

Communities or Subdivisions

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There was a phase in house design in the 1980s that had us building houses that didn't reflect how we really lived. Remember how each house had a fancy living room and a formal dining room at the front of it? The best furniture was kept in that living room, and the best china was kept in that dining room's china cabinet. No one ever used either room though. They were kept pristine for special occasions, which rarely, if ever, came. We all lived in the living room at the back of the house and ate at the real kitchen table that was often in the kitchen. We didn't design those houses for how we lived, but for how we thought we should live.

Thankfully, we got out of that phase. Building houses that had hundreds of square feet of fancy living room and dining room space that went unused was a foolish idea. We need to design houses to be lived in. We need to do the same with our new communities, or subdivisions. However, I am concerned that we don't build communities intended to be lived in anymore. We don't design functional homes in livable communities. We design impressive houses in bedroom subdivisions. It baffles me that we don't design our world to be lived in.

We drive for groceries, drive for services, and drive to work. There is little or no commerce or business in our subdivisions. Granted, on the edge of most subdivisions, there is a gas station, a convenience store and some type of fast food, but there is usually little more than that. We don't build places where people live, we build places where people sleep and cocoon, and the rest of the time they commute to somewhere else to do just about everything else they need to do. We build subdivisions, not communities.

The biggest challenge many of our cities face is a dying downtown core. That is a direct result of making our downtowns only about office space. We removed residences, recreation, and anything associated with actually living from of the downtown core, and as a result, our downtowns died. Many cities are trying desperately to recover from that mistake by bringing back life to their cores, so they don't empty out at 5 pm and become vacant and rampant with crime. The lesson learned is that every part of our communities needs to be designed and built to be lived in.

The coming generations, namely the Millennials and the iGeneration that follows them, are going to be looking for real communities to live in. They are not nearly as interested in big houses as they are in real homes that are built for the way they live rather than as a symbol of status. They won't be interested in homes with big driveways and two or three car garages when they don't have much interest in owning a vehicle at all. Frankly, why would they want to own a vehicle that costs an average of \$12,000 a year to own, and sits unused 95% of the time, when they can hail an autonomous vehicle on a phone app that arrives within minutes?

They want to live in communities where they can stop and have coffee, or a beer with friends after work. They want to be able to work out or do yoga in a location only minutes from their house. They want to eat local, gather locally, and live, not just sleep, in their community. Don't misunderstand me. They will be wonderfully global in their thinking and learning and travelling, but they will be hyper-local in their daily living. The next generations will be more community-focused than any preceding it, but we need to design communities in which they can live, not just sleep.

If you have ever read this column before, you know I believe strong and healthy communities are the foundations on which we build a strong nation. That makes communities important to our future success. I do hope that you, that we all, design communities that people can live in, now and into the near future.

Building communities the way we live is not a new concept, but it takes some deliberate consideration and will to put it into place. It is so much easier and more affordable to design a subdivision, name the streets after trees, build in a few walking trails, and then watch as everyone drives out of it for anything to do with living their lives. We need real communities, for real people and real families, who want to live real lives.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.