

# LOTS, PLOTS, AND BLOCKS: SOME WINNIPEG EXAMPLES OF SUBDIVISION DESIGN

by H. J. Selwood

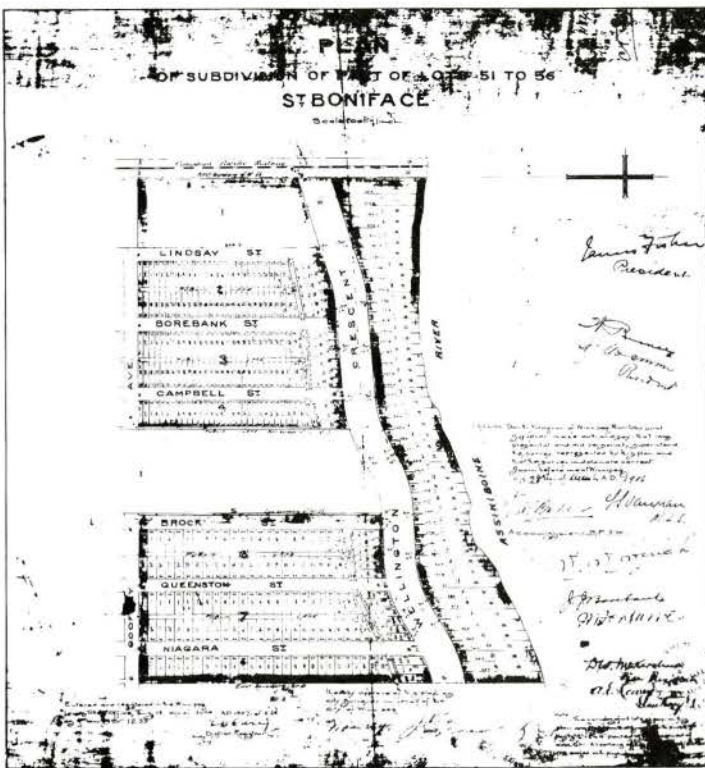


Figure 1. Plan 1235, Winnipeg Land Titles Office; although not registered until 1907, this plan nevertheless offers a good illustration of the patchwork of grid-iron plans that was extended far into the outskirts of Winnipeg in its boom years. Note the narrow, 25 foot and 40 foot frontage lots.

The most distinctive characteristic of Winnipeg's subdivision styles is their lack of distinction. Yet land subdivision practices in Winnipeg have changed considerably through the city's history. Generally, however, the changes have been sequential, with the varying styles conforming to the dictates of prevailing technology and widely accepted conventions of land promoters, surveyors, and planners. Thus simpler, rectilinear or grid-iron patterns predominate in the inner city and suburbs, whereas more complex modified grids and curvilinear forms prevail in the outer suburbs. Winnipeg's flat terrain has placed few constraints on surveyors' subdivision designs. Nevertheless, the influence of the rivers and the first survey lines is still readily discernable on contemporary maps of Winnipeg.

The basis of Winnipeg's present-day cadastre is the system of long, narrow river lots laid out in the early 1800s for the original white settlers at Red River. These river lots, ranging in width between ten and twelve chains and up to four miles in depth, had by the 1870s been extended a distance of some forty miles along the banks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. With few exceptions, subdivision activity has taken place within these river lots, on the Hudson's Bay Company Reserve in central Winnipeg, and on the Catholic Church lands in St. Boniface.

As the city has grown, these formerly agricultural lands have been taken up by land promoters, speculators or developers and parcelled up into smaller lots appropriate for urban living. For simplicity sake we can divide this process up into four periods of peak activity and stylistic preference: the early grid-iron plans of the late nineteenth century land boom, the City Beautiful designs of the early twentieth century, the post Second World War modified grid, and the contemporary comprehensive designs.

