

## **Designing for Civility**

*by Avi Friedman*

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I appreciate the effort that Canadians make to decorate the exteriors of their homes on special occasions. Ghosts and pumpkins appear on Halloween, elaborate lighting arrangements brighten the Christmas season, and seasonal flags and wreaths add colour and cheer at other times of year.

I used to wonder why Canadians invest so much in something that lasts for such a short time. My instinctive answer was tradition but, after more thought, I decided that a strong community bond was the essential element behind their efforts.

Being part of a community means that we all contribute our share in an effort to create a common bond. There are no rules or regulations as to how a community should function. Civility is the one guiding light for community behaviour. We behave in a certain way because we are part of a civil society.

Montrealers tend to take signs of civil behaviour for granted. We assume that in all societies people look after the outsides of their homes just as we do. But this is not the case. Such care is the result of cultural attitudes, wealth, and tradition.

There are many measures that can help turn a row of houses into a community. Some measures are social but many are physical. There are signals that a friendly homeowner will project to the street. Planting flowers on the front lawn or in a planter box on a windowsill in the springtime is such a signal. Going to the market and selecting flowers requires the investment of both time and money, yet it has become a ritual for Montrealers. Flowers make a home look more distinguished, and when most homeowners on the block plant flowers, the street looks distinguished as well.

Holiday decorations also contribute to the bonding of a community. As the ethnic origins of Canada's population become more diverse, these adornments help to celebrate our diversity. Placing a wreath on the door or hanging seasonal or national flags from the porch are symbols of response to a common hidden code of civil behaviour.

The tendency is to believe that it takes years for a community to bond socially. That can be the case, but certain design strategies can help accelerate the process by physical means. Using such strategies is especially important given the current trend to spend more time at home, away from the company of neighbours.

Most cities have zoning by-laws specifying that new developments must include green space. The way these spaces are planned has a crucial impact on an area's sense of community. Creating several small parks, rather than a single big one, tends to draw together people from nearby streets. Parks with play structures or wading pools are outstanding places for neighbours to get to know each other more intimately. An allotment garden where people can grow their own vegetables is another land use that makes a place green and at the same time brings neighbours together.

Street benches and lampposts are some of the features that have disappeared from the

sidewalks of new developments. A public bench gives the community a place where acquaintances who happen to run into each other can sit and talk in comfort. For the elderly especially, a bench can be a handy resting place after an evening stroll.

Leaving a strip of land between the sidewalk and the street allows people to tend not only to their own front yards but also to the public domain itself. Creating an outdoor space where the community can gather on national holidays is another way to turn a development into a neighbourhood. The space can have a stage, a gazebo, or a fountain to provide a focal point.

The home itself can also be designed to facilitate public gestures. Unfortunately, in recent years porches have been dropped from the facades of new houses, and planter boxes are rarely included on handrails and windowsills. Bringing these features back would be a step forward if the goal is to create a livable community.

When Canadians go looking for a new house, we tend to focus only on our quest for personal comfort indoors. Homebuyers visiting model homes rarely look for, or ask about, the features of the public domain. Of course, if the development is not yet built, it's hard to know how the area will look or feel when completed. Yet, if we make the effort to find out about the development's planned public parks, streetscapes, and planter boxes, we can improve our chances of ultimately living in a community that will contribute as much to our environmental comfort as does the pleasure of homecoming.

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