

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has tried to explain suburban residential urban growth primarily in terms of the relationship between the City of Calgary and the various land developers. Given the intentions of both, the resulting urban sprawl was inevitable. The first point of note is that each fostered urban sprawl for different reasons: The City favoured expanding the city's gross area because of a powerful and abiding belief in the merits of the uni-city concept. This was compounded by inflexible attitudes towards zoning. The developers sought annexations to assure land inventories and to maximize profits through ready access to easily serviced land at the lowest possible cost. Both catered to the demand for single residence construction.

The overall argument has stressed the importance of utilities in determining the pace and direction of urban growth. Utilities, it appears, played at least as big a role in the subdivision approval process as the more obvious transportation issues. In this context one wonders about the sizing factor. What were the implications of sizing for density changes within subdivisions? Did they preordain initial density patterns in that once laid, they were too expensive to modify? It seems that the whole issue of utilities installations deserves more attention, both within the context of points raised in this discussion and with respect to their complex role in the overall planning process.

Did the City err in handing over the control of suburban construction to the developers in the early 1950s? Could it and should it have continued to control the rate, direction, and priority of infrastructure construction through local improvement taxes? The City and the developers always maintained that the private sector route was cheaper, ultimately more efficient, and therefore beneficial to the homeowner. According to a City report in 1977, homeowners would not have been better off had the City undertaken the work and charged everything to local improvement.¹ Evidence suggests that this opinion was correct. Certainly the City, and probably the homeowner, profited in that the private sector route was less expensive. But did the City lose more than it gained? The City abrogated the development process to the developers, who decided when and where subdivisions would be opened. Would things have been different

TABLE 8

Comparative Housing Costs, 1968 & 1977*

Raw Land per Lot	1968: \$1,220 1977: \$7,500
Construction Costs (including profit)	1968: \$17,200 1977: \$37,000
Service Costs per Lot	1968: \$2,250 1977: \$8,000
Miscellaneous Costs and Development Profit	1968: \$343 1977: \$6,750
Total Cost	1968: \$21,013 1977: \$60,050

* 1,080 Square foot bungalow on a 50' lot

Source: H.U.D.A.C. figures in City Submission on Municipal Agreements to Province, 1977.

otherwise? A negative answer is suggested, especially since City Hall philosophy held that its proper role lay in planning and monitoring growth, not in actualizing it. A corollary argument concerns the overall costs of suburban growth. Regardless of acreage assessments, developer agreements, and other civic measures to wring financial concessions from developers, one wonders whether the City indirectly subsidized developers by providing facilities, amenities and utilities, and transportation infrastructure to accommodate a process that was essentially out of their control, and arguably, unnecessary.

A central point in this discussion concerned the relationship of land supply to housing costs. Even disregarding the fact that the price of a lot as a percentage of the total housing package in Calgary did not diverge markedly from other major cities, the developers' argument that house prices could be controlled only through a steadily increasing supply of land is contestable. According to Peter Spurr, any direct correlation between land supply and housing prices is far too simplistic.² One also wonders about the assumption that new house prices set the standard for the city generally, especially given the fact that they comprised an annual addition of only about 3 percent to the overall housing stock. It appears that prices were determined by what the market would bear rather than by availability of land.³ As seen in West Thorncliffe, the relatively low cost of the land bore little relation to the price at which it was sold, and therefore the ultimate prices paid for the houses. Finally, using the developers'

own rationale, it must be concluded that there was an upward limit beyond which people simply could not buy. Any policy of restrictive growth therefore could drive land prices up by only so much. In this situation developers probably would have maximized profits by releasing their diminished inventories more slowly. However, this could be a staying measure only, and in order to stay in business, they would have had to turn to modifications in density and design. However, the City lacked the will to test the developers' arguments about the relation of land availability to housing prices. This allowed them to continue to promote the single family residence as a way of life, and, as a consequence, the necessity of the ever-expanding corporate suburb. The City's major error in the land supply debate lay not so much in an unwillingness to combat expansion-hungry developers but in its acceptance of their arguments. There was thus no give and take dialogue between the two over how the city should grow.

