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The production of a suburban main street:
Financialization and urban design in Halifax

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Abstract:

Given that planning policy calls for mixed use, higher densities, street-oriented facades, walkability, and high-quality urban design, what explains the kinds of segregated, low-density, auto-oriented designs and development patterns that appear in some suburban areas? Drawing on land sales data, field surveys, and interviews with urban professionals (planners, developers, brokers, elected councillors) in Halifax, Canada, we argue that processes of financialization are generating new opportunities for the mass production of suburban landscapes lined with specific types of buildings. Alongside land-use regulations and design guidelines intended to urbanize the suburbs by promoting urban forms and sensibilities, financial processes paradoxically reproduce traditional suburban stereotypes.

Keywords: financialization, suburb, urban design, apartment building

The production of a suburban main street: Financialization and urban design in Halifax

Since the 1970s, urban planning has increasingly sought to promote higher urban densities, mixed use, walkability, and high-quality design (Jacobs, 1961; Lynch 1981; Grant, 2002, 2006). Contemporary planning advocates such urban characteristics even in new suburban projects (Duany, *et al*., 2000; Hodge & Gordon, 2014). In this paper, we discuss a new suburban area in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to try to explain the form and pattern development is taking along the main street of a master-planned community. Although municipal plans and developer concepts envisioned suburban forms that might replicate urban patterns, analysis of the forms emerging reveal problems with achieving the vision. Planning, development, financial, and cultural processes contributed to creating a streetscape in which the scale of structures and their organization produces a suburban environment with segregated land uses that feels unattractive for walking, despite an overall design originally intended to implement new urbanism and smart growth principles. Our analysis identifies the key role that financialization – that is, processes turning real estate products into transactable financial assets – may be playing in facilitating a specific type of residential project, supported by permissive planning policies and contemporary consumer demands.

Like many Canadian cities, Halifax is changing rapidly. The year 2015 was the busiest in residential apartment construction since the early 1970s, with approximately 2500 apartment units under construction (CMHC, 2015). Several factors combine to stimulate the current real-estate development environment in the city. Relaxed commercial underwriting standards and low interest rates mean that developers can carry more debt with less equity (Weber, 2010). These factors lower the cost of construction loans and mortgages, which makes projects financially viable that previously were not. After the stock market crash of 2001, commercial property became an attractive investment, as investors became increasingly wary of stocks (Ip & Whitehouse, 2001). Population growth and interest in low-maintenance living increases demand for rental apartments. At the same time, regional policies and plans encouraging intensification and mixed use guided new development projects (Brewer & Grant, 2015).

Our research seeks to understand how financial investments may influence urban form in a suburb of a mid-sized city on Canada's Atlantic coast. We discuss the kinds of structures that non-traditional actors may be building, buying, and managing in new developments. We want to understand how local policies, together with real estate investment practices, may be shifting suburban development patterns. We are especially interested in explaining the kinds of urban design and land-use patterns emerging. We explore these questions through a detailed look at Larry Uteck Boulevard in the Halifax suburb of Bedford, Nova Scotia (Figure 1).

Figure 1- Map showing location of Larry Uteck Boulevard in Bedford South study area [source: authors]

We begin by briefly reviewing the impact of financialization on contemporary urban development before examining Halifax planning policies and development experiences in Bedford South. Analysis suggests that although higher density residential buildings are appearing in the suburbs, auto-oriented, functionally segregated, and relatively low-density patterns remain dominant. Many high-rise apartment structures lining Larry Uteck Boulevard have been erected by a single builder and sold to institutional investors such as pension funds and real estate investment trusts (REITs). Although the proportion of multi-unit dwellings has increased dramatically from that seen in Halifax suburbs in previous decades, land-use patterns seem resilient to change, and it is difficult to conclude that the suburbs are becoming more urban in character. The kinds of structures that appeal to institutional investors and the kinds of tenants that companies want to serve are not patterned in the landscape in the way that planners envision. Efforts to generate walkable, high-density, mixed-use, high-quality urban landscapes in new suburban areas are frustrated by financial and cultural processes that planners cannot readily influence.

