

# ONTARIO PLANNING

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### Bracing for the Demographic Tsunami-Can Canada's Seniors Escape Un-Pleasantville?

Authors: **Glenn Miller, Gordon Harris, Ian Ferguson**

(This is the third in a series of three articles about aging and mobility.)

*Sharon sat in her living room, feeling a bit bewildered. It was ten o'clock in the morning. By rights she should have been mingling with her bridge group, just as she had every Tuesday for as long as she could remember since her retirement. But here she was—marooned on her couch, trapped in her house. Or at least, that's how it appeared to her. Friends had offered to give her a lift, but Sharon declined—stubborn as always—claiming she was busy with other things. Next time, she said.*

*Sharon's face reddened with anger at the memory of the confrontation with her son, daughter in law and Doctor Jones. It was all the more galling because the doctor was the same age as her! When he had solemnly declared that he was going to have to recommend to the Ministry of Transportation that she give up her licence, Sharon had lost her temper. Pompous ass. Who did he think he was? The scrape on the fender was quite minor, after all. Even if the people standing at the bus stop when she accidentally mounted the curb had had a bit of a scare, she'd missed them, hadn't she? And so here she was, stuck and immobile in the house.*

*Even though her faithful Toyota was parked in the driveway, Sharon was no longer licensed to drive it. Mobility had been a problem since she fell and broke her hip. Grudgingly she could admit that she needed the walker. She also knew she was taking a risk trying to lug the damned thing down the five front steps to the path. The basket was handy but couldn't hold enough groceries and she didn't have the stamina to manage what was otherwise only a ten-minute drive to the store. Everyone suggested she try public transportation. The bus stop was only a five-minute walk and the bus did kneel for people with walkers. Unfortunately, even if she could get to the bus stop, she had sworn never to ride the bus again after that last embarrassing experience when the driver took off before she had gained her balance. Sharon wasn't going to repeat her role as a human bowling bowl any time soon, thank you very much.*

*Ever since the fall, her children worried about her being safe at home. Suggestions had ranged from someone coming in to help her with housework to, god forbid, moving into a retirement home. Sharon knew that she wasn't quite as sharp as she had been prior to the surgery but didn't think she'd "lost it" quite yet. She was starting to feel quite old and wondered, how had it come to this? Pictures on her mantel of her skiing and playing tennis with her late husband seemed to depict complete strangers. Her job as a busy professional, travelling the country, advising clients on million-dollar decisions, already seemed like an experience from another lifetime.*

*She still lived in the same house she and Bob had moved into after their first of four children was born. Everything had worked so well for all those years. But now the subdivision that had so much to offer when the kids were small was beginning to feel like a burden. The peace and quiet that had meant so much on the weekends when she and Bob were both working had turned into an eerie silence. Even her house seemed, at times, overwhelming. If only she had let Bob build that bathroom on the main floor when they built the addition.*

*The house was always silent and the neighbourhood empty and quiet during the day. Too much quiet. Welcome to Un-Pleasantville!*

Can Sharon's story have a happy ending? Of course. Does the scenario described above have to play out this way? Maybe not. Unfortunately, there are already thousands of Sharons and Bobs living in car-dependent suburbs and isolated rural communities across Canada who are seeing their quality of life seriously compromised as they get older. And the situation is not about to improve. This country needs to begin bracing for the demographic tsunami that will, in the space of a generation, create the largest single lobby group this country has ever seen. By 2025, there will be 7.5 million Canadians over the age of 65, more people than currently live in the entire Greater Toronto Area—all motivated to demand changes to the status quo.

As they become less agile, start to lose some of their mental sharpness and have their driving licences removed, many older Canadians will inevitably find that the combination of reduced mobility and their choice of where to live will redefine *how* they live. In the words of L.S. Suen, "the freedom to move is life itself." If there are ripples of discontent today, the sheer size and speed of the coming transformation in the country's demographic make-up that threatens to swamp municipal and other government services is bound to influence how decision makers do their jobs.