Comprehensiveness was certainly not the byword of the early subdivision designs. In stark contrast, was the wholesale, often conflicting pattern of speculative activity indulged in by independent land agents and promoters during the frenzied land booms that hit Winnipeg in the 1870s and 'eighties (Figure 1). Speed was imperative, and the regular grid-iron plan of design was the universal means to that end. Lots, plots, and blocks were parcelled up using the standard measurement modules of the period. Roads and property boundaries were given dimensions of the sixty-six foot chain, of the 100 foot unit, or some simple division thereof. The only constraints were the river lot boundaries and these were frequently overridden when speculators were able to acquire adjacent properties. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how lot sizes were systematically varied according to their accessibility and pretentiousness. The more accessible parcels were made smaller in size, whereas the high prestige lots were given larger dimensions and more spacious surroundings.<sup>2</sup>

Crescentwood, subdivided in 1902, was one of Winnipeg's earlier prestigious subdivisions. Here the developer actually dedicated a block of land within the subdivision for recreational purposes. The park plot, Enderton Park, was later donated to the city. It is also noteworthy that the Crescentwood subdivision incorporates curvilinear street forms even though these are dictated by irregularities in the property boundaries. The curved street plan, parkland, large lot sizes, and proximity to the river, attest to the high quality of the Crescentwood subdivision.<sup>3</sup>

Although at the turn of the century the grid-iron plan still dominated subdivision designs, by this time the City Beautiful Movement had achieved a widespread following in both the United States and Canada. Promoters of the City Beautiful Movement eagerly demonstrated the inadequacies of the grid-iron plan when espousing more comprehensive designs. They drew attention to the need for recreation space, and called for more imaginative subdivision designs that incorporated landscaping principles. Given that the city was then enjoying its most prosperous years, it is not therefore surprising that, in the first decade of the century, Winnipeg saw City Beautiful Movement ideas being adopted locally.

The area concerned was Tuxedo. Tuxedo, still the most prestigious neighbourhood in the metropolitan area of Winnipeg, was designed to be just that by its promoters. The very name "Tuxedo", copied from the prestigious neighbourhood of New York, indicates this to be so. Over the years much of Winnipeg's Tuxedo has been re-designed and re-planned, but elements of the original design still exist on the northeastern

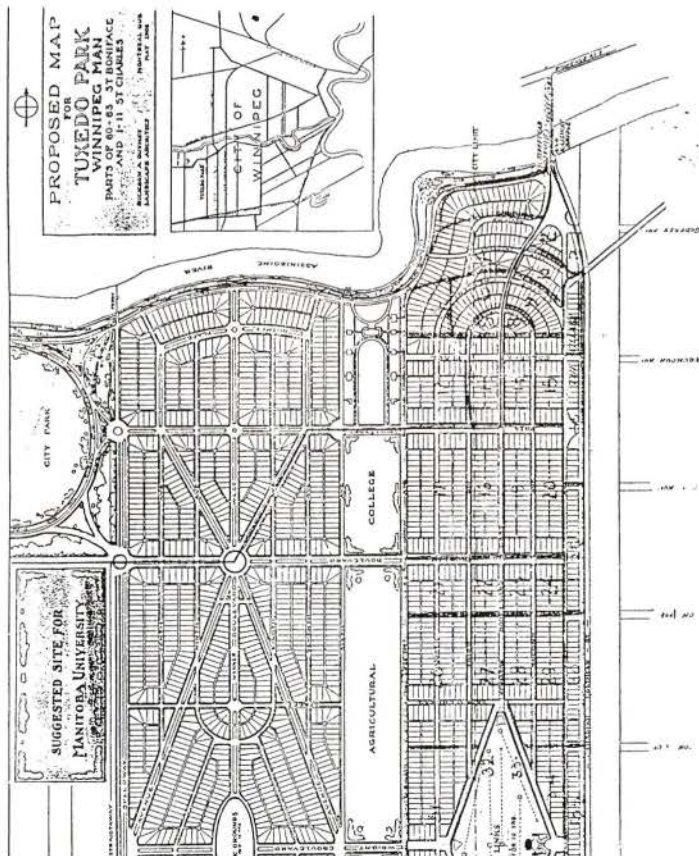


Figure 2. The northern portion of the proposed master plan of subdivision produced for Tuxedo Park around 1906 by Rickson Outhet of Montreal. The western section was registered as Plan 1374 at the Winnipeg Land Titles Office on 7 April 1908.

