



At 4 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon, as the cool September breeze kicks up a reddish dust from the lots still under construction, the Roxton Road corn roast and block party is in full swing, the air filled with the pungent scent of burned husks. A Chevy Lumina, equipped with a massive sound system, blasts alternating children's music and Bob Marley. A few stalwarts are still playing volleyball on a net strung across the street, but most of the 40 or so children and adults congregate around picnic tables next to the barbecues. It's a smiley-face snapshot of a happy suburban neighbourhood, a scene that brings to mind Hollywood movies and property developers' marketing videos.

Cathy Mulvale and her children – five-year-old Zackery and Jordanne, nearly three and a half – are gathered around one of the picnic tables where Mulvale had earlier laid out tubes of glue and boxes of beads and dried pasta. She is simultaneously helping children with their crafts, chatting to friends and answering questions about the need for more barbecues and when to bring out the desserts. An outgoing woman in her early 30s with short-cropped blond hair, Mulvale is the unofficial mayor of Roxton Road. More than a geographical location, Roxton Road is the psychic epicentre of Oak Park, a “new urbanist” community in Oakville, Ont., 35 kilometres west of Toronto. As it happens, Oakville's mayor is also named Mulvale – no relation, says Cathy – but when the coincidence is mentioned to other residents of Oak Park, many say that she could trade places with their mayor and run things at least as well. For example, she would probably have acted more quickly to slow down traffic on Glenashton Drive, the thoroughfare that ▷

JANET BAILEY

Dream homes

They're building suburbs way better than they used to. Folks are friendlier, stores are closer, old-time village values are thriving... at least that's the dream that some developers are peddling. David Hayes looks behind the sales script at what separates a house from a home



Where the grass is greener: Melanie Kingston waters her front lawn in Oak Park. She and her husband, Julian, were attracted to the development because of its new urbanist philosophy.

divides the north and south sides of the development and is used by commuters as a shortcut, and to amend the bylaw that prohibited residents of Oak Park from locating their central air-conditioning units in the narrow corridors between houses. (Both issues have now been resolved.)

Annoying bureaucratic problems such as these often trail in the wake of new urbanism. Municipalities such as Oakville, with bylaws shaped for the curving cul-de-sacs and sprawling lots of the postwar suburbs, don't know what to make of these new developments that set a mix of usually modest houses close together along narrow

New urbanist planners envision streets where life happens on the verandas and sidewalks.

grid-pattern streets. New urbanist communities typically include front porches, postage-stamp lawns and rear garages reached by shared lanes – echoing idyllic villages of an earlier era or, in the case of Canada more than the U.S., successful inner-city neighbourhoods such as Toronto's Little Italy or the Annex, the Plateau in Montreal or Vancouver's Kitsilano or Commercial Drive districts. In Oak Park, where the

first phase was recently completed, Victorian- and Georgian-style single-family homes, semis and town houses nestle side by side, with a pair of soon-to-be-finished, four-storey condo apartments nearby. Eventually, there will be parkland, a manmade lake and low-rise office and retail space (with apartments above the shops) along a “main street.”

The idea behind new urbanism – which is epitomized by Seaside, the sprawling Florida development featured (some say spoofed) in the Jim Carrey film *The Truman Show* – is to build not just homes but communities. The architects and urban planners who dreamed it up envisioned neighbourhoods where residents can walk or bike to stores and offices instead of driving; where neighbours are drawn together instead of being forced apart by acres of lawn and pavement; where life happens on the verandas and sidewalks, not just behind drawn curtains or backyard fences. Critics of the movement say you can't build neighbourliness; they dismiss the tightly controlled style as ersatz and cutesy, the retro touches as nostalgic window dressing. But new urbanist developments are taking root and attracting buyers across Canada – from Bois-Franc in Montreal's Ville Saint-Laurent to Murray's Corner in Langley, B.C. The question is, do they deliver?

Like many of her neighbours, when Cathy Mulvale moved to Oak Park she had never heard of new urbanism. The

Mulvales took possession of their red brick, 180-square-metre Victorian-style house a year and a half ago after having lived in a modest home on a large property in a south Oakville neighbourhood. But with two small children, Mulvale hadn't liked the absence of sidewalks, the proximity to two major streets and the fact that the neighbours kept to themselves. When she and her husband, Tom, visited >



All the trimmings: some houses in Oak Park feature old-fashioned details – a throwback to the friendlier communities that new urbanism seeks to recreate. But critics dismiss the touches as nostalgic window dressing.

Oak Park, they liked the plans and the philosophy of the builder, Tribute Homes, and developer, MetrOntario Group, whose marketing stressed a friendly village-like environment.

Marketing, of course, is the business world's happy face and it can be as reliable as a carny's pitch. How a community really works depends upon people like Cathy Mulvale and her neighbours – which was brought home to me when I visited two other new urbanist developments in the Toronto area. There, many people I talked to had little contact with neighbours and, for the most part, used their cars to get from work to mall to garage every day.