What can be done to mitigate the situation? And, just as important, how can we avoid making the problem worse for future generations? By taking the principles of Universal Design and scaling them up to neighbourhood scale, to reflect the

principles of New Urbanism, and giving a nod to Smart Growth, we came up with ten criteria to guide the design of new development and influence the retrofit of existing conditions:

**Equitable use:** When designing public space, every effort should be made to avoid privatizing the public realm. In many Canadian cities, the divide between the rich and the poor is becoming more extreme. Affordable housing options—for young and old—should be available in all neighbourhoods because the principle of equity also embraces affordability. Many of the suburban communities built since the Second World War were designed for young families at low densities on the cheapest possible land. As seniors begin to experience the other end of their life cycle, the economies of scale achieved by building vast acreages in single uses (this applies to employment uses as well as housing) are revealed as a root cause of lost mobility.

**Flexible use:** To the extent possible, development should be mixed use, and at the very least, promote flexibility of use. This would allow housing on major roads to be converted to retail uses, or transformation of a school site to community or other institutional uses as demands change. Just as many multi-storey industrial buildings have found a new lease of life as loft conversions, site design for *all* uses should anticipate densification, and not preclude future additions to the landscape.

**Human scale:** Buildings should be human scale (at ground level, at least, leaving lots of opportunity for tall buildings) to encourage walking. Design should pay as much attention to solar orientation as to the impact of wind. Some environments inadvertently make life tough for the very young and the very old by creating places where gusts of wind are strong enough to knock people over.

**Transit-oriented:** Wherever feasible, the development pattern should be transit-oriented, focusing density with a view to creating the potential for a critical mass of services; in retrofit situations, encouraging intensification along corridors provides opportunities for mid-rise apartment buildings—a housing form that appeals to all ages, especially seniors—while improving the odds that transit service can be successfully upgraded. For many "middle aged" communities that began life as single-use, residential suburbs, this approach can provide much-needed definition to a street as well as creating attractive places for older people to live, allowing them to remain in their neighbourhood.

**Walkable:** The scale and distribution of development should encourage walking, allowing for easy access to services, amenities and destinations such as recreational uses, health care facilities or shopping. One of the challenges when retrofitting suburban areas is the need to pay attention to the size and quality of sidewalks, but improving sidewalks won't be very useful if there is no adjacent, active development. Extensive strips of sidewalk can also be intimidating to seniors whose stamina is beginning to flag. Many suburban communities are divided by six-lane cross-sections that present impassable barriers to pedestrians whose agility is compromised in any way. Careful thought has to be given to the siting of light rail or streetcar tracks, as well. Many older Torontonians, for example, are loath to board streetcars that require them to balance on strips of concrete less than two feet wide in the middle of a busy road.

**Simple and intuitive:** Another related criterion linked to walkability is the way that built form "reads" to the pedestrian. Ideally, built form should be *simple and intuitive* for the resident as well as the visitor. In many suburbs, curvilinear street patterns that can be handled reasonably well by motorists at driving speeds become problematic for pedestrians. For people walking slowly, focused on maintaining their balance rather than the view, suburban curves can be disorienting, particularly if the streets are lined with look-alike housing.

**Perceptible information:** Signage design and principles guiding the display of essential information are matters that are typically dealt with more successfully at the micro scale than at the larger, neighbourhood scale. Because layers of information are added at different times in the life of a community, the result can be puzzling at best. An example of this is a well-known, auto-oriented university campus in the Toronto area that was laid out in the best suburban tradition. Retrofitting signage to help people find their way was done first for people arriving by car; another layer of pedestrian-oriented information was added as the campus began to acquire more buildings. The latest layer of information added to the campus, which has become the dominant layer, reflects the recent focus on waste management. As a result, it is much easier to locate recycling bins than to determine the name of a building, its street name or even the orientation of the block. The same thing happens to neighbourhoods and major institutional buildings. Senior citizens attempting to circumnavigate large hospitals, for example, must cope with the current mania for naming wings, doorways and even alcoves for people who have donated significant sums of cash. Whatever happened to signs that proclaim the actual function? Older people not only have less stamina, but also tend to get anxious in stressful situations. Visual clutter can add to this stress.

