

THE VANCOUVER SUN

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The New Suburbia

Surrey's East Clayton is one of the products of a North American housing revolution. Like many revolutions, it was long and sometimes bitter. Unlike many revolutions, it brought the dream to life through compromise



BY WILLIAM BOEI
VANCOUVER SUN

Most evenings when the weather's good, you'll find Mark and Lisa Peters sitting on their front porch, keeping an eye on their two young daughters and chatting with the neighbours. It's an early sign that East Clayton, one of North America's first attempts to build a new kind of suburb — a sustainable community — might be working.

That's good news for the academics, land owners, developers, builders, planners and politicians who have been butting heads over the project since the mid-1990s.

The hope is that East Clayton, a subdivision that's being carved out of the hobby farms and over-sized, tree-shaded lots in the uplands of eastern Surrey, will turn out to be the 21st-century equivalent of Levittown, N.Y., the legendary prototype for the post-Second-World-War suburbs where millions of baby boomers grew up and where many of them eventually grew alienated.

Communities based on sustainable development principles are meant to be healthier places to live and easier on the environment than post-war suburbs, which have been linked to everything from heart disease and obesity to chronic flooding and rising air pollution.

The Peters were among the first to move into a new home in East Clayton.

There are no driveways in their block of 70th Avenue, no clutter of campers, trailers, boats and parked cars, no double-garage doors turning blind eyes to the street.

In building industry jargon, the lots are "rear-loaded." The Peters' block and several others in East Clayton are being built with rear laneways and garages. The houses are set close to the street, with tiny front yards, and every house has a front porch.

Those are a few of the elements of a groundbreaking sustainable-development strategy that may transform city-planning principles in the Lower Mainland — and all of North America — in the coming decades.

The change could herald a revolution in urban development patterns as profound as the 20th-century march to the suburbs. But the new suburbs are barely into their infancy and their survival is not yet assured.

East Clayton homes have been selling briskly, but builders are still dubious about whether they can market sustainable communities after the real estate boom sags. It's not certain yet that some of



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Mark and Lisa Peters with Jayde, 3 (right), and Lauren, 5. Behind them, their home in East Clayton, one of North America's first sustainable suburbs: healthier to live in and easier on the environment than their post-war equivalents.

the drainage engineering the new suburbs need will work in the long run. Local governments are not yet firmly committed to requiring — or even allowing — the departures from conventional planning that sustainable development demands.

And there has not been time yet for home-buyers to demonstrate whether, given a choice, they will pick a place like East Clayton over a conventional community.

But the first people to settle in East Clayton seem to be taking to the new design, and it is making an instant difference in how they interact with their neighbours.

"We fell in love with the idea that the cars are parked in the back, with the porches in the front,"

says Mark Peters.

"We probably spend six out of seven nights sitting on the front porch. I've met every single one of my neighbours — a dozen so far — just by being out there.

"Not having the cars in the front makes people more approachable. They walk by on the side-walks. We've had lengthy conversations meeting our neighbours that way."

East Clayton is a 20-hectare (50-acre) subdivision, the first phase of a 250-hectare project that will eventually house 13,000 to 15,000 people and will itself be a part of the larger Clayton community, which is projected to have a population of 30,000 in 20 years.

Tucked between 72nd Avenue and the Fraser Highway just west of Langley, at the moment Phase One is a chaotic, dusty mix of newly built homes, half-framed houses and holes in the ground, crawling with trucks, backhoes, porta-potties and men in hardhats.

Up close, it's clearly no ordinary subdivision. Besides rear laneways, it has small lots, narrow streets, and is laid out in rectangular grids instead of curving crescents and cul-de-sacs. Single and multi-family housing stand cheek by jowl instead of being segregated. Odd-looking bits of grating and pipe protrude from the lawns.

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