



EXPANDING HOUSING DENSITY IN REGINA

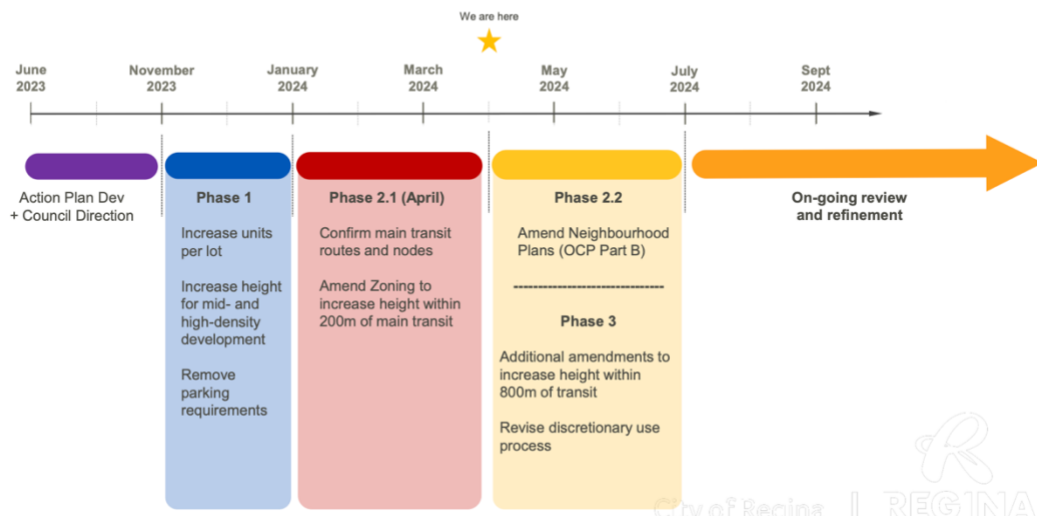
**A Collection of Student Papers
GES 346 Urban Planning, Winter 2024
Dept. of Geography & Environmental Studies
University of Regina**

EXPANDING HOUSING DENSITY

Overview:

In 2023, the City of Regina applied for funding through the Housing Accelerator Fund, a federal initiative to increase housing supply across Canadian municipalities. To be successful, applicants were required to demonstrate the removal of housing supply barriers (including exclusionary zoning & parking minimums) and the addition of increased density through as-of-right development (including missing middle & high density developments). The City of Regina was awarded \$35.2 million from the Fund and is currently on phase 2 of 3 of its plan titled Expanding Citywide Housing options to increase housing supply:

Phased Approach (adjusted timelines)



Planning Project:

In winter 2024, as part of their coursework, undergraduate students in the Department of Geography & Environmental Studies, Urban Planning (GES 346) class at the University of Regina, were tasked with completing research on a topic broadly connected to increasing density in Regina.

Students were asked to consider the following:

- The history of single family zoning practices in Regina
- Existing missing middle housing (i.e. duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes) in Regina's established neighbourhoods
- The outcome of intensification efforts over the past decade
- The potential effects of increasing density along transit corridors in mid and high density zones
- Considerations for affordable housing
- Support for non-residential uses, amenities, and services alongside increased density
- Ideal density levels
- The role of neighbourhood character

We hosted a public presentation session on April 11 and were joined by University members, the public, City of Regina planners, and a City Councillor. We hope you enjoy reading a selection of some of the papers completed through this project!



Dr. Vanessa Mathews

Associate Professor & Course Instructor for GES 346: Urban Planning
Department of Geography & Environmental Studies, University of Regina

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We would like to thank Laura Pfeifer, Autumn Dawson, and Amar Guiliani with the City of Regina for their collaboration and support with this project.

**Planning Low-Density Pathways: Persistence of Social Values and the Absence of
Missing Middle Solutions in Mid-sized Cities**

Emma Der

University of Regina

GES 346 - Urban Planning

Vanessa Mathews

April 10, 2024

Introduction

A recognizable and distinctive feature of mid-sized urban areas is an absence of core area density (Bunting et al., 2007; Graham & Filion, 2024). Regina falls within this category as a mid-sized city with a decentralized central zone and low-density profile. The need for intensification has been recognized in Regina's planning agenda since the 1980s. In Regina's 2013 Official Community Plan, the City Centre population target aimed to add 10,000 new residents to the city centre with the intensification target of absorbing 30% of its annual growth (City of Regina, 2013). However in 2021, the area saw a population decrease of 5.2%, effectively presenting an unsuccessful trajectory (City of Regina, 2022). This outcome is not unique to Regina as the literature indicates trends of inertia and resistance to change within urban areas defined by suburban growth and low-density single-family housing (Bunting et al., 2007; Filion, 2015; Graham & Filion, 2024). Unwillingness to adopt alternative strategies to promote higher-density in forms such as multi-family housing can be linked to the persistence of the suburban form. This absence of missing middle housing is also reflected in the values placed in the social ideology of homeownership, a concept that is closely tied to the race- and class-based exclusion of single-family zoning (Rollwagen, 2014). Continued peripheral growth accompanied by patterns of core area depletion reproduces low-density pathways and spatially segregated urban forms common in the Canadian context. Missing middle housing and the integration of gentle density provide alternative strategies to encourage mixed-use and reinvestment of central core areas, effectively countering the historic and sociopolitical values embedded in the urban form of mid-sized cities such as Regina.