**Safety and tolerance for error:** Ever since *The Death and Life*, planners have known that "eyes on the street" is an important aspect of community design. In many suburban settings, however, those eyes require binoculars because of the distances between buildings. At the building scale, applying principles of Universal Design, this implies that there should be no hazards—particularly for people in wheelchairs, for example—but at the neighbourhood scale, implied safety is a difficult standard to meet, and one that is biased towards "urban" solutions.

A key factor with respect to "tolerance for error" can be seen in road design. Narrower streets will naturally inhibit the speed of motorists but attention also has to be paid to the plight of drivers who select the wrong lane or select the wrong direction

**Low physical effort:** Community facilities, other neighbourhood amenities and services should be designed in ways that make the transition between different grades as easy as possible. In places where pedestrian routes follow paths designed

for easy vehicular access, the extra effort required to gain access to a building is often transferred to the pedestrian, who is forced to circumnavigate lengthy ramps or steep stairs. Many ancient European towns stand out even today as examples of how use topography to advantage for both pedestrians and vehicles because the original vehicles were horse-drawn or even human-powered. With the advent of disability legislation, many facilities have now been retrofitted with ramps. The next step is for planners to start applying the same principles at a larger scale.

**Appropriate size and scale:** A key determinant of urban form is the size of land holdings that form the basis for development. One of the reasons that suburban communities built since the Second World War are hard to navigate on foot or even by bicycle is that the subdivisions being developed are so large. When a land developer takes a project through the municipal process, the tendency is to focus on a single use—and scale. A residential developer will typically design a 100-acre subdivision with the intention of selling serviced land to builders ready to follow a particular formula. To replicate an urban situation—thereby skipping a few generations of development—a developer would have to line up specialists willing to construct four or five different forms of development at the same time. The alternative is to design a subdivision with a long-term end game in mind, a time scale that goes far beyond the original developer's purview. Planners are used to negotiating trade-offs with respect to size and scale in three dimensions. The real challenge is to do this "in plan" in anticipation of redevelopment that may only take place after they have retired.

#### **What is next?**

Our research into these issues is still in the early stages, but our intention is to write a book on the subject that appeals not only to policy makers and practitioners, but which also offers the public alternatives that can help them or their aging parents avoid "Un-Pleasantville." Or if they are already there, to plot an escape—with their dignity and their bank account intact. We are currently working with students in the Masters program in planning at the University of Toronto to develop an assessment tool that could be used to evaluate mobility challenges for seniors in suburban neighbourhoods. As this tool is refined, we also hope to develop the logical complement, which is a multi-disciplinary project that would bring together planners, architects, policy makers, municipal managers and many others. The group would dedicate itself to removing barriers to mobility identified through the assessment process. The model could be funded by government, but could also be sponsored by the private sector.

As this series has shown, the demographic tsunami is washing ashore in countries all over the world. Japan, the U.K., and Australia have already acknowledged the gravity of the challenges they face, and have already begun to change their thinking and their actions. The sooner we begin to learn from their experience, the better off we all will be.

*Glenn Miller, FCIP, RPP, is director, education and research, with the Canadian Urban Institute in Toronto. He is also editor of the Ontario Planning Journal. Gordon Harris, MCIP, is the principal of Harris Consulting Inc., in Vancouver. Ian Ferguson, M.D., FRCPC, is an old-age psychiatrist practising in Toronto. Visit [www.canurb.com/aging](http://www.canurb.com/aging) for more information.*

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