

What makes a Canadian community great?

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When Kerry Jang was growing up, his community was defined by boundaries.

His East Vancouver neighbourhood was the indisputable territory of the working class, his Chinese heritage a classification no one seemed willing to hyphenate, even though his parents were second-generation Canadians.

“I think their community was pretty much defined by the Chinese community in Vancouver,” he says. “It was very much just keep your head down.”

Since then, his world and the notion of community have expanded exponentially. For Mr. Jang, like most Canadians, the term has taken on connotations beyond ethnic background or physical environment, and now refers to the banding together of like-minded individuals. But fundamentally, it's still about where we live.

Now 49, Mr. Jang still lives in East Van, where gentrification has created an urban mosaic of different types, colours classes and castes. Like his neighbours and his neighbourhood, he defies easy categorization. He is a psychiatrist and city councillor, an activist and a father. But when he talks about community now, it isn't about boundaries, but about how to make where he lives even better.

“People confuse neighbourhood engagement with NIMBYism,” he says. “The big change in Vancouver that I've seen is that people are actually more involved in solving a problem instead of just opposing something.”

Fifteen years ago, a Harvard academic named Robert Putnam wrote about the death of community in an essay called *Bowling Alone*, later expanded into a much discussed book. In it, he cited American statistics that showed a drastic and steady decline in participation at the neighbourhood level. People weren't joining their local choral societies and football clubs any more, he found, and they weren't voting or canvassing for votes, reading their local paper or volunteering at the neighbourhood school.

There was no longer a sense of community beyond the actual physical lines that separate one neighbourhood from another.

Across Canada, it's hard to imagine that anyone is still bowling alone. In the time since Mr. Putnam's findings were published, the urban tide has turned, at least up here, and created a flood of interest in all things local.

Recently, when The Globe and Mail asked readers to nominate the best communities in Canada, no one sent us messages about fancy houses or high-tech infrastructure, or places they are living out their comfortable lives in isolation.

People who brag about their neighbourhoods today talk about a place where people know one another, where they are loved. These are places, we are told, where you can walk to the bookstore and the grocery store, to your kid's school and your own office. These are places where green space is not just found around the large "P" marking the nearest multistory parking lot, but where a connection to nature is part of the urban plan.

These places are easy to get around, but are not one size or one style. Some are urban, some are rural and some occupy the tree-lined spaces in between.

In these communities there is a mix of people of different backgrounds, different ages, different jobs, all of whom take part in the same rituals, from summer festivals to evening strolls.

Julia Deans, chief executive officer of CivicAction, Toronto's city-building organization, remembers growing up in a time when community development was dominated by wealthy, Anglo-Saxon families such as the Bassetts and Eatons.

"They really led the community investment and put in place some of the big institutions that have served us as a community since," she says.

Now, she sees the city's institutions being built by people with such names as Singh and Chang, reflecting a changing population and its needs.

"We're building a new kind of community that equally reflects where the new power and leadership fits," she explains.

WALKABILITY IS KEY

Even if Canadian communities are populated by a different mix of people today, what those people want has not changed, says John Tory, a former Toronto mayoral candidate and CivicAction chair.

"If I go back to thinking about what mattered when I was a little boy, it was the park at the end of our street, where we had a hockey rink in the winter, and the local churches, where we had Cub Scouts, and the public school where I went," he says.

"If you think about what was important, it was that sense that you lived in a safe place with nice places to go and play. I don't think it's much different now."

What has changed, says Ken Greenberg, an urban planner and author of *Walking Home: The Life and Lessons of a City Builder*, is the map of where those places can be found.

Gone is the idea that quality neighbourhoods must be built around large suburban yards or that anywhere worth living has a two-car garage.

“There’s a big difference between passing someone in the driving lane of an arterial and passing them on the sidewalk, where you make eye contact,” he explains.

Today, the focus in urban planning boils down to one word: walkability. A strong community is one where you can walk to all the things you need: the grocery store, school, public park and pub, whether you’re in the heart of the city or a small town.

“To me, the key is to have that combination of things in close proximity and in variety, not to have things that are homogeneous,” Greenberg says.

Lenore Swystun, a Saskatoon-based community planner and urban consultant, believes the country is also shifting back to a sense that neighbourhoods must include a shared outdoor space where communing with nature and one another goes hand in hand.

“Whether you’re in an urban environment or a remote rural environment, that call back to the natural landscape is very profound,” she says. “It’s going back home, so to speak.”

COMMUNITY IS INCLUSIVITY

But in Canada, building a real sense of community will always be more complicated than marking off green space and strolling to the local farmer’s market.

Where we live is all tangled up with who we live among, and for neighbourhoods to work, everyone must be welcome to participate.

Leslie Spillett of the Winnipeg-based, First Nations non-profit Ka Ni Kanichihk, says her group is trying to build a sense of community that allows native people to feel good about who they are while also bonding them to the rest of the country.

“For me, healthy community is being fully accepted for everything we have brought to this country and what we continue to contribute, but also fully accepting ourselves as well,” she says.

In Nova Scotia, 24-year-old Swantje Jahn is trying to make her city more accepting of newcomers through her work as the community engagement co-ordinator for the Halifax Refugee Clinic.

The office helps about 25 new arrivals each year, many of whom were persecuted, and arrived with no real experience of what a home can be.

The city is too small to have ethnic enclaves, says Ms. Jahn: “There is no Chinatown here.” And so she works to create new communities by introducing her clients to the people of Halifax and vice versa. Next week, she will hold a baby shower for a newcomer from Iraq, the gifts provided by local moms motivated by a shared experience that transcends nationality.

“We have so many differences, but at our core, we all want the same thing: We all want to belong,” Ms. Jahn says. “That’s what community is.”

What are some great recent initiatives in community planning?

Greeting Fluency: How often do you say good morning to your neighbours? Ever do it in their native tongue? This initiative of former Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan and his organization, Global Civic, encourages citizens to learn a few words of greeting and has identified nine basic phrases, such as “hello,” “thank you,” and “how are you?” Greeting Fluency provides instructional videos in Cantonese, Punjabi and Tagalog, and is meeting provincial education officials in a bid to bring the program into schools. Mr. Sullivan says that anyone who makes the effort is “really showing respect” – and will see how difficult it is for “people coming here and learning English.”

Awesome Cities: Created in Boston in 2009, the Awesome Foundation awards monthly \$1,000 grants to neighbourhood projects and their creators. Chapters have sprung up in Toronto, Ottawa, Kitchener-Waterloo, Edmonton, Montreal and Calgary. Awesome Calgary was founded by Lori Stewart, a former eBay executive who worked on Mayor Naheed Nenshi’s election campaign. Last month, her group heard pitches on projects ranging from an outdoor demo space for a local circus school to a poetry event and a community walk. The budding acrobats and jugglers won out.

Project Neutral: In Toronto, two neighbourhoods are vying to become carbon neutral. The pilot program is pitting Riverdale against the Junction (in the friendliest way possible) to see which community can be the first to drastically reduce its carbon footprint. A project of the Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance, the project hopes that neighbourhood allegiances can be used to get people involved in making a radical change.

Sustainable subdivisions: With just 400 residents, Hafford, Sask., is a small town with big ambitions. Located near the Redberry Lake Biosphere Reserve, the community developed a plan in 2007 to become one of the most sustainable towns in Canada. The off-grid community is the first in the province to have a growth boundary. “We don’t need to grow, we want to nurture that small sense of place,” said Lenore Swystun, the community planner who helped develop Hafford’s sustainability plan with funding from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. “It’s a visionary community.”

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