

OPINION

# The term ‘neighbourhood character’ is a euphemism for something ugly



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Toronto’s city council was talking about front doors. The question: How many of them should a house be allowed to have? It was March, and council was considering new rules about “secondary suites” – usually basement apartments – and whether they should be allowed to have their own entrance facing the street. A dull debate, you would think.

But for some, the stakes seemed high. “This has serious implications on the feel and the character of Toronto’s neighbourhoods,” argued councillor Jaye Robinson. In the end, she moved to enforce the current rule: A second front door in most areas will still require specific permission. The “stability, the character and the feel of these neighbourhoods,” as Ms. Robinson put it, would be preserved. Her motion passed. And tenants will mostly need to enter through the side door.

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The fact that anyone considered this a victory – or indeed that the leaders of Canada’s biggest city thought it was worth discussing – is telling. The idea of “neighbourhood character” pops up everywhere in discussions about city planning. And the concept is, for all that, surprisingly vague. When it gets defined, it usually turns out to be a euphemism for something ugly. On the surface, it speaks about architecture and aesthetic concerns, but its substance is about who gets to live where and who, especially today, gets shut out.

The two-doors debate reflects a larger issue in Toronto. However, this issue is not unique. Most cities on the continent have similar rules, including Vancouver, which has its own two-front-doors restriction.

At a time when prosperous cities such as Toronto are facing a crisis of housing affordability, such rules are anachronisms. That only seems more true as you unpack the basis of “character” arguments, in very different historical situations. First, beginning in the 1920s, came the ideal of a master-planned city, where activities – and people of different classes – were sorted out. Second came the idealism of the 1960s gentrifiers and the preservation movement, who romanticized the physical shape of old urban neighbourhoods.

The history of this idea in Toronto reflects these larger trends in North America. “Toronto is eminently a city of homes,” said a Toronto Globe editorial in 1897. As Gil Meslin recounts in an essay in *House Divided*, a new book I co-edited, apartment houses were an innovation that was linked to undesirable populations: immigrants and women living out of wedlock. This antipathy to the apartment building did not change quickly; it just became somewhat less explicit. Toronto’s first Official Plan, in 1949, included this phrase: “Land use planning is concerned with the preservation of the character of neighbourhoods.”

In the postwar period, “character” was widely used as “a defensive term,” historian Richard White says. Neighbourhood character “nearly always [was] something to protect, not something to create.”

And what did it mean? In short, a “neighbourhood” was a place of houses where families with children could live well. Such older neighbourhoods in Toronto had been built before planning really came into effect. But they were under threat in the 1960s from the twin pressures of suburban flight and dense urban redevelopment – apartment buildings. The city was interested in “protecting such areas ... to ensure that they remain good places for families with children.”

In the 1960s, planners were getting this idealistic vision of “the neighbourhood” from elsewhere, mostly the United States. The scholar Suleiman Osman, in *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, sees the term “neighbourhood” being used often by “brownstoners” – the educated middle-class people who chose to settle in certain older neighbourhoods of that New York borough. Rejecting the sameness of the suburbs, these new arrivals “used phrases such as ‘neighbourhood,’ ‘neighbourly,’ ‘traditional neighbourhood,’ or ‘real neighbourhood’ to describe the area.”

But, he argues, this understanding of the place did not map with the way many long-time residents experienced it; instead, the new arrivals were responding to nostalgic fiction and memoirs, and the political constructions of their own moment. The idea of the neighbourhood was “a seductive commemoration of urban ethnic folk culture, working-class comity, and pastoral innocence,” Prof. Osman writes.

The local details vary, but we all have an idea of what that meant in North American cities: a sepia-toned image of busy, social streets, with colourful “ethnic” foods and cultural practices, a place where everybody knew everybody. Jane Jacobs’s dreamy “sidewalk ballet,” in New York’s Greenwich Village, captures that ideal in high literary style.

One problem is that this city, always somewhat romanticized, no longer exists. Cities change. The old North American neighbourhoods that seemed to need “protection” in 1960 or 1970 are now bastions of wealth. The young people who made the choice to occupy them are now senior citizens. Their cheaply bought real estate is now exceedingly valuable. And if they sell, the “character” of those who come next is likely to be different. The people who are now buying century houses in Vancouver and Toronto are likely to have as many millions as they do children.

And the wider North American experience of the suburbs reflects similar patterns. For much of the baby boomers’ lives, metropolitan houses in the most prosperous cities were accessible to the middle class; now, they are not.

In Toronto, the doctrine of “character” applies in both the old city and the bigger postwar city. And because postwar urbanism was built for the baby boom and designed to be coherent – with only one front door on each house – character there stands even more firmly in the way of change. In Toronto, one-third of the city, or 200 square kilometres, is zoned exclusively for detached houses. It’s now legal to add a secondary suite, the most invisible form of density, to one of these buildings, but not a three-flat or a four-storey apartment building.

And yet those areas are changing. Small houses are being replaced by new chateaux, which have no connection to the architectural styles of the existing neighbourhood. Because these new buildings are single-family houses, they are okayed by city planning regulations, which in Toronto, call for them to “respect and reinforce the existing physical character of the neighbourhood.” What that means is not a policing of architectural style, or materials, or even, often, the size of new houses. It is a prohibition on apartments. “Character” means exclusion.

At the same time, many house neighbourhoods are actually losing people. Across North America, baby-boomer neighbourhoods are emptying out. Smaller families; fewer tenants; elders aging in place; all of these factors contribute to a continuing depopulation of urban neighbourhoods. That includes parts of Vancouver and Toronto. In the latter city, according to planner Cheryll Case, two-thirds of the city’s neighbourhoods have seen their population density decline or remain flat in the past 30 years.

And more people are coming: A recent study by the Canadian Centre of Economic Analysis and the Canadian Urban Institute suggested more than a million people will move to Toronto by 2041.

This is going to mean physical change. A dramatic increase in social housing is already badly needed; when this comes, it will mean apartments and a change in character. Today’s smaller households need more units; this, too, will change character. The houses built for the nuclear families of the 1960s will no longer be able to dominate the city in the same way that they have. But there is room, in the green and park-rich house neighbourhoods of North America, for a lot more people.

But letting those people in will require serious shifts in the architecture and urban design of those places; the presence of hundreds of thousands of homes will be unmistakable. The “character,” in the way we often think about it, will change. There will be more front doors. But the alternative is a city that shuts out new arrivals, or shunts them into illegal rooming houses, and grey-market basements, and condos on old industrial sites. If that is the city we end up building, it will say a lot about our character.

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