Moving Towards Sustainability: City-Regions and Their Infrastructure

Leonore Evans

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The observations and conclusions are those of the author.

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Introduction

Housing stability is a key to Canadians' health and well-being, and the availability of affordable housing helps promote the economic and social sustainability of our cities and communities. Due to Canada's growing lack of affordable housing, the necessity of including affordable housing into governments' infrastructure policies needs to be prioritized. This means federal, provincial, and municipal commitments to build, subsidize, and maintain affordable housing to ensure that Canadian cities can prosper economically, while being socially and environmentally resilient.

In order to make this argument, I will first be examining the current debates surrounding competitive city-regions; why have they gained such prominence and what sustains them? The second section looks specifically at infrastructure; what it is and why it is important for cities' socio-economic well-being. The third section examines affordable housing as a central aspect of cities' infrastructure. Mississauga and Calgary will act as Canadian case studies, to illustrate some of the dynamic tensions Canadian cities are facing in maintaining population and economic growth.   The final section will introduce the concepts of urban economic, social, and environmental sustainability, and examine how these understandings can help cities realign their priorities, to include affordable housing.

City-Regions Debates

Cities have always been centers of political, economic and social interaction. Alan Harding and Patrick Le Galés (1997) point out in the pre-nation state era, cities in northern Europe were unique for their political and economic autonomy; the Hanseatic League was a network of city states, linked by trade, language and culture. Today few cities enjoy the autonomous status of the city states of Hamburg and Bremen, and the majority function within their national hierarchies. In Canada, due to the federal system, municipal governments have found themselves in a particular set of economic and political relationships, largely mediated by provincial jurisdiction. A crisis of sorts has emerged, with municipalities responsible for providing an increasing number of services, while remaining politically and economically constrained. Municipal governments across Canada rely primarily on property taxes, development levies, utility charges and user fees to raise revenues (Wolfe, 2003). Only recently gaining access to a portion of the gas tax, they are politically constrained in what they may or may not decide, as constitutionally they remain "creatures of the provinces."

Cities' growing economic importance on the world stage is in part due to increasing globalization. Canada's largest cities have seen increased immigration, and the rise of the "knowledge economy." Accompanying this is the collapse of other industries, growing social inequality and environmental degradation. Jarvis makes the argument that the economic and political city-regional elements neglect the fact that the household choices of social reproduction are in fact central to an economy's growth. The privatization of collective assets such as affordable housing, gives way to "socially disruptive and environmentally damaging dislocations" (Jarvis, 2007: 207).

Tim Hall and Phil Hubbard's research shows that two basic characteristics define today's competitive city-regions. First, city governments are increasingly shifting from urban government to urban governance, and secondly, cities' have needed to develop an ongoing focus on proactive economic growth strategies (Hall and Hubbard, 1998). Miller argues that while neoliberal policies have downloaded housing provision to limited-capacity local levels, and set municipalities in economic competition with one another, there has also been a shift in modes of decision-making. Triumph of the market ideology, with its discourse of efficiency, low taxes and user fees, has transformed citizens into consumers, and marked a decline in democratic deliberations (Miller, 2007). In this case, citizen involvement in local decision-making is characterized by one-off campaigns and low-level participation which does not necessarily contribute to collective identity formation.

Increased local governance has indeed been documented by a series of authors (Smith and Tronjheim, 2004; Bradford, 2005) and is apparent in how many Canadian municipalities function today. Governance can be broadly defined as "a move away from governing by detailed rules and regulations set out in acts of Parliament to frame-setting legislation. More detailed regulation is left to local actors and institutions" (Tronjheim, 2004). Such an approach can also be related to the "responsibilisation" or "empowerment" of communities, which focuses on shifting the onus of responsibility away from a strong national government towards a more decentralised model of decision-making. At a local level due to increasing numbers of public-private partnerships, this often means more state-business alliances. It can also mean developing more inclusive structures for citizen participation such as citizen committees and involvement on vital issues, and effective communication forums between citizens and local officials.