borders of the district (Figure 2). This area, centred on Kenaston Boulevard, still possesses the curvilinear symmetric street layout proposed in the original plan. It illustrates a definite attempt to introduce some aesthetic quality to the subdivision while also accommodating the graceful curve of the streetcar line. Other elements of the original plan included: a golf course, athletic grounds, wide boulevards with lands segregated by landscaped, treed grass strips, separate allowances for streetcars, and segregated lanes providing 'speedways' to allow automobiles to traverse the subdivision unhindered. The artistically contrived, Baroque style of the Tuxedo subdivision indicates the extent to which the City Beautiful Movement's ideas had been accepted by the designer, Rickson Outhet of Montreal. Although the vast majority of Tuxedo was never built according to the original design, sufficient of the original subdivision still remains to mark the diffusion of City Beautiful Movement ideas to Winnipeg. The emergence of a generous concern for aesthetics suggests that Winnipeg has matured beyond the initial frontier town phase and caught up with the planning ideas becoming prevalent in more mature urban centres.

Street maps of Greater Winnipeg produced around 1910-1912 show that City Beautiful ideas had fairly widespread application. However, most of the subdivisions laid out at the time went the way of the early Tuxedo subdivision. Lack of demand resulted in their being sold for taxes or otherwise abandoned. One of the few other surviving remnants is central Transcona, where the National Transcontinental Railway established a townsite for employees in its neighbouring workshops.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, it is the grid-iron plan which dominates Winnipeg's pre-Second World War development.

So excessive was the expansion of Winnipeg's cadastre before the First World War, there was simply no need for any additional subdivision activity. It is to the post-Second World War period that we must therefore turn in order to trace developments in subdivision design as they occur in the Winnipeg area.

Almost immediately after the Second World War a new subdivision was prepared for the Wildwood area in Fort Garry (Figure 3). This subdivision dramatically illustrates the evolution of planning thought that had occurred in the inter-war years.<sup>6</sup> The Wildwood subdivision is developed according to the Radburn concept of residential area design.<sup>7</sup> That is, it is based on the notion of the super block; an area contained by a surrounding road system with only limited traffic access to the interior. Lots in the Wildwood area are built around a series of narrow bays or crescents leading off from the encompassing South and North Drives. This leaves the interior of the development free for communal open spaces linked by footpaths for pedestrians only. Housing in the Wildwood area faces on to the interior green spaces. The net result is a pleasing, varied and informal type of layout which avoids many of the pitfalls of the grid-iron and other geometrically rigid designs. Hazardous, fast-moving automobile traffic is greatly reduced, visual monotony diminished, while open spaces provide an almost rustic environment. Ironically, it has only been relatively recently that Wildwood has been 'discovered' by discerning homeseekers.

For the most part, more conventional designs have prevailed. Although less radical than Wildwood, these do nevertheless recognize the technological impact of the automobile and attempt to avoid the uniformity of the grid-iron plan. Postwar subdivisions have normally been designed with a hierarchical pattern of roads with only limited frontage on to arterial streets. Most of the housing is served by cul-de-sacs, bays, ways or crescents looping away from peripheral or central arteries. In order subdivisions such as Silver Heights (Figure 4), the street system still very closely resembles the rectilinear pattern of the earlier grid plans.<sup>8</sup> The Silver Heights subdivision, can in fact be described as merely a modified grid. More recently, there has been a greater tendency to avoid four-way street crossings—replacing them with the safer L-shaped T-junction. Another automobile induced innovation is the wider frontage lot, capable of accommodating the triple frontage, ranch-style bungalow with double garage. Nowadays too, the streets are laid out in a more curvilinear form, as for example, in River Park South (Figure 5).

Comprehensiveness in urban design is now the rule. Increased scale in the building industry and more stringent municipal planning controls have led to the creation of extensive, planned districts. Subdivision plans of the larger tract developers now include provision for schools, commercial property and other neighbourhood services as well as parks, playgrounds, tot lots and other public open spaces.