Canadian Planning Context for Suburban Growth

Low-density development in North-American mid-sized cities can be traced back to post-war market-based housing policies that have greatly influenced the current decentralized urban form and continuation of suburban growth. This was first initiated in 1935 with the Dominion Housing Act which became the National Housing Act in 1938. These federal initiatives encouraged single-family homeownership over rental tenures by lending mortgages from partnerships involving finance institutions. As a result, residential suburban development emerged in the late 1950s becoming a dominant Canadian urban form which has directed patterns of outward growth inducing conditions for a decentralized urban core (Bélec, 2015; Bunting et al., 2007). The extent of influence from the programs can be seen as mortgage debt represents 70% of all Canadian household debt as of 2013 (Bélec, 2015). Since 1935, Canadian federal housing policy has continuously applied a market approach to promote demand for low density single-family housing and encourage homeownership in the form of long-term residential amortization.

Development of Mid-sized cities

Shaped by the historic context of state-supported development of homeownership values and outward growth, mid-sized cities have followed this direction in creating unfavourable conditions for intensification. In an examination on the structural dynamics of mid-sized cities, Bunting et al. (2007) notes how density gradients have decreased in the post-WWII era due to changes in population. The combined trends of declining population in central zones and continued peripheral growth, are seen as the major drivers of population change that shapes the urban form of mid-size cities. However, these patterns are in direct contrast to large-sized metropolitan areas that have sustained centralized use despite the

nationwide development of suburbanization. In their success, revitalization strategies from larger cities are mistakenly applied to the different mid-sized contexts, resulting in high failure rates. An example of this can be seen in the degree of auto-based reliance in mid-sized cities compared to large-sized cities which have developed networks of public transit alongside expressways. In mid-sized cities where commute time is shorter and of convenience, there is little motivation for alternative modes of transportation when car-oriented development is the most dominant and preferred pathway (Bunting et al., 2007; Filion, 2015; Graham & Filion, 2024). For that reason, decentralized urban forms are well-supported by the infrastructure and convenience of car-use to navigate and produce conditions of dispersed urban sprawl. In absence of central zone density and prevalence of outward growth, the reliance on auto-oriented development has become fundamental to the urban fabric of mid-sized cities.

Dominance of the Suburban form

The dominance of suburban growth in Canada is supported by the social ideology of homeownership and sociopolitical values of individualism which are conveyed through the physical urban form of single-family zoning. Societies with a history of encouraging homeownership reveal trends towards conservative sociopolitical values around private property and individualism (Filion, 2015; Rollwagen, 2014). This has been shaped by the emergence of dispersed suburbanism during the post-WWII era in conjunction with rising popularity of modernistic values and accelerated capitalist growth. As there is less reliance on collective public services compared to inner city neighbourhoods, the suburban lifestyle presents “an illusion of self-reliance” (Filion, 2015, p. 635) structured around the private accumulation of wealth (Rollwagen, 2014). Under Fordism, this illusion is driven by property ownership of detached single-family dwellings and the access to individual autonomy

through car-mobilities. Ultimately, the urban fabric of the suburban form relies on inertia and the continued exclusion of multi-family housing arrangements that provide alternatives to low-density forms of ownership (Filion, 2015).

Social Ideology of Homeownership

The inertia of this urban form can be attributed to the values of homeownership where other forms of tenure are marginalized and are perceived as less desirable. Arguments informed by race- and class-based perceptions effectively stigmatize these multi-family housing arrangements and single-family zoning exists as a key component to exclude ownership access against low-income people and people of colour (Rollwagen, 2014; Wegmann, 2019). An example is through Newman's theory of defensible space which claims higher crime rates are more prevalent in multi-family housing due the absence of individual responsibility over communal shared space. This argument informs the ideology of homeownership, maintained by cultural values and patterns of thinking that socially constructs homeownership as the superior housing tenure form. Within this ideology, homeowners represent responsible citizens, neighbours and parents, whereas renters are seen as lesser. These stigmatized associations of tenure forms manifest in spatial inequality as homeowners will avoid areas of higher-density housing. As a result, areas of rental housing become concentrated and spatially segregated from single-family neighbourhoods, shaping a persistence of form that remains socially resistant to efforts to introduce higher-density in building forms (Rollwagen, 2014).