Cities' focus on economic growth strategies include creating jobs, supporting the growth of small companies, and attracting outside investment. When disinvestment in manufacturing cities like Detroit and Manchester occurred with manufacturing industries relocating to cheaper labour markets, these cities needed to reinvent themselves economically. Politicians and administrators promoted the comparative advantage of their city, over other places which might be trying to attract a similar form of investment. An interesting angle here is what Hall and Hubbard call the "cultural transformation" of cities, into places of, and for, consumption. This is in line with citizen's transformation into "consumers," or "clients" (Miller, 2007). Hall and Hubbard (1998: 8) summarize Harvey's (1994) ideas that "competition between places to attract inward investment of any type has become sharper as community after community fall over itself to offer more and more inducements for 'capital to come to town.'" Canadian municipalities that depend on development levies and property taxes for a substantial part of their revenue promote land for business and residential development, without taking the consequences of urban sprawl into account.

Richard Florida works with the concept of competitive cities to stress the importance of what he calls the "creative class." His ideas have been enthusiastically received by economic development officers around the world, as they try to reposition themselves economically, politically and socially. Issues of city livability and economic growth are fused as Florida points out that in order for cities to be successful, they need to attract a certain demographic of up and coming earners. His suggestions for cities revolve around development of lifestyle choices such as; active transit corridors (bike paths), a vibrant arts scene, and a gay friendly atmosphere.

Unfortunately, there is little focus on depressed neighbourhoods, or low income groups in Florida's analysis. McCann notes this trend as competitive cities' retreat from redistributive policies and towards the promotion of lifestyle centers. This can be seen in local policies promoting high end housing in city centers, while expecting low-income workers to endure long commutes. Here the question of who defines livability becomes central.

City-regions' economic growth strategies and governance models represent a scalar shift towards a more horizontally localized structure. McCann (2007: 188) writes that today's "'new regionalism' is an understanding of the region - as opposed to the nation - as the ideal scale in and through which economic competitiveness can be fostered and maintained." Local government is also where citizens can feel most effective. It is in this vein that Neil Bradford (2005) writes that places matter. He points out that while cities are engines of economic growth, they are also where the social and environmental consequences of this growth play out. While cities are competing internationally, their consistent focus on growth as a strategy might be working to the detriment of the social support system. Hiking user fees for public transit or cutting subsidized childcare spaces affects low-income citizens, and this can have adverse effects on these citizens' ability to be economically productive, as well as participate as citizens in decision-making.

Byron Miller's contributions to the city-region debate, states cities' position as an increasingly squeezed one. Federal and provincial governments' repeated downloading of responsibilities without accompanying financial mechanisms mirror the uploading of regulatory functions to supra-national levels. Miller (2007) introduces the concept of market-strategic thinking, as necessarily dominating local governments, to the detriment of communicative-democratic processes. He further connects this shift to the transition from local citizens to individual consumer and the growing lack of broad participation in local decision-making. Held in this light, housing advocacy groups need to be making new arguments in order for their call to be heard. Among them, is the need to link housing stability to the economic, social and environmental well-being of Canadian cities.

Cities Need Infrastructure

Canadian Prime Minister Harper recently announced a $33 billion dollar infrastructure plan (June 1, 2007). It includes primarily large scale projects such as the Asia Pacific Gateway Corridor, the clean up of St John's Harbour, the Autoroute Bypass for Montreal, the FLOW project for GTA, and the expansion of the Red River Floodway for Winnipeg. The federal infrastructure vision for communities includes (in the same announcement) mandatory limits for industrial emissions and 11 anti-crime bills, including targeting street racers, and keeping convicted offenders in prisons.

Infrastructure facilitates economic and social interactions among residents. An important distinction is between physical and social infrastructures. Physical, also known as "hard" infrastructure includes bridges, roads, sewers and airports. Studies have shown that urban investments in road building and telecommunications have a significant impact on productivity and growth (Pomeroy, 2006). Social, or "soft" infrastructure, is much harder to quantify, and rarely have its benefits been measured in economic terms. There is however, a growing body of literature focusing on the importance of social capital and social reproduction as essential to city-

regions economic, social and environmental well-being (McCann, 2007; Jarvis, 2007; Krueger and Savage, 2007). These authors do not equate livability with marketability, and what they call the "growth fetish," instead they focus on themes which Miller categorizes as communicative-democratic thinking: housing provision, adequate funding for public schools, and funding for public transit. These are traditionally provided by a "welfare state."