The City inadvertently fostered outward growth by its reluctance to speed up the decision-making process. Annexation resulted in part from the temporary unavailability of developable land within the city. Large areas of land were withheld from development pending decisions on road alignments, utilities installations, and other issues. The presence of sour gas in the northeast, the ongoing debates over the future of Fish Creek and Nose Hill, and indecision over the best land use along the Barlow Trail led developers to plead the land shortage argument while at the same time securing raw land beyond the corporate limits. The City might have worked harder to secure the release of land in Strathcona and the northeast, or better still take the advice of one its planners and use development control to provide higher density housing. It did neither. Instead it took the pragmatic route and sought annexation.

The City's failure to go into residential land banking was an error. A publicly owned land bank, judiciously managed, would have aided affordable housing policies and growth control while providing a yardstick by which private sector activity could be gauged. One has only to note the envy directed towards Edmonton which, because of its Mill Woods project, was able to offer land for social housing at below market prices.⁴ In its three opportunities to enter land banking, the City shrank before acquisition costs at current market prices. There seemed to be no awareness that they might represent future bargain values. As late as 1977 R.O. Leitch, the architect behind the City's very successful industrial land banking program, in responding to a query about a residential land bank, noted that "we are not in it but it's never too late."⁵

Rising land values thwarted efforts to meet demands for low cost housing, with the issue revolving around who would supply the land and who would administer the projects built on it. Each party wanted the other to provide cheap land in order to maximize the benefits under federal and provincial social housing program. Both refused. The City felt that some relaxation of building standards was as far as it could go. The developers believed that the best alternative to cheap land was for the City to act as a clearinghouse by diverting all government monies to them, since they were the best equipped to meet the demand for affordable housing. According to Clarence Semrau, Vice President of H.U.D.A.C. in Calgary, “the City’s role should be to provide the correct environment so the private sector can respond to the social housing needs. We believe that industry can do the job more efficiently than the City if given the same opportunities, conditions, subsidies etc that are at the City’s disposal.”⁶ This impasse was evidenced in the failure of the City and the developers to persist with workable solutions in the absence of federal and provincial financial assistance. For example, once A.H.P. and the C.M.H.C. financing was not forthcoming, both the City and the developers lost interest in integrating lower cost housing into overall subdivision design.

Zoning emerges in this study in terms of controls rather than as a progressive instrument to manage growth imaginatively despite the flexibility afforded by development control. The options provided under development control were under-utilized. Moreover, there were few incentives for experimentation or compensation for risk taking. The Faculty of Environmental Design articulated the City’s lack of leadership in influencing the way Calgary grew when it noted that “government is content to see the private sector remain responsible for basic decisions governing the character of urban growth.”⁷ Along with annexation, the City’s failure to capitalize on zoning options was a primary reason behind the unchecked urban sprawl in Calgary during this period.

Several observations can be made about the relationship between the City and the developers during the period covered by this study. Though their formal relationship seemed proper enough there is evidence to suggest that behind-the-scenes animosities were commonplace. This is not surprising and to be expected. And certainly while there were instances where the City seemed to yield to developer influence on a general basis, the prevalence of unbridled palm greasing and collusion is certainly not substantiated in the evidence available.⁸ In terms of what each thought of the other, a couple of consistencies are suggested. The City saw the developers as grasping, sometimes overbearing, and ignorant of inherent



Sprawl continues in north Calgary, 1985.

practical and political complexities. To the developers, the City was primarily interested in squeezing as much money as they could while cluttering the approval process with bureaucratic red tape. Both tended to shift the blame for the rising cost of housing onto the other. Yet because they had to work together, there existed a grudging respect for each other's professionalism.

It does not appear that developers reaped inordinate profits compared to industry generally or with their counterparts in other cities, certainly not before 1975, and even after that it is difficult to measure given rising inflation and carrying costs. Calgary's housing costs did not vary significantly from the rest of the country. For almost this entire period, Calgary compared very favourably with other Canadian cities. As late as 1972, Calgary ranked 15th out of the 22 largest Canadian cities in terms of new house prices.⁹ Even after 1974, when Calgary land and housing prices rose markedly, they were still behind Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa, and Victoria. While monopoly presence was an issue, especially in the 1970s, it was never associated with price collusion.