Resistance to Change in Regina

As seen in previous paragraphs, the built urban environment is largely dependent on the actors of consumers, developers and the public sector decision makers in contributing to

outcomes of the planning processes. However, opportunities for changing dominant urban growth patterns are met with significant inertia from actors in mid-sized contexts. This is observable in Regina's sustained low-density profile and absence of concentrated efforts from actors in efforts to revitalize the decentralized urban cores. Evidence of this can be observed in the current outcomes of the OCP's intensification goal to "[d]irect at least 10,000 new residents to the CITY CENTRE" (City of Regina, 2013, p. 20). The cumulative rate of residential intensification reports a disappointing figure of 12.2% since 2013, with an added 74 residents in the city centre (City of Regina, 2021). Firstly, inertia is reflected in consumer preferences for low-density living in contexts where single-family housing is still affordable. These low-density locations are regarded as attractive due to the increased accessibility to natural amenities, privatized home ownership and car-oriented convenience. In the case of Regina, the role of consumer inertia is further reinforced when residents develop place-based attachments to the attributes promoting the persistence of the low-density suburban form (Bunting et al., 2017; Graham & Filion, 2024). Developers will be unwilling to change practices from pre-existing greenfield projects due to the significant absence of knowledge around core development and the unappeal of Regina's central areas from social perceptions of associated high crime rates. Essentially the high risk and low returns of changing development practices sustain greenfield development. Lastly, the inertia from political leadership is demonstrated in the pattern of opposition from councillors to higher-density housing proposals in the core, and the absence of a comprehensive guiding framework to support the intensification targets outlined in the 2013 OCP (Graham & Filion, 2024). While consumers, developers and public sector decision makers are the ones to drive change to the built environment, the collective inertia from these actors establish barriers to developing self-reinforcing, mixed and higher-density arrangements of the inner-city.

Missing Middle Housing

As seen, mid-sized cities have an absence in missing middle forms of housing, reducing opportunities to shift low-density practices and promoting a healthier urban form. According to Wegmann (2019), low-density single-family zoning is “the most inequitable and environmentally destructive practice in Northern American planning” (p. 114) as it is closely tied to automobile emissions and racialized and classist exclusion. Missing middle housing provides an alternative from the forms of low-density single family housing. ‘Missing’ refers to the types of largely underrepresented housing types and ‘middle’ both represents the scale between single-family dwellings and apartment development as well as the range of affordability to the ‘middle income’ market (Parolek, 2020a).



Opticos Design. (2024) [Missing Middle Housing Diagram] <https://missingmiddlehousing.com/>

These housing types are characterized as low-rise, house-scale dwellings with more than one unit that can build density around existing services; these forms can encourage the reinvestment in public amenities without the need for newer development. In all, forms of gentle density can remedy the low-density profiles of neighbourhoods and improve housing affordability with minimal impact on established communities (Bozikovic, 2019). The next section will present existing forms of missing middle types from Regina’s examples.

Side-by-Side Duplex and Stacked Duplex

The duplex is the most common form of missing middle in Regina. Historically, the side-by-side was built for more affordable housing options with the two-story design developing from the lack of incentive to build higher density-based systems with smaller units. Still, the stacked duplex is a more attainable housing option compared to single-family dwelling but is still not the ideal solution for density (Parolek, 2020b).

Figure 2



Figure 3



Google. (2022). [Figure 2 Google Street View 251 Markwell Dr]. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/njif3KC26xGvXwLA>
 Google. (2013). [Figure 3 Google Street View 3348 Dawson Crescent]. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/Um5C1364idFGous6A>

Stacked Fourplex

While this type looks and feels very similar to single-family dwellings, they are not as common in Regina. Parolek (2020b) writes that fourplexes have historically been built on the same block with single-family homes and fit well into the neighbourhood character, “indiscernible from [single-family] homes” (p. 125). This can be seen in the example of Figure 5. While being of house-scale and relatively indiscernible from the single-family homes, this stacked fourplex doesn’t get completely lost in the blend of single-family dwellings in its location at the end of the block.

Figure 4



Google. (2019). [Figure 4 Google Street View 2711 15th Ave]. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/TBnWuZX4cfjJtS127>
 Google. (2017). [Figure 5 Google Street View 1404 Argyle St]. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/saYw6Z7QSVb8E6QK8>

Figure 5



Triple-decker/Triplex

This housing type is of house-scale and is beneficial in filling narrow lots as it has three-stacked dwelling units with one unit per floor as demonstrated in the examples provided in Figure 6 and Figure 7.

Figure 6



Google. (2018). [Figure 6 Google Street View 2229 Smith St]. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/kpTELX5mFxW1fb46>
 Google. (2019). [Figure 7 Google Street View 3810 Rae St]. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/roaRiormjCnioWeRc9>

Figure 7



Rowhouse/Townhouse

Townhouses provide an efficient use of land with the features of shared walls and are more affordable than detached single-family homes (Parolek, 2020b). Located in the upper-middle class neighbourhood of the Crescents, the rowhouses in Figure 11 provide an example of a more affordable housing option in the area dominated by single-family dwellings. Figure 8 is located near transit lines and commercial amenities to demonstrate a

healthier mixed-use environment. Figure 9 presents a modern example of missing middle compared to the more dated townhouse example presented in figure 10; these examples are found in the core intensification area from figure 12.

Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

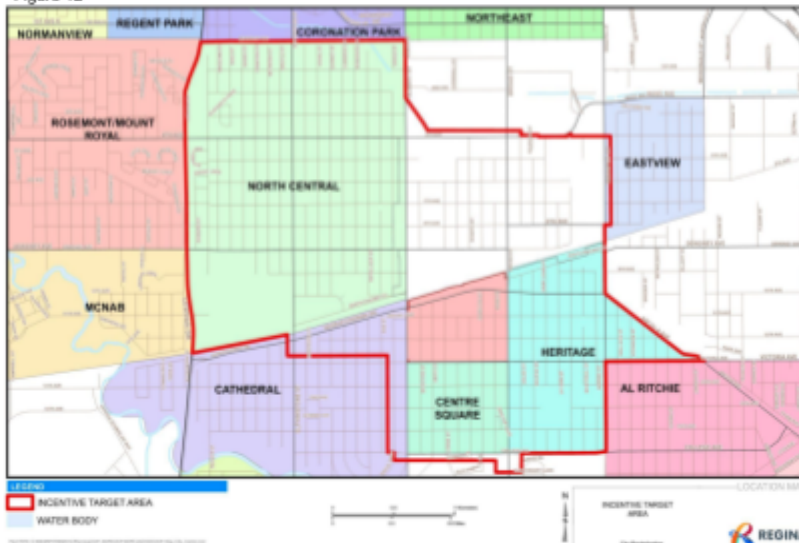


Figure 11



Google. (2019). [Figure 8 Google Street View 1634 Badham Blvd]. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/kGvTzxdf7LY4tu4u8>
 Figure 9 Street View of 2107 Osler St. (own photo)
 Google. (2021). [Figure 10 Google Street View 2633 7th Ave]. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/mrG9XwBUU1a8MZv87>
 Google. (2013). [Figure 11 Google Street View 3036 18 Ave]. <https://maps.app.goo.gl/yK42VbKwoZ4B5VQM7>

Figure 12



City of Regina. (2024). Revitalization Incentive Policy. City of Regina. <https://www.regina.ca/export/sites/Regina.ca/business-development/land-property-development/galleries/pdfs/Revitalization-Incentive-Policy.pdf>

Conclusion

The persistence of a decentralized, low-density form in mid-sized cities is reliant on mutually reinforcing factors including residential place-based attachments, historic patterns of peripheral development and the sociopolitical influences that operate in support of this highly unsustainable auto-oriented form. Social principles of inertia and ideologies driving perceptions of crime justify pathways of exclusionary single-family zoning and continued trends of outwards growth, effectively creating barriers for developing alternative urban growth and greater housing affordability. However, an opportunity for change has been presented from the federally-funded Housing Accelerator Fund (HAF). It has amended sections of Regina's OCP and the 2019 Zoning Bylaw to permit higher-density on residential lots within the intensification boundary and is currently working to advance a multi-unit residential development among other goals to increase housing stock (City of Regina, 2024). Ultimately, the HAF represents the potential for areas of decentralized use to adopt strategies of gentle density to provide sustainable alternative pathways. It is an opportunity to completely shift the trajectory of urban growth in Canadian mid-sized cities, away from self-perpetuating dynamics of core area depletion to build inclusive, higher-density and healthier cities.

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Single Family Dwellings Fueled the Housing Crisis in Regina

Keith Lloyd

University of Regina

GES 346 Urban Planning

Vanessa Mathews

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Single Family Dwellings Fueled the Housing Crisis in Regina

Regina is a city comprising several communities. Some areas of the city are more exclusive than others, fueled by exclusionary zoning practices that exacerbate housing disparities in the city. Canada is currently experiencing a housing crisis that affects the entire nation. The development of much-needed housing is hindered by restrictions imposed on areas to limit housing to housing types. To address this issue, the federal government has allocated four billion dollars to the Housing Accelerator Fund (HAF), which aims to expedite the construction of the "missing middle" housing across Canada. Regina has received thirty-five million dollars to support additional housing growth in the area as part of this initiative. Missing middle housing refers to all other types of housing that are not single-family dwellings, suites, duplexes, apartments, and everything in between (City of Regina, 2024). These housing types allegedly threaten property values and the character of neighborhoods and can be met with resistance. The conventional explanation for the need for traditional zoning is that towns and cities progress as they realize that certain land uses become incompatible over time. Early community planners recognized the need for zoning due to growing concerns over the city's appearance, urban living conditions, housing conditions, the natural environment, the city's function, and the local government's efficiency. They took the initiative to address these planning problems (Gordon et al., 2021, p. 77). Before zoning, people relied heavily on private agreements and used the concentration and reliance on public transit to their benefit by building homes further away from high-density areas. Additionally, the well-off homeowners and builders would use their political influence to bar the expansion of public transit into lower-density single-dwelling areas (Fischel, 2004). Most critics argue that zoning restricts specific demographics from accessing certain areas of town, which can result in segregation by race and income throughout the city. Since its

inception, zoning has been primarily used to protect the interests and values of the single-family development promised in the ‘American Dream.’ Along with this American dream comes the social perception of the picture-perfect neighborhood. Through understanding the historical tactics used before legislated zoning and of Regina’s North Central Community, there is a clear understanding of the protections used in Regina’s Residential Detached Zoning bylaws of 1992 that have manifested as exclusionary. The social security of the single-family dwelling zone was historically exclusionary and did not receive any reform; instead, this type of low-density housing received protection through municipal bylaws and has fueled the housing crisis Canada is experiencing today. The HAF has compelled municipalities to take essential steps toward eliminating regulations restricting a diversity of housing types’ available in specific areas. This presents an opportunity for Regina to address its history of exclusion and work towards providing affordable, equitable, and sustainable housing. By doing so, Regina can also contribute to resolving the country's current housing crisis.