The River Park South development in South St. Vital is a good example of this form of planning. Parts of the development are to contain quite large, prestigious lots. These higher priced parcels circle the edge of an artificial lake—a storm water retention pond. Much of the remainder of the subdivision is occupied by smaller, more compact single family residences which give way to duplexes and finally to large parcels for apartment blocks.

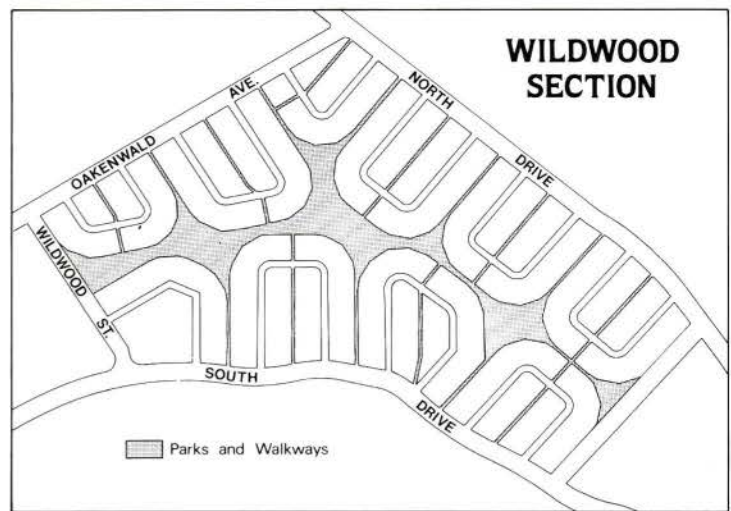


Figure 3. A sketch plan of Wildwood showing the system of crescent-shaped, 30 foot wide lanes serving housing that fronts on to 10 foot wide footpaths and parkland. The absence of garden fencing creates a natural park setting for the entire subdivision.

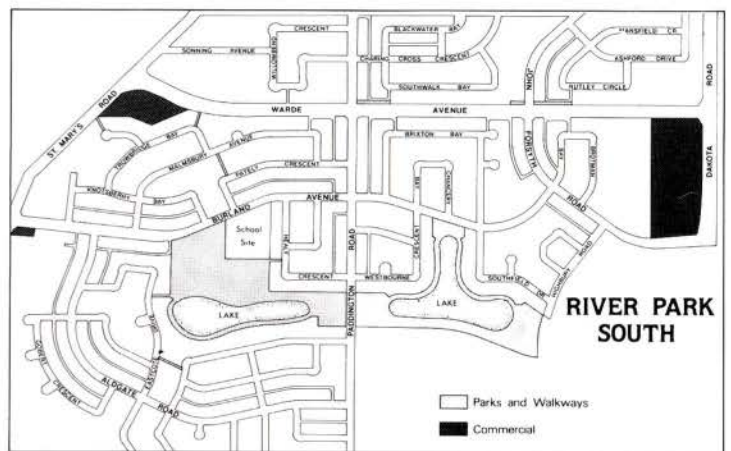


Figure 4. This plan of subdivision of Silver Heights, registered in 1950, shows a simple pattern of crescents and L-shaped streets that form a modified grid.

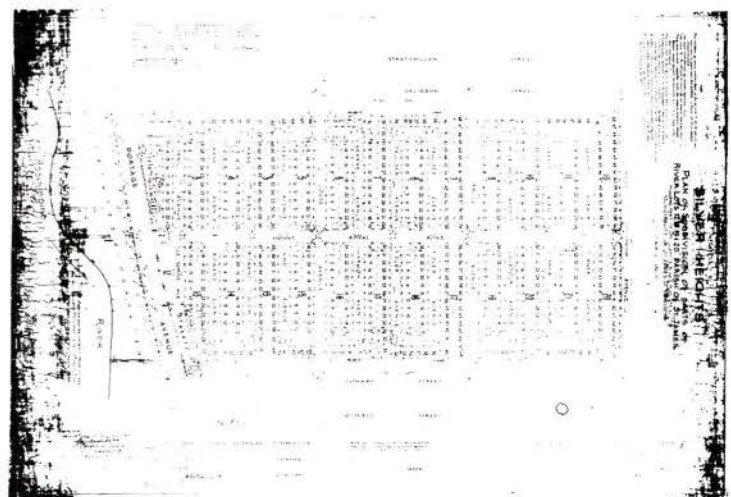


Figure 5. This sketch plan of River Park South in St. Vital illustrates the curved street pattern and comprehensiveness of the contemporary suburban subdivision.