In his research paper, Steve Pomeroy (2006) maps the term "infrastructure" from the more traditional notion of "hard" infrastructure (roads and sewers), to a more inclusive understanding of "social" infrastructure (community centers, and informal networks). Pomeroy's literature review notes the many different definitions used to convey this wider concept; from "community infrastructure" to "social capital" and "institutional infrastructure." It seems there is no one agreed upon definition. Pomeroy concludes with Hanvey's (2004: 2) definition of social infrastructure as "essential to human development and therefore *a necessary condition for economic growth* ... [it] encompasses the inter-dependent mix of places, spaces, programs and networks at all levels" (my emphasis). In Hanvey's understanding, social infrastructure precludes economic growth.

Louise Hanvey's furthers her ideas by drawing on the metaphor of successful cities needing "magnets and glue." Magnets attract outside investors, students, new companies, or skilled labour. Yet communities also need "social 'glue' – the social infrastructure that contributes to social cohesion and promotes the economic and social well-being of all members of the community" (Hanvey 2004: 6). And often the magnets are also the glue. Hanvey makes the point that families and communities benefit directly from a healthy social infrastructure. Hanvey is not clear as to whether everyone benefits equally from these investments, which brings the question of how different sectors of the population benefit to different degrees from strategic investments in, or policies surrounding social infrastructure decisions.

Pomeroy introduces the private/public divide, as an important arena in the debates around governmental provision of infrastructure, as increasing numbers of public-private partnerships have blurred these strict categories. Housing is a very good example of this: whereas subsidized housing units might be privately owned, government subsidies assist with the management of these facilities, as well as the financial, social and psychological supports to tenants. Another example is while housing is essentially considered part of the private sphere, (because it houses one's private life), a well housed citizenry is a valuable public benefit, housing stability being central to resident's health.

A useful way of understanding the complexity of these issues, and shared responsibilities of the multiple actors involved, is through Jensen's framework of Canadians' well-being diamond; the interconnections between families, communities, governments and the market. Provision of social infrastructure, specifically adequate and affordable housing for all Canadians, cannot be achieved by one sector alone. At a local level this means working together, through governance models to engage diverse citizens and stakeholders and allow for conflict, growth and the development of durable partnerships. In Canada, the dynamics of intergovernmental relations have further complicated the affordable housing picture. Hulchanski (2004) notes that the until the mid-twentieth century, the federal government had been the primary leader in shaping

housing policy, but since then, municipalities have been playing a major role in the form and the density of residential areas.

Housing as Social Infrastructure

One would think that affordable housing provision would fall into Miller's communicative-democratic framework. Yet, recent work by leading financial institutions has firmly located affordable housing as a strategic market tool. In 2003, the Toronto Board of Trade published a report detailing why housing affordability is central to an attractive, livable and competitive city. It stated that employee access to affordable housing attracts potential business investment, while keeping labour and commuting costs down for workers who provide essential services. In May of 2007, the Ontario Board of Commerce made similar recommendations. The recognition that quality, affordable housing is central to their employees' well-being, and therefore productivity, allows business to push for an integrated government housing strategy. The 2007 report includes recommendations with regard to brownfield redevelopment, facilitating the development of surplus land, and financial incentives for developers.

Although access to affordable housing has not been framed as an explicit aspect of social infrastructure, its centrality as an indicator for socio and economic health should flag it as such (Hay, 2005). By having access to affordable housing, and the stability and safety it provides, residents' ability to engage in society increases, thereby allowing them to become active citizens. The location of one's housing becomes the physical link through which residents access other forms of infrastructure. In other words, the physical location of neighbourhoods matters to residents' political, economic and social inclusion. For instance: low-income housing is often found in areas that are poorly serviced by public amenities, such as transit, community centers and libraries (Hulchanski, 2004). The spatial exclusion derived from socio-economic housing segregation can lead to further political, economic and social exclusion.

There are other intersections which play into how residents access and benefit from infrastructure differently, diversity being an important entry point into this debate. For instance, gender has been noted as an important determinant in access to affordable housing. One example is that families with children are more likely to receive affordable housing then individuals (Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association, 2006). In this case, there is a need to recognize a wide diversity of residents who need affordable housing, and the wide of diversity of housing needed to house them. This includes building and subsidizing units for large families, people with disabilities, those in need of supported living and individuals living alone.

