

The Better Way:

Dan Leeming on the New Urbanism

Five years ago, urban planner Daniel Leeming could only dream of designing communities that created a sense of place. But today his dreams have become reality as house builders and municipalities replace traditional suburban plans with new urban designs.



New urbanism is an alternative approach to suburban development, and one of Canada's leading advocates of the movement is Leeming (MES '92; BFA '83). In 1987, with 15 years experience as an urban planner, he found his work unsatisfactory. "I was designing efficient contemporary suburban developments that I felt little personal affinity with and, quite honestly, I wouldn't have wanted to live in myself," he says.

Leeming says the traditional suburban, low-density housing design eats up valuable land and makes transportation inefficient. "There simply aren't enough people living in one spot to make it affordable to have convenient transit." People buy second and third automobiles, which leads to congested roads and excessive pollution, he says. "People are spending their lives sitting in a car."

Leeming, a partner with the Toronto design firm, The Planning Partnership, now uses ideas reminiscent of older Toronto areas, such as Bloor West Village and the Beaches, when planning a new community. He overcomes what he says are the two main problems of traditional design -- long distances to amenities and ugly streetscapes -- by keeping bus routes, shops, schools and parks within five minutes of houses, and by moving two-door garages to the backyard. The result? An interesting street presence of porches, doors, windows and activity.

"The more an area feels like a village," he says, "the more desirable it is."

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