

NEW UR

Nineteen years ago, Max LeMarchant went to a presentation by U.S. architect Andres Duany was giving in Markham, Ontario and heard about a bold new concept in community design.

LeMarchant, who planned to develop property he and his partners had on the western fringe of Cobourg, a small town on Lake Ontario 110 kilometres east of Toronto, was excited by what he heard.

The idea was to create from scratch a walkable, mixed-use neighbourhood designed for pedestrians, yet able to accommodate cars and public transit. Parks, small shops and community buildings would be within minutes' walk from each home and the neighbourhood and its architecture would reflect local history, ecology and culture.

"The minute I heard Andres Duany talk, I knew he was who we needed. I flew to Florida as soon as I could, went to Seaside, then met with Andres, who was an incredibly compelling, committed person," LeMarchant says.

Duany and his wife Elizabeth Plater-Zyber, considered the founders of New Urbanism, created the master plan for Seaside, the first New Urbanism community

in North America, in the early 1980s in the Florida Panhandle. Developer Robert S. Davis and his wife Daryl wanted to create an old-fashioned beach town with charming wood-framed cottages and Duany and Plater-Zyber modelled Seaside after small towns they visited on a road trip throughout the American south. The whimsical pastel coloured-houses in Seaside, all of them different, are built around a downtown retail centre and amenities include a post office, fire hall, chapel, etc. Just as important as the physical buildings is the sense of community engagement Seaside has fostered.

But 20 years ago, New Urbanism, known then as neotraditional planning, was considered a weird, fringe idea that went against the grain of typical suburban development, which glorified the car. With its small, walkable streets, houses with porches out front and garages at the back, and buildings scaled to the surroundings, New Urbanism was the antithesis of urban sprawl, thus not widely popular.

Today, it is being embraced as a cornerstone of sustainable living, given concerns about peak oil, climate change and obesity rates. Government policies such as Ontario's Green Belt and Places to Grow legislation, and the U.S.



LEED for Neighbourhoods (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) are dictating denser, mixed use, pedestrian-friendly developments close to transit, shopping, civic buildings and green space.

“It very much is the way to do things nowadays,” says LeMarchant. “Communities need mixed use and to be designed for pedestrians, which are New Urbanism principles. (Mississauga mayor) Hazel McCallion is completely embracing New Urbanism. It really is becoming mainstream. It still has lots of opportunity to grow, but is a very recognized and desired way to do things.”

Even two decades ago, LeMarchant was convinced New Urbanism was the right fit for the historic town of Cobourg and he and his partners became Duany’s first private sector clients in Ontario.

“Max is a very sincere and well-studied person and knew what New Urbanism was about,” says Duany, who conceptualized the master plan for New Amherst. “Cobourg was an interesting small town and we really got into it. We went to see Gilbert and Sullivan at the local theatre, we were treated beautifully by the local

people. We not only look at place physically. We thought it was a fantastically charming very English town and civilized. And you couldn’t get a better developer.”

Duany says the projects he designs “have to be locally calibrated” not only stylistically, but on a deeper level and he and his team studied precedents and the “aspirations of place” to create a plan that would mesh cohesively with Cobourg’s existing culture and heritage.

Cobourg, steeped in history, has a small-town atmosphere. But it is also sophisticated and urbane, thanks to its long tradition of theatre and the arts, upscale new condominium developments along its waterfront and a growing collection of boutique shops and bistros. And it has links to downtown Toronto, with VIA Rail and Highway 401 readily accessible.

For more than a decade, the ambitious plans for New Amherst were trapped in limbo due to multiple factors, including a bitter boundary dispute between the Town of Cobourg and neighbouring Hamilton Township. A developer with less tenacity would have given up, but LeMarchant persevered.

Today, New Amherst is unfolding as a village within a larger village and promises to be one of the finest



Clockwise from the top left: New Amherst - extra wide porches provide ample space for dreaming; uninterrupted sidewalks for a pedestrian friendly community; views of the neighbourhood from large porches



“A lot of people think New Urbanism is about rear-lane garages, but the real concept is to create a neighbourhood that’s comfortable for pedestrians through things like street widths and architectural vernacular,”



examples of New Urbanism in Canada. More than 110 pretty Regency and Ontario Gothic cottages, elegant townhouses and stately Georgian two-storey houses, inspired by local architecture, have been built around the central town square and its clock tower. The Boulevard – the main street of New Amherst with a mix of retail and professional spaces and residential condominiums – is under construction.

“It is unfolding as we envisioned, but holding the vision together for a period of time was difficult,” admits LeMarchant.

Phase 3 of New Amherst has been launched and with it, a new building company, New Amherst Homes, started by the development’s partners William O’Malley, Rae Carruthers and LeMarchant. Homes in the previous two phases were constructed by two local custom home building companies.

LeMarchant says the new company “puts us in a better position to deliver the consistency of vision, the detailing we want and the level of quality we expect.”

Garages are tucked to the rear of homes, creating picturesque streetscapes, and streets are narrow with sidewalks on both sides. Front porches encourage camaraderie between neighbours.

There are parks within two minutes’ walk of every home, including the clock tower park, the Barn Park with the foundation of an old barn at its centre, and a linear park running through the centre of the development. Eventually, up to 1,000 homes will be built on 54.6 hectares of the 141-hectare site.