David Hulchanski describes Canada's housing system as "dualistic." He elaborates: "the housing system [...] allocates differential benefits for two groups of citizens on the basis of whether they are in the primary or secondary part of the system." (Hulchanski, 2004: 222). Evidence hereof is that the majority of federal housing policies have been geared towards the 80% of Canadians who own their homes or who are likely to buy them. This includes the now permanent Home Buyers Plan, in which first time buyers are allowed to borrow up to $20,000 tax and interest free from their RRSP's. Hulchanski states that policies targeting low-income market renters and the 5% of Canadians who live in non-market social housing largely depend on the nature of the federal-provincial relations of the day.

Housing in Canada is primarily market based, and the market does not make provisions for low-income people. For instance, a recent report detailed that a single parent must earn three times more than the minimum wage in order to afford average market rent for a two or three bedroom apartment in Toronto (Pomeroy, 2007). In light of this kind of statistic, and the growing numbers of hidden and visible homeless, affordable housing providers and advocates continue to call for an ongoing, meaningful federal role in affordable housing provision. The Canadian Housing Renewal Agency emphasizes the importance of affordable housing as a policy tool for achieving further economic and social gains. They argue that housing affordability contributes to prosperous cities through the availability of housing for employees and their families, as well as poverty reduction through reduced shelter costs for low-income families and individuals (Canadian Housing Renewal Association, 2007).

Case Studies: Mississauga and Calgary

Mississauga

The use of concrete Canadian examples will help illustrate some of these theoretical issues. I will be looking at Calgary and Mississauga as two Canadian cities who are working to re-brand themselves as international actors while balancing the diverse needs of residents, and the complexities of urban governance. Mississauga is an interesting case, because although it is legally its own city, it sits within the larger administration of Peel Region. This means that although it is the sixth largest city in Canada, Peel Region operates essential infrastructure services such as ambulances, transit, and low income housing.

Mississauga has been engaged in an aggressive self-marketing strategy in its attempt to attract economic investment, recently taking second place for "Best Economic Potential in North America" in the "North American Cities of the Future 2007/2008" competition (City of Mississauga, April 2007). Geographical proximity to Canada's financial center, Toronto, has been one of the factors of Mississauga's success. Thus, Mississauga has not remained a bedroom community but become an economic powerhouse of its own, with 57 Fortune 500 headquarters, a fact which is repeated at every opportunity. Mississauga's commercial tax rate is 2.8% compared to Toronto's 4.5%. This, with other factors such as a business friendly mayor, a suburban lifestyle, and an extensive public transit system has led many companies to relocate from Toronto to Mississauga (Canadian Business Magazine). In 2006, the City of Mississauga engaged an American company called Project for Public Places to redesign their city centre, and create a network of active transportation paths. This re-branding strategy can be seen as the deliberate cultural transformation in order to make the city more livable, and thereby attractive to investment and skilled labour.

In the case of Mississauga's affordable housing, the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association (ONPHA) released a report in 2006 stating that most of the workers employed in the service or unskilled manufacturing industries cannot afford to live in the Peel Region, without substantially eroding their financial well being. A ten year waiting list for affordable housing in Peel is among the highest in the province (ONPHA, 2006). In 1994, four out of ten people in emergency shelters were working poor. Whereas Mississauga has engaged in a decisive place

marketing strategy, affordable housing provision falls under the Peel Region authority; this political structure replicates similar constraints Canadian municipalities face under their respective provincial governments. In 2007, Peel Region received 6.4 million from the Provincial government for construction and maintenance of affordable housing.

Calgary

Calgary has outpaced all other Canadian cities in terms of its economic growth, primarily driven by the oil and gas industry (Teplova, 2006). In Calgary's case, the local administration is trying to catch up to the economic growth through social infrastructure provision. In 2003, poverty rates in Calgary increased for the second consecutive year, to 17 percent (Teplova, 2006). Alberta's retention rate for immigrants is the lowest in Canada, with 30% of economic immigrants leaving (Calgary Herald, May 9, 2007). Teplova writes about the negative impacts of unsustainable growth such as the impacts of increased sprawl, poor environmental conditions, and growing poverty on the general health of the population. As Calgary depends on attracting and retaining skilled labour, municipal officials are struggling with developing transit systems and affordable housing.

