - was also partially afforded during the War Years. In 1944 the federal government passed the National Housing Act which emphasized house ownership and production of detached single family homes. The federal role was primarily to leave the building and planning of housing developments to others (private industry and local governments) and to merely share in the financing of such activity. The fact that it provided most of its money for home ownership, however, attributed to the favorability of developing the outskirts to the inner areas. This was further complemented by the availability of relatively low priced land on the outskirts which was prevalent at the end of the war.

The type of suburbs created, however, depended upon more than merely pressures for growth, low land values, and home ownership. Generally speaking, any of the vast majority of developments that were primarily low density depended also upon the private automobile as the primary source of transportation. Potential for expansion of the automobile was made possible during the War in conjunction with Canada's involvement with the war effort. In addition, further discoveries in oil and gas after the war played an important part in retaining the automobile and promoting its widespread use. Costs of petroleum fuels also favored their use for heating homes. This attributed further to individual unit heating in housing.

The other prominent factors affecting suburbanization depended largely upon those persons and agencies most directly involved with the production of subdivisions. In some instances these people comprised municipal, provincial and federal authorities in conjunction with private financiers, developers, builders, and planners. In other instances it was primarily the private developers, realtors, financiers, and builders in conjunction with prospective home buyers. In the former case, developments tended toward a more organized community appearance while in the latter, developments were spotty, sprawling and disorganized. Also in the former, schools, parks and small commercial establishments were often a part of the development whereas in the latter only housing was usually visible.

It is important to observe the above forces on a national level in order to distinguish periodic trends relating to suburbanization, as well as on a more local level to witness the exceptions and specifics within the general tendencies. It is through these two perspectives

that Chapter II elaborates the essence of post-World War II suburbanization in Canada, and distinguishes contexts in which "typical" subdivisions and a-typical subdivision was created.

C. The "Typical vs A-Typical" Debate

Much of the recent literature on suburbs is centered around the debate of whether there exists a typical suburb or not. Generally earlier post-World War II literature, focusing upon American suburbs and written largely by sociologists and novelists, assumed that there was and set out to describe it. Such well known authors as Sectorsky, Reismann, Fromm, Whyte, Forest and Keats added substantially to this view hypothesizing a typical lifestyle, behavior pattern, political beliefs, and other social aspects that corresponded to the typical form. A composite picture extracted from these writings depicts the typical suburb with rows of ranch-style homes with large picture windows facing wide streets and "barren" boulevards; minimal landscaping where lawns and small trees and shrubs offered little contrast to the empty surroundings; neat little gardens located in the back of standard sized yards; carports or garages aside single storey houses both flanked by a small stretch of sideyard empty space; and giant supermarkets, schools, and churches located in isolated fashion by roadsides, parking lots and barren open space.

Further research expanded upon the assertions of the typical suburb in many other respects. However, amidst the growing volumes of studies there evolved the belief that many suburbs actually exhibited very different characteristics, physically and socially. Well known authors such as Herbert Gans, Bennett Berger, Dennis Sobin, and John Kramer dispelled the beliefs that a "typical" suburb existed.