“A friend asked if we knew any neighbours yet. We told her we know all of them.”

In one development, there was a corner store in an attractive “village green,” but far from having a unique character like the neighbourhood store that for many years was a focal point of my Riverdale neighbourhood in Toronto, it was little more than the kind of convenience store found along major drags and in strip malls everywhere.

Of course, living in a high-density inner-city neighbourhood or the centre

of a centuries-old village doesn't necessarily guarantee social cohesion or neighbourliness. But the disappointment of a failed new urbanist community is all the greater because it represents the failure of an elaborately planned vision, a failure of imagination and, to the residents who bought into the marketing and promotion, a promise not kept.

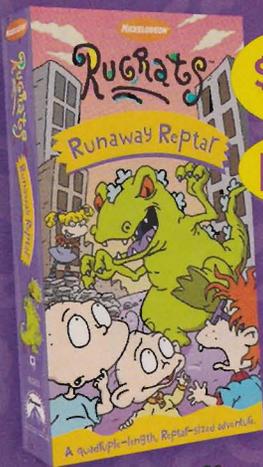
In Oak Park, things felt different. True, the retail outlets have not arrived yet so most people rely on their cars for trips to nearby malls for shopping, but the promised “village” atmosphere has somehow taken root. One woman who I approached while she was sitting on her front porch told me she found her new neighbourhood much friendlier than Toronto's Cabbagetown, where she had previously lived. It's a thought echoed by Julian Kingston, who chats with me while helping supervise kids' crafts at the corn roast. Kingston, his wife, Melanie, and three-year-old daughter, Marilla Margaret, moved from a rented house in Toronto's High Park last year. With lower house prices drawing them away from downtown, the Kingstons – unlike the Mulvales, their across-the-street neighbours – were attracted by what they knew of the new urbanist philosophy. “We knew we didn't want one of those suburban homes with the huge garage dominating the front entrance,” Kingston says. “As we began going to see developments and cutting ads out of newspapers, we started reading about new urbanism.”

And so far, he's a satisfied customer. “Recently, a friend who was visiting asked us if we knew any of our neighbours yet. She was shocked when we told her we know all of them.”

Why is Oak Park different? Partly because it has a full-time community coordinator, hired by the builder, Tribute. Sonja Clark sits at a curved desk in a cor- ▷



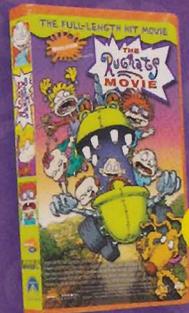
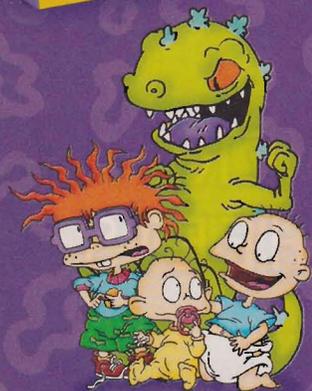
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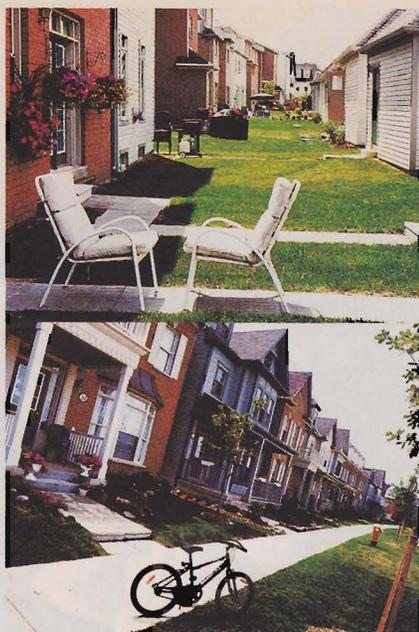
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Oak Park's narrow backyards and inviting streetscapes are meant to draw neighbours together.

ner of Oak Park's sales office fielding phone calls and setting up special events. A vivacious blond with a quick smile and a B.Sc. in psychology who drifted into the hospitality business, Clark is a key part of Tribute's and Metrontario's efforts to jump-start the neighbourhood.

Clark has coordinated home decorating and landscaping seminars and a popular wine tasting hosted by a nearby wine-making shop. She also organizes the annual Canada Day, Halloween and Christmas parties as well as the Easter egg hunt. (She was delighted when the residents of Roxton Road planned their own block party, to which she was simply an invited guest.) Part of her job is to ensure that the sales centre functions, as she puts it, "like a kind of general store and post office in a small town."

There seems little question that Clark's presence has had an influence. She keeps in touch with homeowners from the moment their agreement to purchase is completed. Everyone is invited to the events Clark organizes and she makes sure that newly signed homeowners meet their neighbours. She tells me about people standing around the architect's model of the site, introducing themselves to the couple beside them who have bought a house

two doors away. "They become neighbours before their houses are even built," Clark says. Once they've moved in, many people ask her when local hockey leagues begin or where to find a good day care. (Clark will tell them that the lady who sells Tupperware also operates a day care out of her home.) In every idyllic small town or inner-city neighbourhood - the inspiration for new urbanism - there are locals like Clark who know about everyone and everything. The only difference in Oak Park is that Clark doesn't live there and is paid to do it.