From the early pioneer days, community planners were responsible for dealing with the built form before the implementation of zoning. Increased populations led to more housing and eventually more housing issues that led to a need for community planning. During early Boston, segregation existed based on race and income, resulting in certain regions of the city being unaffordable for some. In densely populated areas, minority groups lived in large numbers and depended heavily on public transportation. The public was reviewing the location of these transit lines. Homeowners and builders had a say in the planning process, which enabled them to prevent public transportation from intruding into established and future residential zones. This was considered as a viable alternative to zoning (Fischel, 2004). What happened in early Boston is an excellent example of the experiences and tactics that people used before traditional zoning

bylaws were implemented. Early community planners made progress in improving living conditions and establishing safer building materials and standards. However, these standards should have been more inclusive and beneficial to all demographics. The existing standards only benefited those with a voice in the planning process, leaving out others who were omitted. These same standards of improved building materials and living conditions would have restricted the demographics that would not have been able to afford the same building materials and means, so there is an early history of community planners having an exclusionary aspect (Miller, 2014). Early Canadian pioneer towns experienced similar exclusionary planning and were similarly divided by race and income throughout. Regina's North Central Community is an excellent example of these experiences.

The North Central community in Regina is classified as mixed-use residential. Unfortunately, it has a long-standing negative perception for being a difficult place to live. North Central has had a bad reputation since the earliest days of Regina's creation. North Central still has a stigma attached to the community today, regarded as Canada's Worst Neighborhood (Macleans Magazine, 2007). The proximity of the railyards and early industrial activity made the area less desirable. Many of the pre-zoning tactics used in early Boston show similarities within the built form of North Central. North Central experienced divisions in built form and class division from its earliest days. Implementing Zoning bylaws exacerbated the housing disparities in Regina because it protected single-family zoning (Miller, 2014). There are many similarities between the North Central area and the early days of Regina as a pioneer town, both in terms of urban design and environment. It was easy for better-off people to avoid the higher density and low-income area of North Central and build more significant, more suitable structures away from North Central. This can be expressed through Regina's vast suburban communities, with strict

infill guidelines to reduce gaps. Although there are not as many direct barriers as experienced in Boston, it would have been near impossible for specific demographics to build enough equity in order to purchase or build housing away from the North Central neighborhood. The transition to formal zoning bylaws and regulations would reinforce the city's desire to protect the character of the residential-detached dwelling of the single-family suburbs.

Some scholars argue that neighborhood character is most important when choosing a place to live. Neighborhood character can be the area's physical characteristics and social perceptions of its primary residents (Geller, 2017). The Urban Planning Department of Regina's 1992 zoning bylaw grants the residential-detached zone in the highest regard of housing and provides protection through municipal bylaws; "Density and intensity standards for this zone are designed to ensure that the residential-detached zone shall serve as a designation that preserves and protects the suburban residential community character of its area" (1992). This marks a shift from the political influence of the wealthy to the true political enshrinement of bylaw protection of single-family housing. Historic exclusionary principles could be witnessed at the core of specific zoning bylaws, and these principles come from exclusionary tactics used to keep specific demographics out. The same regulations used to define a neighborhood as rich, like house size, lot size, setbacks, and height restrictions, are the same parameters used to exclude other housing types and their demographics. Among the biggest reasons for resistance to intensification is protecting home values from encroaching on missing middle housing standards, and The HAF will threaten these boundaries and zoning protections used by early and modern community planners.

The HAF has aggressive goals of rapid housing growth across Canada by creating favorable conditions for additional housing and an opportunity for the City of Regina to

reconcile with its exclusionary zoning history. Additionally, the HAF aims to reduce the barriers to developing missing middle housing with intensification measures (City of Regina, 2024). The HAF is looking for transformational change across Canada, and it will only be successful if specific changes are made possible to remedy the problems that the dominant classes in society have used to shape zoning bylaws for their benefit. The exclusivity of single detached dwellings, the various restrictive regulations that protect large homes, and strict lot regulations are evidence for the foundational argument that zoning regulations have worked to shape housing stock availability. The built environment has implications on the sociodemographic makeup (Goetz, 2021). Single detached dwellings have garnished the image of white exclusivity because this housing is predominantly dominated by white demographics that have historically been better off than the marginalized and have had a significant influence on shaping modern zoning bylaws to protect the interest and values of single residential style housing. The implementation of strict bylaws that restrict the encroachment of apartments and duplexes “protects” home values and has, in turn, caused a lack of affordable housing across Canada. This is also explicitly shown in Regina’s 1992 zoning bylaw, which aims to protect the area's character. Phase one of the HAF has been passed as of January 2024 and opens areas within the intensification boundaries to missing middle housing. This will pose negative consequences for the security and value of the single detached residential zones cultivated since community planning's inception. Regina had a history of exclusion before zoning, and zoning solidified these disparities through municipal and government protection. Regardless of social perceptions of housing and property rights, the HAF will move forward and is Regina’s opportunity to stimulate equitable housing.