Financialization and urban development

Capital plays a critical role in influencing the form and functions of suburban development (Ekers, *et al*., 2012). Public goods are transformed by the way they are financed (Weber, 2010). Infrastructure and housing, for example, can attract further private investment (Weber, 2010). Institutional investors—such as pension funds, insurers, and REITs—have developed a fondness for urban real estate investments to balance their investment portfolios (Weber, 2010). Many of these investments are in multi-family housing, because that can produce reliable returns over the life of the property. Hall (2012) notes that financial interests are moving into mundane assets and geographies as they seek opportunities for returns, while Rutland (2010) explains that financialization has influenced redevelopment in downtown Halifax. At present, however, we know relatively little about the effects of these processes on urban form and land use patterns, especially in suburban areas and for rental housing (Fields & Uffer, 2016).

The financial sector has grown in influence since the 1970s (Pike & Pollard, 2010; Rutland, 2010). Institutional investors have not traditionally been managers or owners of real estate; however, with low interest rates and an uncertain stock market, they have become increasingly interested in real estate as an asset class, capable of providing secure returns on investment (Van Loon & Aalbers, 2017). These entities pool money from various sources. Pension funds combine the retirement savings of individuals or groups of employees. Insurance firms aggregate funds from policyholders. REITs sell units on the stock market to raise money for property acquisition, and then seek regular returns to provide dividends to investors. These financial entities have acted in conjunction with changing norms of real estate finance to embed housing and other property assets into global capital markets (Rutland, 2010).

Rutland (2010) identifies major changes in the way real estate is financed that contribute to current conditions. First, insurance companies and pension funds have taken ownership positions in real estate; previously, many primarily provided debt financing. Second, the globalization of commercial banking and the advent of commercial mortgage-backed securities increased the amount of capital in the sector requiring deployment through providing debt financing for property purchase and development. Third, the advent of REITs and other property-holding companies provided investments in commercial real estate at low cost to individual investors interested in purchasing shares. Together, these changes allowed real estate to become more attractive to institutional investors and their shareholders (Rutland, 2010). Van Loon and Aalbers (2017) explain another factor: for long-term investors, such as pension plans, a building's value depends on perceived ability to sell the asset, thus decoupling value from the structure's civic address, though not entirely removing risk (Kirkpatrick, 2016). Institutional investors may distance themselves from the cities where they invest as they seek to maximize returns and minimize risks (Pani & Holman, 2014).

Institutional investors try to minimize risks by diversifying in the geography and property types where they invest (Ping & Roulac, 2007). As larger markets have become saturated, investors have looked more frequently at smaller cities like Halifax. Product types acquired include multi-family, hotel, industrial, office, and retail properties. As Ping and Roulac (2007) note, institutional investors generally see apartment properties as low risk. The proportion of multi-family housing in American pension fund real estate portfolios rose from 10.8% in 1997 to 24.3% in 2016, a 125% increase in investment (Ping & Roulac, 2007; NCREIF, 2016). Over recent decades, housing has become an important financial product that is packaged, traded, sold, and resold from various locations in the market.

Although multi-unit housing was traditionally seen as difficult to treat as a financial asset, after the stock market crash of 2001 several factors made it more attractive to investors (Fields & Uffer, 2016). With declining interest rates, relaxed commercial underwriting standards, and expansion of the secondary mortgage market, more capital was seeking new opportunities (Weber, 2010; Fields & Uffer, 2016). Innovations in data collection and analysis improved the ability of investors to understand rents, loan performance, and management costs, easing the risks of dealing with commercial properties (Fields & Uffer, 2016).

The ways that local governments regulate land use and development also affect financialization of real estate. In the last two decades, planners in North America have increasingly encouraged intensification as part of their efforts to promote smart growth and sustainability, although not always successfully (Filion, 2003, 2010; Grant, 2006, 2009; Filion, *et al*., 2016). Such efforts contribute to market opportunities for multi-unit residential projects by providing the requisite zoning and infrastructure necessary for growth. Contemporary planning promotes walkability and good quality design to try to make higher density districts more attractive and functional for residents. High housing costs and the increasing interest of millennials and retirees in urban living without maintenance worries have generated a strong market for apartment living (Moos, 2016; Burke, 2017). Some cities have explicitly encouraged investment by establishing special districts with tax incentives (Weber, 2010; Pacewicz, 2016); in such cases, planners may be encouraged to plan land uses in ways that facilitate capital deployment (Rutland, 2010; Savini & Aalbers, 2016).

