

Development must benefit everyone, not just the development industry

By **Mitchell Cohen** Contributor
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There is no doubt that building inclusive, resilient cities is one of the fundamental challenges of our time. Recently, Evergreen's Future Cities Canada Summit and the United Nation's Urban Economy Forum hosted intense discussions in Toronto on sustainable city theory and best practices from around the world.

There is good reason for this focus on the urban environment. According to the United Nations, roughly 80 per cent of the world's population will be living in cities within 30 years.

The challenge is daunting, but so is the opportunity: can we realize the enormous potential of our cities? Can we achieve healthier outcomes than we've witnessed with suburban development over the past 50 years?

Unrestricted low-density suburban development has resulted in an unsustainable monoculture dominated by detached single family homes, homes detached not only from each other but from employment centres.

The environmental and social impact of endlessly increasing commute times and the disconnect between home and work has turned the dream of the suburban lifestyle into a nightmare.

Although reinvention of suburbia is necessary, today we need to get it right in our cities.

Toronto, for example, has been experiencing robust immigration for years. There are significant benefits, including a vibrant downtown both day and night. However, we were *not* prepared for the growth, either from a hard infrastructure or policy perspective.

For decades, we didn't invest in transit and we have not imposed inclusionary zoning to embed affordable housing in perpetuity in both the urban core and inner suburbs.

Millions of square feet of density have been built in Toronto over the past 20 years. Today, new development applications are in the pipeline for tens of millions more, representing billions of dollars that will be invested in the city.

That investment represents an opportunity that must be leveraged for community benefit, with affordable housing and inclusive local economic development at the top of the agenda.

Can development benefit everyone, not just the development industry? The answer is yes, provided the starting point is a shared vision and responsibility.

The foundation of the vision is inclusion, a city in which everyone feels welcome and safe, where "housing as a human right" becomes deeply rooted in our collective DNA, and where development is about much more than sewers, roads and buildings.

Within a resilient city context, development goes well beyond the bricks and mortar. The vision, which is being road tested today in Regent Park, includes a commitment to building community capital through local empowerment and nurturing grass roots entrepreneurs.

It also includes applying social procurement practices throughout the development process, as well as leveraging relationships with consultants, sub-contractors, and all institutional and commercial partners to create both jobs and long term career paths for local residents.

The responsibility for implementation is as clear as the vision. In short, responsibility must be shared by all sectors of society, as well as by each of us as individuals.

The public sector has a responsibility to do more than talk about transit and affordability.

Money is on the table for transit. It's time to move beyond the politics, listen to the experts, and build transit infrastructure that should have been steadily built over the past 50 years.

The same is true on affordability. Although a National Housing Strategy has been announced, along with \$50 billion to support it, housing providers across the country have seen very little money flowing.

In addition, it's time for senior levels of government to follow Toronto's lead by requiring affordable housing within every land disposition, through Canada Lands Corp. or provincial agencies like Metrolinx.

All levels of government need to walk the walk on affordable housing, demonstrating leadership every step of the way.

The private sector must also share responsibility, embracing inclusionary zoning in order to safeguard the future health of our cities. Without affordable housing, our cities will reflect a monoculture as unsustainable as suburbia.

Individual citizens also have a responsibility to share their neighbourhoods, to demonstrate a spirit of community by saying "yes in my backyard" and by welcoming development that fosters integration and local economic development.

Working together, we can build cities that work for everyone. We have both the tools and the expertise. Together, we can build social cohesion day by day, neighbourhood by neighbourhood.

With focus and intentionality, with all of us sharing the vision and responsibility, our cities will realize their potential, becoming brilliant tapestries of strength and resilience.

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