Through understanding the historical tactics used before zoning inception and of Regina’s North Central Community, there is a clear understanding of the same protections used

in Regina's Residential Detached Zoning bylaws of 1992. The social security of the single-family dwelling zone was historically exclusionary and did not receive any reform; instead, this type of low-density housing received protection through municipal bylaws and has fueled the housing crisis Canada is experiencing today. The HAF has forced municipalities to take crucial steps to eliminate the regulations limiting the housing types available in certain areas. Hopefully, it will be an opportunity for the city of Regina to reconcile its exclusionary history, move forward with affordable, equitable, and sustainable housing, and contribute to raising the nation out of the housing crisis. There are still more discussions beyond this brief overview of exclusionary zoning in Regina, mostly concerning who will have opportunities at these spaces provided by the HAF initiative. Canada is moving ahead with reconciliation with indigenous peoples. They have been historically oppressed, and the effects of these oppressive tactics are still being felt today within the indigenous populations. Additionally, the motives of developers are often concerned with profit, and hopefully, the need for sustainable, equitable, genuinely affordable, and well-built housing will outweigh financial gain through cutting corners. Finally, the social perceptions around land value and the depreciation of land values when certain types of land use encroach need to be studied further. Canada prides itself as an equal nation that has been historically oppressive to indigenous peoples and has historically oppressive exclusionary tactics built into community planning that received legislative protection. Is Canada truly an equitable nation? If these social perceptions stop neighborhoods from becoming more diverse, what will the future of Regina's neighborhoods look like? Development needs to create a landscape that offers housing options to all demographic and income types, and zoning practices and principles should be reformed to be more inclusive above and beyond HAF directives.

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**Slippery & Hopelessly Ambiguous:
Neighbourhood Character as a Tool in Urban Planning**

Jessie Stueck

University of Regina

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Vanessa Mathews

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Neighbourhood character is nearly impossible to narrow down into a single definition. Due to the ambiguity of formal definitions of character, and the subjectivity of personal perceptions, character can be understood and utilized in many ways when it comes to urban planning. Increasing density or intensification in a neighbourhood is often understood to be in opposition to the retention and vitality of that neighbourhood's character, but there are many ways planning can reduce impacts of density and new housing on existing built form in established neighbourhoods. Considering the potential impacts of density on neighbourhood character beyond built form calls into question the concept of neighbourhood character itself and its use in urban planning.

Increasing density can positively impact neighbourhoods in a variety of ways. A certain amount of density is required to support non-residential uses, services, and retail (Ottawa, 2023, p. 16). Increasing variety and volume in housing supply can contribute to affordability and "community vitality" (Kurz, 2024). Given that higher density is often considered to be "optimal land use" (Alvarez, 2023), higher density residential neighbourhoods contribute less to urban sprawl than lower density ones. The City of Regina links density to reducing its environmental impact, suggesting that "new and renewed housing in central and established areas and in proximity to transit routes will support reduced energy consumption and associated greenhouse gas emissions through reduced travel distances" (Regina, 2024).

There are numerous ways that planners may attempt to accommodate both density and character in neighbourhood development. Stephen Wood writes that "the simplest and most familiar formulation" of urban character is its "look and feel" (Wood, 2015, p. 24). It is

challenging to plan the feel of a place, and consequently most planning measures that consider neighbourhood character are focused on the former aspect with the hope that it will impact the latter.

Neighbourhood character is often linked to heritage. Cities are complex and “historical places” (Grosvenor & O’Neill, 2014, p. 456), and conceptions of urban character are often linked to that history. The earliest approaches to the “regulation of character” were focused primarily on a place’s “historical and architectural aspects” (Davison, 2023, p. 315). The City of Regina utilizes the planning document *Thematic Framework & Historical Context* as “key tool to systematically develop a heritage inventory in the community” (Regina, 2017, p. 7). Regina, and many other cities, utilize designation of heritage properties “to encourage the conservation of buildings deemed to have historical, cultural or architectural significance that contribute to a sense of place” (Regina, Heritage Properties and Conservation).

Prioritizing both heritage and intensification can be rewarding and revitalizing for urban areas. The community of Plainfield, Illinois, established in 1834, began crafting a new planning policy in 2004 in recognition of the need to accommodate development while retaining “the village's distinctive character and architectural tradition”. Referencing this, Plainfield’s planner refers to the village’s “sense of place” (Proulx, 2007, p. 1), echoing the phrasing used in the City of Regina’s comments on heritage designation.

Plainfield is now the sixth fastest growing community in Illinois, according to the 2020 census (Village of Plainfield). One of the ways that Plainfield provides for this growth while preserving its historic character is providing developers with “bonuses that reward developers for incorporating village objectives”. These objectives include things like the provision of affordable

housing, the preservation of historic buildings, good environmental practice, and utilizing design elements and materials that are consistent with existing neighbourhoods (Proulx, 2007, p. 2).