Building properties as assets for investors can affect the form that structures exhibit. Developers and managers want buildings with the highest possible appraised value as collateral for loans (Crosby & Henneberry, 2016). Decisions about layout, fenestration, ceiling heights, materials, and parking become about maximizing asset and resale value. Crosby and Henneberry (2016) note that market specifications regarding design have led to homogenization of built form in London, UK. The need to maximize asset value or share price has become a major driver of design choices, leading to standardization in the public realm. Because commercial property can be traded like any other financial asset, the balancing of investor risk, return, and liquidity is increasingly influencing the urban fabric (Guironnet, *et al.,* 2016).

Local governments attempting to achieve specific urban design objectives around mixed uses, densities, housing types, parking requirements, and heights may find themselves dealing with developers and investors with detailed market specifications derived from valuation or sale purposes (Guironnet, *et al*., 2016). In the kinds of decisions made at a local level, the community design intentions about livability and amenity expressed in plans and policies encounter the logic of a market based on evaluating land and buildings as financial assets that can deliver long-term returns to investors.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-2008, some investors began to diversify their interests and explore new markets. After buying prime property in large cities, financial firms had too much money chasing too few assets, which raised prices and reduced returns (Wong, 2007). With considerable liquidity in Canadian commercial property markets, but few high-quality assets available, investors increasingly began to examine second-tier cities, like Halifax: centres where investment poses greater risk but potentially high profitability (Rutland, 2010; ULI/PWC, 2016). As Rutland (2010) noted, insurance companies, pension funds, and property holding companies have purchased many commercial and office properties in central Halifax: however, recent high vacancy rates in such spaces (Burke, 2016) have buyers looking at new options. Willwerth (2017) identifies the growing interest of institutional investors in suburban multi-unit residential structures. In the next section, we examine growth in part of suburban Halifax to understand the kinds of factors influencing the form of development appearing where institutional investors are active.

A suburban main street

Created by the Province of Nova Scotia in 1996 through the amalgamation of two cities (Halifax and Dartmouth), a town (Bedford), and the surrounding county, Halifax is a large regional municipality of approximately 5500 square kilometres, and home to around 403,000 people in 2016. The sprawling city-region has its major concentration of population around the Halifax peninsula. Approximately half of the housing stock in Halifax in 2016 was single-detached housing: a relatively low proportion by Canadian standards (Statistics Canada, 2017a, 2017b). Two-thirds of households contained only one or two persons, and 40% of households rented their dwelling units (Statistics Canada, 2017a). With a large cohort of university students and armed forces personnel, and growing interest in apartment living from persons over 55 years of age, Halifax has significant market demand for apartment units, combined with low vacancy rates (Burke, 2017). In that context, the number of apartment buildings added annually has significantly increased in recent years (Burke, 2017). The types of buildings accommodating units are also shifting. Where the 2006 census reported that 9.6% of dwelling units were in buildings of five or more storeys, by 2016 that proportion increased to 12.1% (Statistics Canada, 2007, 2017a). Halifax is experiencing a boom in apartment construction.

In this paper, we focus on suburban Bedford South, along the west side of Bedford Basin. Master-planned in the late 1990s by Clayton Developments (the largest residential developer in the region), Bedford South was intended to become a complete community with a mix of uses, higher densities, a range of housing types, and good transit service on over 600 acres (HRM, 2015; Brunet, 2017). Dotted with schools, commercial plazas, and multi-unit residential structures, the main street or spine for the development, Larry Uteck Boulevard (named after a deceased municipal councillor), connects the Bedford Highway Route 2 with the Bicentennial Highway 102. Low to medium-rise apartment buildings (4-12 storeys) have become a staple building form along the street.

We used mixed methods to conduct the study. First, we reviewed planning policies, reports, and media stories about developments in the area. We documented built form and streetscapes with site visits, photography, and satellite imagery (Figure 2). We examined sales information on structures built and sold in the area. Finally, we interviewed professionals working in the planning, real estate, and development industries, and elected officials in Halifax to gain insights into their perspectives on patterns emerging in Halifax.[1] The primary intent of the interview questions was to understand what is getting built, by whom, where, and how. We recorded and transcribed interviews for thematic analysis.