“One thing we realized is a lot of residents here are really not experts on New Urbanism or necessarily even familiar with term,” explains LeMarchant. “They really like the variety and pedestrian feel and quality of the neighbourhood. There is a lot of pride in the neighbourhood and seems to be high level of community engagement. They enjoy living here and appreciate a nice sense of community and neighbourliness.”

The current residents also appreciate the pedestrian-friendly aspects and many of them regularly stroll through New Amherst’s streets with their dogs.

“A lot of people think New Urbanism is about rear-lane garages, but the real concept is to create a neighbourhood that’s comfortable for pedestrians through things like street widths and architectural vernacular,” LeMarchant says. “If you build a neighbourhood that’s nice to walk in, people will walk. Even for biking, smaller streets are just so much nicer to ride on. Big wide roads don’t feel safe. Here, you don’t feel threatened by the automobile.

“New Urbanism is a kit of a lot of parts and more complex than a standard subdivision. You have to follow the rules and do it as purely as possible and orchestrate the individual parts if you are going to set a project apart.”

Duany is not the only prominent New Urbanist involved with New Amherst; the latest house plans were reviewed by Mike Watkins, the site architect for another famous New Urbanism development, Kentlands in Maryland (one of the first in the U.S.); and The Boulevard has been designed by Victor Buccholz of Looney Ricks Kiss of Memphis, Tennessee.

LeMarchant has used a fair bit of local and Canadian talent in New Amherst, including Behan Construction for servicing, as well as architects Jim Fryette and Andrew Smith. The house plans represent the work of a variety of

architects, as LeMarchant and Duany believe a successful New Urbanism community requires a mix of styles and talents for the greatest success.

But “the Bible” for all of the homes is architect Marianne Cusato’s book *Get Your House Right* to ensure individual details and proportions are correct. Cusato is best known for designing the 300-square-foot hurricane-proof Katrina Cottage for homeless survivors of Hurricane Katrina. The cottages were sold in kit forms in U.S. home improvement stores.

She has designed one of New Amherst’s house plans, the Cusato. The 1,771-square-foot, two-storey home has the flexibility to adapt to the owners’ changing needs. It has a main floor bedroom with private entrance which can be used as a master retreat, or for an adult child or elderly parent.

Before Watkins reviewed the newest house plans for the community, he extensively researched architecture of Cobourg and southern Ontario.

“I reviewed the plans for their contribution to the neighbourhood and street life and for the authenticity of the traditional details,” said Watkins. “The hope is that these neighbourhoods reflect the unique character of area.”

Watkins says the idea is not to create exact replicas of the traditional regional homes: “The idea behind New Urbanism is to do whatever works best in the long run, whether it has been working well for over 100 years or was conceived 20 minutes ago. That’s how we’ve built settlements for generations. For the most part, there is an effort at common sense decisions to create a comfortable quality of life. It may be an old idea, it may be a new one.”

Victor Buchholz of Looney Ricks Kiss says the long germination period for New Amherst will ultimately pay off.

“That’s what you need for really great places,” he says. “So often, developers try to make them happen in five years. Whatever they’re doing at New Amherst, they’re doing it right. It takes a longer time period than traditional development projects might take. It’s like cooking. If you want to make a good dish, you just can’t heat the oven up to 800 degrees and cook it faster. Great places need time.”

He says his mission was to establish “a special moment to brand New Amherst” with the main corner of The Boulevard. Buchholz came to Cobourg to acquaint himself with the town and its unique history and architecture. He found the town to be British Colonial in character,



with a resemblance to classic neighbourhoods in Boston.


For the condominiums, “Max wanted those to be very distinctive for individuals looking for something unique in the marketplace; he wanted the residences to be unique and have a special quality so there’d be a reason for someone to buy.”

For The Boulevard itself, Bucholz wanted to create a great pedestrian street and though the car is accommodated, “it doesn’t live at the front door. It lives at the side door or underneath the building.”

The Boulevard’s signature corner building sits on a lot that comes to a point and provided an opportunity to create a distinctive landmark, with a cupola with a domed roof, thus creating the architectural prominence the street needed. A restaurant will likely go into the ground floor space.

“It really is a special place and what we love about working within DPZ (Duany Plater-Zyberk) plans that is specific lots and streets are keyed up for long views and this is one of them,” says Bucholz. “It was designated in the master plan to have a signature building that captured long views. In DPZ plans, you turn a corner and look down and there’s a wonderful vignette that’s almost poetic in the way that it composes itself in the landscape.”

Now with New Amherst evolving as it was planned, LeMarchant is satisfied that his, Carruthers’ and O’Malley’s hard-won vision is coming to fruition.

“The biggest challenge in doing something new is always fraught with risk and there is a lot of research and development work required and there’s a cost to that,” says LeMarchant. “The R and D idea isn’t as prominent in the (development and building) field, but that’s what we’ve done, trying new things, implementing new processes and bringing in new people. If you do the same thing as what’s being done everywhere else, it’s easier. But New Amherst was a bit of a dream, to create this addition to Cobourg that is something unique and outstanding. What happens with New Urbanism communities is they are a combination of things that adds value. It takes time to be realized to create that unique sense of place that people value.” 

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Seaside view

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Kentlands Town Center

Photographer Simon Hare



ARCHITECT ANDRES DUANY AND HIS WIFE ELIZABETH PLATER-ZYBERK