Spiralling land and construction costs have meant that even in the outer suburbs, the newer subdivisions provide for mixed and higher density forms of housing. This often occurs within the context of the conventional subdivision form, the only modification being that log frontages are made appreciably narrower to accommodate duplexes or terrace housing. More dramatic is the Planned Unit Development (PUD), a reversion to Radburn principles; where apartments, terraces, or townhouse complexes are positioned on a large land parcel in clusters around a centralized parking area, the clusters linked by intervening areas of open space. These developments, in fact, represent a truer version of the original Radburn concept in that they produce mixed housing forms at a higher dwelling density than the Wildwood project. Good examples of PUD's are to be found in Willow Park, an interesting cooperative housing development in northwest Winnipeg.

Emerging from this discussion of subdivision design come some general principles that remain common to all periods. First is the concern for value; that is, the financial returns from the land after parceling it up. Second is the preoccupation with shapes. Third, is the notion of amenity, while fourth is the question of access. In various combinations, these four principles govern subdivision design. The first grid-iron subdivisions used simple shapes for speedy, cheap land conversion, with amenity being provided by larger lots and wider, more prominent roadways. In contrast, the most recent subdivisions and PUD's rely on more complex designs with mixed land uses, artful arrangement of open spaces and accessways so as to maximize returns while enhancing amenity. The universality of these principles is clearly demonstrated in these examples of subdivision design drawn from the Winnipeg cadastre.