I've heard people say it feels like a Hollywood set," Barry Bevan says as he looks up and down the street from the front porch of his three-storey red brick house. I'm not sure if he realizes that they meant it as an insult, but Bevan, who moved from a nearby traditional suburb with his wife, Sally, and three daughters, has put his finger on the chief criticism that dogs new urbanism: it's phoney.

To be fair, new urbanist communities are a recent phenomenon that will look less gingerbread-perfect in a few decades, when the trees grow in and the houses get scuffed. Still, although there's a mix of housing styles and prices, an entry-level Oak Park home costs more than \$200,000 and the people I've met are uniformly middle class (largely professionals or entrepreneurs) and, for the most part, are white.

There is an assortment of ages represented, from young singles starting out to retirees, but since you aren't permitted to rent out a coach house or basement (let alone the whole house), that pretty much guarantees you won't have any students or other low-income renters dragging down housing prices and giving Oak Park a little more of the gritty character of inner-city neighbourhoods. (In fact, the new urbanist philosophers, most of whom have a utopian streak, advocate a mix of tenants and owners to provide some real-world diversity.) Several residents supported the idea of allowing some rentals, but told me that suburban municipalities such as Oakville are notoriously conservative about such things. The truth is, though, that a ▷

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number of other Oak Park residents – mainly those whose tastes run more toward traditional suburbs than downtown neighbourhoods – have made no secret that they prefer their community to remain a middle-class enclave.

Paul Mondell is the general manager of land development for the Metronario Group, the developer that, in partnership with Tribute Homes, created Oak Park. When I ask him about the rental issue, he talks about resistance on the part of municipalities to some of the company's philosophies, something that may take time to change. "We envision Oak Park becoming something for everybody. We want seniors' housing next to entry-level housing for young families."

A more serious criticism of new urbanism is that its goals are a fraud. "They're traditional suburban subdivisions by another name," says Jack Diamond, a prominent Toronto architect who believes that urban planning must be devoted to restoring cities – not creating new suburbs. "There are no corner stores, the retail mix you'd find in a real village is not there and they're still automobile dependent because the densities aren't nearly high enough to sustain public transportation."

Diamond believes that new urbanist communities are just another form of the urban sprawl eating up agricultural land and deflecting attention from the needs of cities. When I ask him whether it can at least be said that the characteristics of new urbanism are an improvement over the old suburban model, he says: "Is this a process of maturation, slowly reeducating people about the needs of urbanism so that our cities will survive? Perhaps, but I don't think so. I think the improvements have an imperceptible impact. They're a drop in the ocean."

You'd have trouble convincing the converts living in Oak Park that they're part of a problem rather than a solution. But if Oak Park is unusually neighbourly, the question is whether it's because new urbanism works, because of Sonja Clark's efforts or the result of a serendipitous coming together of the right mix of people committed to creating a neighbourhood.

Barry Bevan clearly doesn't care

why it works – or what the critics say. For him, it's important to feel connected to the neighbours. He points to his daughter's thriving babysitting career, which he says would not have happened in the isolation of the suburb where they used to live. Waving hello to a neighbour who's watering his lawn across the street, Bevan walks through the narrow corridor between his house and his neighbour's. Stepping into his backyard, he says: "This takes me back to when I was a kid and I knew everyone on the street. I feel like I've come full circle."

At dusk, the corn is ready and people gather around the barbecue to peel back the silk and husk and slather on the butter. To the west, backlit by an orange sky, the silhouetted figures of a dozen children appear atop a pile of sand. Before she leaves, Sonja Clark chats to Cathy Mulvale, joking that the residents of Roxton Road are making her job too easy. Mulvale, looking tired but satisfied, surveys the crowd and declares the event – the second Roxton Road street party in three months – a success.

It's fair to describe Oak Park as a bit too tidy and homogeneous, certainly for a determinedly urban downtown dweller. It's a nicely designed and well-planned approximation of an inner-city neighbourhood, minus the sirens, the rich mix of races and colours and the haves and have-nots. Minus the edgy nervous energy, which to some provides the dynamic pulse of daily life but to many, even those who enjoy other aspects of city living, is an irritant, an impediment to raising a family in safety that makes them flee to calmer surroundings. The great ambition of the new urbanist movement is to marry the best of both of these worlds and, like most compromises, the result will satisfy neither the hardcore downtown dweller nor the lover of suburbia's promise of wide open spaces and easy parking.

I ask Mulvale how she feels about new urbanism, a term that she's only recently come to know. "Whatever you call it," she says, "this is what a lot of people want when they buy a house but they don't often find." **C**