Innie or Outie: What Kind of Neighbourhood Do You Live In?

Continuing our discussion on Ontario’s suburbs, this MPI Insight returns to the cities of Kingston, Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Windsor, Hamilton, and Oshawa, to study the dimension of housing. More specifically, where and when is housing being built and how has housing changed over time? We know from our previous Insight that the majority of residents in these Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) studied live in the outer suburbs. It follows that the majority of housing would be built after 1970. Along a time scale, downtown cores are evidently the oldest, inner suburbs grew in the postwar-1970 years, and the outer suburbs are the more recent extensions of inner-ring suburbs. Outer suburbs do not preclude homes built before 1970 — this depends on the growth history of the region — but are rather defined by geography and a particular kind of design, dominated by curvilinear streets and cul-de-sacs. Exhibit 1 shows that an average 67.4% of homes found in the outer suburban Census Tracts of the selected CMAs were indeed built after 1970. These statistics were collected in the 2006 Canadian census, so that figure would be even greater today. Appropriately, the inner suburbs average 50.2% of homes built in the 1946–1970 postwar years, and downtowns display the highest proportion of pre-1946 housing. Both inner suburbs and downtowns display infill and redevelopment, with 27.5% and 28.2% (respectively) of homes being built after 1970, when these areas would already have been built up by that point.

When we examine homebuilding across CMAs in Exhibit 2, we can confirm that the most heavily weighted outer suburban cities (Oshawa and Kitchener-Waterloo) in the previous Insight are also dominated by post-1970 housing development. Hamilton and Windsor experienced relatively more housing development between 1946 and 1970 than the other cities. Windsor expresses this with a higher proportion of inner suburbs than any other city, although the same cannot be said of Hamilton where the extent of inner suburbs is much less remarkable than the large number of Census Tracts with downtown qualities.
Understanding when housing was built can give us a visual of what these cities look like. Below, using Hamilton as an example, pictures illustrate how housing and neighbourhood design changed over time, and correspondingly across downtowns, inner suburbs and outer suburbs. Note that downtown homes, can be quite large, but lack the expansive yards of suburban homes. Downtown homes were rarely built with garages — many came at a time when demand for automobile storage space was low. Inner suburban houses generally have driveways for a vehicle, but not necessarily garages. These houses are not as big as their outer suburban counterparts and many inner-ring areas are in a state of dilapidation or decline nowadays. Others are experiencing gentrification, much like we have seen a creeping wave of investment and face-lifting in areas such as West Queen West in Toronto. Outer suburban homes were all built when automobile use was ubiquitous, and are therefore dominated by garages and driveways, and generally sit on much larger lots than downtown or inner suburban homes.

The nature of each neighbourhood presents unique challenges to planners, politicians, and residents alike. For example, in outer suburban areas, density is generally so low, and streets are generally so meandering, that effective public transit becomes economically nonviable. Inner suburbs have been showcasing their own issues of failing public services, or in the case of gentri-fying neighbourhoods, displacement of lower income residents. Downtown areas contend with the problems surrounding old infrastructure and in some cases, extremely high property tax. Understanding the needs and conditions of Ontario cities at each ring of development, is key to establishing holistic policies and collaborative place-making.

The implications of these findings are considerable when we attempt to match homes with buyers. As described, most of the housing stock in the CMAs studied is suburban, predominantly outer-suburban. From the early postwar years, suburbs have been the cradle of the baby boom.
generation, which then grew up to purchase their own outer suburban homes and become parents of the millennial generation. However, surveys show that not only are these baby boom empty-nesters pushing demand for smaller properties and walkable neighbourhoods, but their millennial children are not interested in the outer suburban homes that will flood the market as older owners deem them too much work. Research shows that millennials are far more attracted to smaller dwellings with easy access to amenities and the freedom not to own a car. This combined with growing baby boom demand for low maintenance, high amenity living may thrust our newest housing stock in the outer suburbs into a downward spiral of divestment and declining values.¹

On the other hand, neighbourhoods with walkable streets and greater access to amenities like parks, retail, and cultural sites, may feature older housing stock but attract the most investment and redevelopment in the future.² In the middle sit the inner suburbs which present a toss up situation. They feature some of the least desirable housing on the market, and have been subject


to years of eroding public and social services, however their relative centrality and grid pattern streets make these neighbourhoods ideal targets for meaningful redevelopment. It remains to be seen how brand new housing in the outer suburbs will fare 20 years from now, and how the inner suburbs will transform for better or worse. However, with market research would suggest that it’s not a bad time to invest in housing downtown.

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