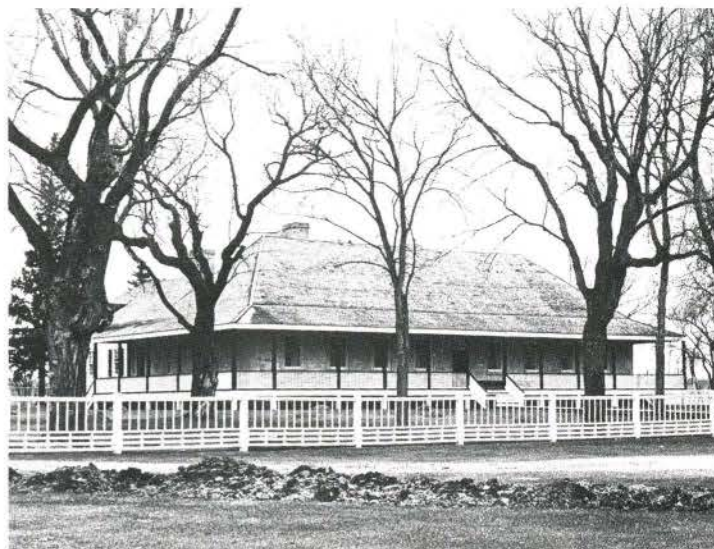
## NOTES

1. For a more detailed account of the original surveys, see H.E. Beresford, "Early Surveys in Manitoba," *Papers of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, Series III, (1954), pp. 9-15.
2. An account of the intensity, timing, and extent of land subdivision activity in the Winnipeg region is given in H. John Selwood, "Invisible Landscape: Premature Urban Subdivision in the Winnipeg Region," in John E. Welsted and John C. Everitt, eds., *Landscape Development and Boundary Influences in the Canadian Prairies*, (Regina: Regina Geographical Studies, No. 4, 1984), pp. 41-57.
3. Plan No. 700, surveyed by R.C. McPhillips and registered at the Winnipeg Land Titles Office on 23 September 1902.
4. See Plan No. 1374, surveyed by H. Paterson and registered at the Winnipeg Land Titles Office on 7 April 1908; also, "Proposed Map for Tuxedo Park," a promotional pamphlet produced circa 1906. Much of the original plan was replaced by one conceived by Frederick Olmsted, with C. Chataway the supervising surveyor. This plan was registered as Plan 1714 at the Winnipeg Land Titles Office on 31 October 1911.
5. See Plan No. 1504, surveyed by R.C. McPhillips and registered at the Winnipeg Land Titles Office on 28 September 1909.
6. Plan No. 4565, surveyed by S. Guttormsson and registered at the Winnipeg Land Titles Office on 3 May 1946.
7. For a description of the original Radburn proposal see James Bailey, ed., *New Towns in America*, (Washington: The American Institute of Architects, 1973), p. 8.
8. Plan No. 5090, surveyed by A.C. Findlay and registered at the Winnipeg Land Titles Office on 19 July 1950.

## Manitoba Government Publications

The following titles are available from the Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Historic Resources Branch.

- Archway Warehouse, Jail and Powder Magazine Norway House
- Brandon College
- Brandon Normal School
- Display Building Number 11, Brandon
- Grund Lutheran Church
- Isbister School, Winnipeg Paterson/Matheson House, Brandon
- St. James Church, Winnipeg
- St. Michael's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church, Gardenton
- Seven Oaks House
- The Emerson Courthouse and Town Hall Building.



## LOWER FORT GARRY NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK

by Greg Thomas

Sir George Simpson, the overseas Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company and its most dominant nineteenth century personality, was a very parsimonious individual. In one of his rare outbursts of extravagance in a career which spanned more than four decades, Sir George Simpson established what has endured to become one of Western Canada's most prominent heritage resources; Lower Fort Garry. Situated on the west bank of the Red River twenty miles north of Winnipeg, Lower Fort Garry National Historic Park contains the most significant assemblage of original structures to have survived from the Canadian fur trade era.

Remarkably, Lower Fort Garry's survival at all is more of an historical accident than a deliberate design. When Sir George chose the location in 1830 and appointed a talented builder and mason, Pierre Leblanc, to begin construction, he was intent upon the provision of a safe retreat for his English bride, Frances, and an administrative hideaway, far from the historic centre of settlement at the forks. Leblanc first built a substantial stone residence facing the river. Later this "Big House" was flanked by stone warehouses each three storeys high, seventy feet long and thirty feet wide. Within a few short years, however, Simpson recognized the folly of his decision and Upper Fort Garry was constructed as the company's administrative headquarters closer to the centre of economic activity at the forks of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers.

Lower Fort Garry, or the "stone fort" as it came to be known, was not abandoned. Its infrastructure of solidly built stone residences and warehouses were ideally located to serve at the Hudson's Bay Company's major trans-shipment and provisioning centre as well as an assembly point for the boat brigades which travelled the Red River-Portage-La Loche-York Factory route. This function was complemented by the company's decision in 1857 to launch a farm at the lower fort. A farming operation soon extended for more than a hundred acres, excluding pasturage for the fort's extensive livestock operations. To complete the fort's economic role, a small industrial complex was established on the south side of the fort which included a brewery/distillery, grist mill/saw mill and steamboat repair area. The fort's active involvement in the transportation revolution reached a peak in 1872, when the new steamer "Chief Commissioner" was built and launched from an impromptu shipyard south of the fort.

With the decline of the fur trade after 1870, the role of Lower Fort Garry began to evolve. The fort began to assume an institutional flavour in 1871 when the fort's warehouse building was transformed to serve as Manitoba's first penitentiary. Two years later the newly created North West Mounted Police force arrived for a lengthy training session before their dispatchment westward. Throughout this period, and indeed until 1911, the Hudson's Bay Company continued to own and operate Lower Fort Garry, primarily in the later years as a part-time summer residence for the company's governors. Ever adaptable, in 1913 the Lower Fort's buildings and grounds were taken over by the Motor Country Club of Winnipeg who operated the fort as an elite summer club retreat until 1962 when the Hudson's Bay Company transferred title to the property to the federal government.