These types of bonuses are ways to attempt to incentivize developers to build in ways that compliment what is already there. Zoning is a more restrictive method that can also be utilized to impact development of built form. The City of Ottawa's *One Pager* summary of their Neighbourhood Character report outlines the interconnection between zoning and character as relating "most directly to managing the relationship between the quantity of development (including density) and the physical aspects of development". These physical aspects, or built form, can be restricted through zoning restrictions on height, driveways and parking, landscaping requirements, and waste management, among other things (Ottawa, 2023).

Zoning is used in many ways to increase density as well. In 2024, Regina's City Council recently approved amendments to its 2019 zoning bylaw to allow for greater density. The amendments include allowing for up to four units to be built on residential lots within Regina's intensification boundary and permitting up to two units to be built on residential lots outside of the intensification boundary. Other examples of these amendments include the increase of building height allowed in mid-density, high-density and mixed-used zones, and altering parking minimums (Regina, Zoning Bylaw).

There are a variety of ways zoning can be used to both invite density and protect heritage, or character. Considering concepts of gentle density is also a viable way to soften the impact of density on character. Gentle density can be characterized as "slightly increasing the number and variety of homes in existing single detached-home neighborhoods" (Alvarez, 2023), or as adding "density and diversity without totally upending a community plan" (Kurz, 2024). Regina's

zoning bylaw amendments allowing for multiple units to be built on residential lots, the reduction of parking requirements, and increased height allowances provide an example of how zoning can make way for gentle density. Gentle density can also allow for the construction of multiplexes or infill row houses, while always prioritizing integration with the existing built form of established neighbourhoods (Alvarez, 2023).

Thoughtful and intentional zoning and practices like gentle density are effective tools to protect the “look”, or built form, of a neighbourhood. Considering the “feel”, or social aspects, of a neighbourhood introduces complications and contradictions. Wood describes this aspect of character as “key to understanding resident reactions to compact city policies”, but notes that it is “hopelessly ambiguous” (Wood, 2015, p. 24).

The City of Ottawa’s discussion paper on neighbourhood character makes a similar point, noting that “character is often cited as a principal concern in discussions of new infill development and zoning”, but cautions that it “is not always clear what someone means by character when expressing concerns about it, and any two people may be concerned about very different things” (Ottawa, 2023, p. 1). Gethin Davison characterizes the use of concepts of character in planning as attempting to regulate the distinctiveness of a place by ensuring that modifications to property or changes to land use are compatible with, compliment and respect existing neighbourhood character (Davison, 2017, p. 305). The City of Regina’s study on the character of its Lakeview and Cathedral neighbourhoods attempts to define character as something that “makes an area attractive as a place to live, work and invest” resulting from “many elements: location, landscapes, views, architectural features, and heritage assets” (Be Heard Regina).

These understandings and utilizations of character are vague enough to allow broad interpretation. If certain landscapes, views, or architectural assets impact character, are there landscapes, views, or architectural assets that do not impact character? What makes places distinctive, or not distinctive? If neighbourhood character is a good thing, are there neighbourhoods with bad character, or no character at all? Due to this ambiguity, character can be (and often is) utilized as a tool for exclusion, both by planning entities and the public.

Exclusionary zoning is characterized by low density zoning, especially single detached homes, which can have the effect of reducing access to certain neighbourhoods, often on the basis of income level. This can be utilized intentionally to exclude specific groups, or unintentionally, through lack of consideration of the impact of zoning practices. In Regina, about three-quarters of the housing supply is single family homes (Kurz, 2024).

Regina and other prairie cities have unique challenges in regard to low density zoning and single family homes. The natural landscape in the prairies allows for substantial sprawl, and the combination of relatively low population combined with the large amount of geographic space has not made intensification a pressing necessity. As a prairie city, Regina is closely linked to rural spaces and the urban-rural divide is particularly blurry. Much of the city's growth has historically been intra-provincial, and "newcomers from small rural communities tend to bring their preferences for low-density living" (Graham & Filion, 2024, p. 63). Countering this perspective, it can be argued that when the majority of options available are single family homes, the majority of people will choose what is readily available (Graham & Filion, 2024, p. 64). Regardless, Regina has historically perpetuated exclusionary zoning, and their recent bylaw amendments that attempt to correct this have come only as an attempt to secure federal funding

through the Housing Accelerator Fund (Kurz, 2024).

There is a prevalent association with single family homes and neighbourhood character. This is presented quite recently in Regina's 2021 character study on the Cathedral and Lakeview neighbourhoods. In the discussion section (which features 11 comments from 9 separate users), multiple commenters credit the character of the neighbourhoods to this type of housing. One commenter writes "detached homes with attractive, well-kept yards give Old Lakeview its character", while another comments "these areas are exemplified by single-detached residential homes". Others express distaste for intensification with comments like "we need to stay away from... replacing one home with 2 tall skinny ones in one lot" and "I hope the City plans will prohibit this infill design from taking over this important heritage neighbourhood which, to me, reflects the courage and determination of our early citizens who built the city" (Be Heard Regina).