Since it lacked both the right and the mandate, the City showed virtually no interest in encouraging variety in subdivision design. This was unfortunate, for despite the developers' claim that they followed a variety of building designs, Calgary's subdivisions were monotonous and bland. Developers defended their profit-driven practice based on the mass production principle by indicating the absence of customer dissatisfaction and the ready resale values for all designs.¹⁰ Instead, they sought other areas to stress their individuality. For example, Kelwood had the lakes; Melcor became adept in building on sloped land, while Qualico focused on pre-fabrication design. In the final analysis the City was probably wise in not wasting energy or time in trying to encourage more diversity in subdivision design. The developers had realized from the outset in the 1950s that it was the idea of "one's own house" which counted, and while the location might matter somewhat, the design was a minor consideration. Faced with financial limitations, the vast majority of potential homeowners settled for house over design. Some even accepted the persuasive sales pitch that the flat roofs, the stucco siding and the squat anonymity of the bungalow meant cheaper maintenance, easy add-on potential, and most of all equal opportunity in the resale market.

Finally, the relationship between the developers and the City can be seen as a power struggle. One may be excused for wondering why, since the City held all the ultimate decision-making authority. In theory and often in practice the developers filled the compliance role. Yet, the developers succeeded in achieving a much more balanced power relationship than that suggested by their secondary status. Some would argue that the reason lay in co-optation through money and collusion, and doubtless this was true in isolated cases. However, evidence seems to suggest that the developers' growing power was related to the inability of the City to combat them on a united front. The developers' focused approach to City Hall was based on clear profit-driven criteria and market indicators, and in the long run was a great equalizer when faced with a multi-layered decision-making process involving executive and political components. As was indicated in the Introduction, theoretical power generally does not translate into equal efficacy in practice, especially one subject to a bureaucratized chain of command.

By 1978 the City was dealing with a new Planning Act.¹¹ Six years in the making, the Planning Act of 1977 helped the City by removing specifications in general plans, by allowing a very loose Land Use Bylaw, and by extending legal force to design briefs (Area Restructure Plans). However, it also weakened the City's powers to deal with the development process.

For example, provisions in the section pertaining to “Money in lieu of Reserves” placed heavy financial constraints on the City with respect to land purchases, appraisals, and its ability to provide adequate parkland in new communities. The subdivision process was made far more lengthy and complex. Most significantly, the Province seemed determined to insinuate itself into City policymaking. It weakened the City’s autonomy with respect to replotting schemes, claimed the right to control development in any area impacting “the welfare of any person or property,” and reserved the power to establish “special planning areas” under its control where and when it saw fit. While the offsite levy was continued, the Province reserved the right to set a maximum. Then a year later the City was again hit hard by two decisions, one by the Supreme Court and the other by the Provincial Planning Board. Hailed by the U.D.I. as “milestones for the development industry,” the first prohibited the City from acquiring more land than sufficient for public roads and utilities from developers without compensation. The second established that developers did not have to sell additional land to the City at set or arbitrary rates.¹²

A final note concerns the philosophical underpinnings about the ideal city during this period. Certainly a belief in the modern city as opposed to earlier forms was evidenced by infrastructure to support the automobile. An adherence to the Garden City ideal typical of the period was expressed in the cultivation of the private domain, mainly through the single family detached dwelling. Best articulated in the General Plan of 1963, a mutual belief in the efficacy of these two principles bound the developers and the City in a common quest.

As the late 1970s unfolded there was no slowing down in Calgary’s suburban development. Potential homeowners still wanted their quarter-acre as much as they did in the 1950s. The developers and the City were only too willing to accommodate them. There were few laments. Though housing affordability had become a bigger issue, it was not enough to slow the momentum. Developer profits were at an all-time high, as were local taxation revenues. Though increasingly beleaguered by provincial constraints, City policymakers had their sights set on big city status and the growth statistics that went with it. A silent and very real casualty was the land. Much of Calgary’s suburban domain that sprawled like a malignancy across the river valleys and prairie was being built on chernozemic black soil, the best in the world. In 1978, few understood. Fewer cared.