City, regional and provincial officials have developed a series of solutions seeking to mitigate the worst of this crisis. Provincial administrators completed Alberta's Affordable Housing Strategy in March of 2007. In April of the same year, the Alberta government responded to the task force report with $285 million for affordable housing and homelessness funding. "Housing is an important issue for Albertans and a top priority for our government," said Premier Ed Stelmach. "We are delivering with increased funding for rent supplements, supports for shelters and homeless initiatives and affordable housing units" (Government of Alberta, 2007). The goal is to build 11,000 affordable housing units in the next three years. However, the province did not implement temporary rent controls as the Task Force recommended, to ease the financial burden of tenants living in market housing (Edmonton Journal, April 26, 2007).

In her recommendations for Calgary, Teplova (2006) makes the case for diversifying the local economy. She brings attention to some of the drawbacks of strong dependence on the oil and gas industry: this includes the detrimental effects of accelerated and unsustainable growth which can involve noticeable health costs arising from sprawl, such as poor environmental conditions, growing poverty, and socio-economically segregated neighbourhoods. Mississauga, although more established, has similar concerns, with sprawling suburban growth making efficient transit systems difficult to establish, while housing prices make the city unaffordable for its' working poor.

Towards Sustainable Cities

"Sustainability" is a useful catchphrase for city administrators looking to develop long term strategic directions. In essence it captures the interconnectedness of three important goals for city-regions: economic development, social equity and environmental protection. Campbell (1999) writes that sustainable development lies somewhere between these tensions, and can never be reached directly, only approximately. If sustainability includes social equity, then a central component of cities' strategic direction must be to ensure that their residents are securely housed.

However, upper level Canadian governments are not providing a long term vision or secured funding for ongoing affordable housing construction and maintenance. Local municipalities, who depend on development levies as central sources of revenue, allow developers to build in unsustainable ways, leading to unaffordable condominiums downtown and sprawling suburbs at cities' peripheries. For developers financing housing construction in Toronto, it is not profitable to build units costing less than $1,500 a month, which means that in order to meet the "affordability" benchmark, residents need to earn $60,000 a year (Falvo, 2007). Yet, as argued by the Ontario Board of Commerce and the Toronto Board of Trade, prosperous cities need housing for all levels of income earners. Falvo supports a federal housing policy for non-profit housing provision would include funding capital costs (land, construction) as well provincially funded annual operating subsidies in order to maintain Canadian affordable housing.

At this point it becomes paramount to reintroduce the notion of governance into the debate surrounding sustainable cities and the provision of affordable housing as local governance might be seen as the answer to sustainable goals for city regions. However research has shown that citizens often come together around place-based identities; community associations are one such example. Here, NIMBYism is an oft cited example of the fortress behaviour such place-based initiatives can take when deliberating affordable housing options. More positive examples include municipalities such as Canmore and Whistler, that have launched "perpetual affordable housing programs," due to average family homes costing over $600,000. These small scale programs have focused on families' ability to purchase homes.

The federal government recently expressed their financial commitment to municipalities by extending the Gas Tax until 2013 and increasing the GST rebate from 57 to 100%. Together, this means a contribution of approximately $3 billion a year to Canadian municipalities. Securing municipalities financial autonomy is one strategy for ensuring more sustainable growth, as they will not need to depend as heavily on developers' levies and raising property taxes. However, federal and provincial government leadership is still essential in developing policies designed to ensure the provision of affordable housing, especially lower-end market housing and subsidized housing for a wide diversity of residents, thereby ensuring that communities across Canada can thrive economically and socially.

Conclusion

The growth of city-regions' importance on the world stage has dictated new roles for cities. Municipal governments in Canada, while economically and politically constrained, are balancing the economic, political and social demands of their residents. Understanding that social equity and environmental protection can lose out when economic growth is the only focus, leads to a deeper understanding of the complexities city officials face when engaged in long term planning, and the daily management of urban centers.

Arguing the centrality of affordable housing to municipalities' overall wellbeing by using social infrastructure as an entry point has been a useful exercise. Housing provides the physical link to accessing further forms of city infrastructure. This allows for citizen's political, social and economic inclusion and integration into their city. Recent provincial government funding announcements for local housing initiatives have spurred interest in how municipalities will spend their funding. While there is no simple answer, Falvo's paper argues for a balanced policy mix for government involvement in subsidized housing. A closer look at some of the housing issues facing Canadian municipalities clearly shows that municipalities need to continue political pressure for a meaningful and ongoing federal role in affordable housing provision. At the same time, municipalities must continue to develop local housing strategies, and work together with non-profit and business groups to develop lasting partnerships for the ongoing provision of affordable housing.

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