Only one commenter advocated for the existing contemporary examples of density in Cathedral and Lakeview, writing,

I really value the mix of housing that is in the Cathedral and Crescents neighbourhood. For me this includes the different ages and architectural styles of the buildings, the housing formats (apartments, single family homes, row houses, duplexes) because they support different household compositions (young students and professionals, small families, big families, seniors, etc.), and the mix of incomes. It really is one of the few neighbourhoods where you can see the city reflected. (Be Heard Regina)

One does not have to go far into Cathedral to see this mix of housing types, from duplexes and multiplexes to low and mid-rise apartment buildings. Many of these structures are architecturally beautiful and reflect the diversity in built form that is often considered integral to

Cathedral's character. The assertion that the neighbourhood is "exemplified by single-detached residential homes" (Be Heard Regina) is bizarre. Whether or not these proponents of single family housing are actively trying to exclude specific groups from these neighbourhoods or not, it is important to consider the question asked by Wood, "when residents seek to protect neighborhood character, urban character, or just plain character, what is it they are looking to defend?" (Wood, 2015, p. 24).

Ottawa's Neighbourhood Character discussion paper clearly outlines things that often come up in discussions of character but can not or should not be restricted by zoning. The first point is what the paper refers to as "people zoning". The paper stresses that "zoning cannot seek to regulate who lives in a neighbourhood, directly or indirectly" and that "age, race, religion, family status, marital status, sexual orientation or gender identity or disability cannot be the basis for zoning". In terms of planning, impact overrides intent, and so any planning measures that result in exclusion of specific groups is "discriminatory regardless of its intent" (Ottawa, 2023, p.6).

The document also notes that aside from height and other built form restrictions, zoning should not restrict the number of units in a building, emphasizing that "the mere fact that a new building contains more units than what previously existed is not itself a negative impact on neighbourhood character". Tenure is also mentioned in the document, with emphasis on the fact that both single family homes and multi-unit buildings can potentially be owned or rented by their occupants. The discussion paper clearly demonstrates how low density zoning excludes residents on the basis of income, noting that "a zone that permits only detached houses effectively restricts that neighbourhood to those who can afford a detached house". The paper

places anything that can restrict “who can live somewhere” as “outside the purview of zoning--and by extension, of neighbourhood character” (Ottawa, 2023. p. 6-7).

Ottawa’s discussion paper offers a refreshingly objective definition of what character is or is not in the context of planning. Examining character through the lens of neighborhood residents introduces complexities and bias, as seen from the previously mentioned discussion comments in Regina’s study on character. Wood writes that resident fears surrounding intensification “often appeared to be founded on the defense of a fiction (a ‘community,’ of which many admitted minimal direct, prior experience) against attack from a monstrous specter (inscrutable and obscene hordes bent on stealing what is rightfully owned by interviewees)” (Wood, 2015, p. 32).

Wood hypothesizes that resident apprehensiveness about the impacts of increased density does not undermine the community, but actively constructs it. The author's research outlines how existing residents begin to represent or idealize their neighbourhood as a “consistent, harmonious, whole community”, in opposition to the perceived impacts of the incursion of new residents who would come with higher density development. Wood argues that the “threat” presented by high density developments actually challenges and produces neighbourhood identity where perhaps there was none before (Wood, 2015, p. 34).

Wood’s arguments suggest that social understandings of character are, at least in part, fantasy (Wood, 2015, p. 32). On character, Wood writes,

Like related concepts such as place, home, and neighborhood, character is a slippery concept when used in urban-development debates. Across the interviews, character appeared as a paradoxical notion that scrambled numerous established dualisms. It is at once objective and subjective, personal and impersonal, and an objective property of the environment (the feel/how it looks) that evokes an affective or emotive response (a

feeling / how it appears) linked to socially shareable experiences of and values about a place (a feel for). It is deep and specific, that which distinguishes one place from another; it is superficial and nebulous, an "atmosphere" floating as a mist on the surface of places. (Wood, 2015, p. 35)

These contradictions are inherent to conceptions of character and make its use as a planning tool problematic.

Another important criticism of the utilization of character in planning considerations is the designation of character itself. When some areas are deemed to have to have significant character, there is an implication that "the character of other areas is not as significant and not worthy of the same levels of protection" (Davison, 2017, p. 219). One only needs to look as far as Regina to see the ways the City interacts with different neighbourhoods. The historic neighbourhoods of Cathedral and Lakeview are perceived to have significant enough character to merit a character study to help determine how to protect and preserve them during the intensification process. Other similarly historic neighbourhoods like Heritage and North Central are perceived to be barriers to intensification due to "social issues, perceptions about crime and safety, and decades of disinvestment and urban decline" (Graham & Filion, 2024, p. 64-65).

There are significant ways that planners can implement increases to density while protecting and respecting the existing built form of neighbourhoods. Zoning offers avenues to restrict or encourage development where appropriate to minimize impact on established neighbourhoods. Whether or not character can be attributed to built form alone is questionable, but accounting for any other definition of character in planning is inherently problematic. Social understandings of character can be utilized as tools of exclusion and the designation of character itself often has negative implications. Considering these points, it is arguable that consideration of character in neighbourhood planning should be predominantly limited to built form, and with

significant care and intention.

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