Figure 2: Air photos of the area that became Larry Uteck Boulevard, 2003 to 2017

Source: Google Earth™, 2003, 2010, 2017

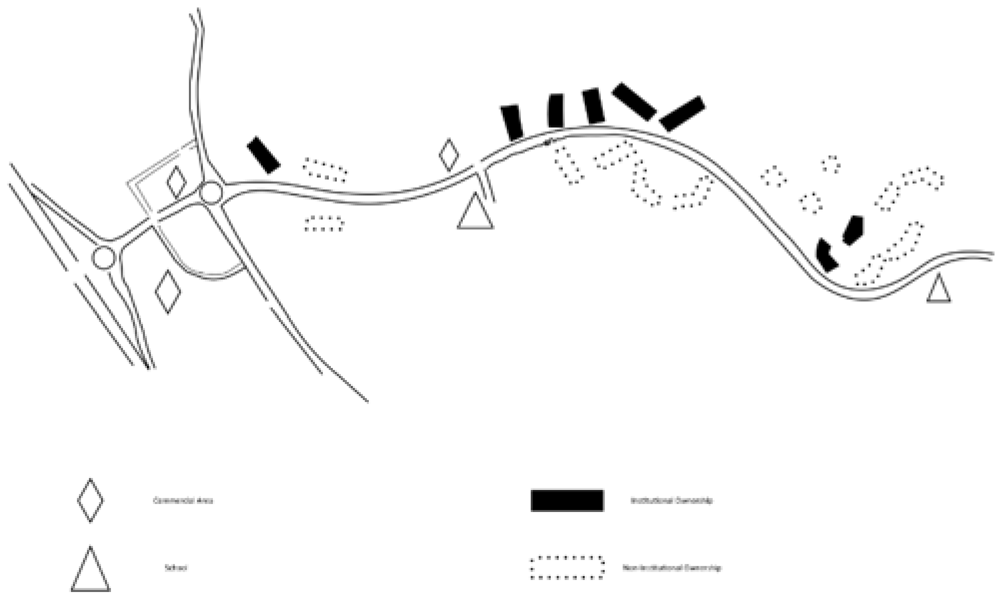
Bedford South resulted from a master-planning exercise between developers and city planners, following municipal amalgamation in 1996. The area was envisioned as six neighbourhoods (HRM, 2015), each developing under a separate development agreement within which the developer and the municipality negotiated layout details (HRM, 2015). Agreements allocate densities and provide basic development and design guidelines, but Clayton Developments and Cresco Holdings, its builder partner, have considerable latitude with design specifics and the allocation of overall densities permitted. Indeed, the plan objectives 'allow for design flexibility in recognition of future changes to external circumstances / market conditions' (HRM, 2015, p. 74).

The Bedford Secondary Planning Strategy describes Bedford South as an appealing infill project (HRM, 2009). To facilitate development, the city, province, and federal government shared the costs to build a new interchange with Highway 102, serving Bedford South and Bedford West (another Clayton / Cresco project nearby). Given constricted traffic capacity on the Bedford Highway, the new interchange was essential infrastructure. The municipality expects to recoup its contribution through capital cost contributions levied on new development (Anstey, 2010). Areas along Larry Uteck near the interchange were zoned for commercial and mixed uses. Bedford South's zoning policies are permissive. Early phases, with frontage along Larry Uteck, permitted higher density residential (HRM, 2015). The balance of the zoning is Community Commercial/ Institutional and General Commercial, which are mixed-use zones that permit various uses, including apartment buildings (HRM, 2015). Buffers separate apartment buildings from detached houses on streets away from the boulevard.

Respondents suggested that growth in the Bedford South area resulted from several factors: low interest rates, permissive regulation, strong demand for apartments, and effective master-planning of the area. Low interest rates and strong demand for apartments generally drive growth in residential units in several parts of Halifax. The effects of master planning and the perception that regulations may be more permissive especially favour Larry Uteck. Because Clayton spent years working with the city to master-plan the area, and negotiating for permissions to build in each neighbourhood, builders purchasing plots receive permits relatively quickly. A local broker (BR3-M) elaborated on the effect on investors: 'if I could do something in the suburbs which is much faster, and I can meet the market, I would argue that it's a lot more profitable to me for me to be spending my time in the suburbs than it is downtown.'

The area developed quite quickly. As Figure 3 indicates, Larry Uteck is lined with townhouses and four-storey apartment buildings along its lower reaches near the Bedford Basin, higher apartments buildings (6- to 12-storeys) for the middle stretch, and then commercial structures near its intersection with Highway 102. Two Francophone schools on the street serve the wider community. Apartment buildings are set back from the sidewalk, accessed off private lanes and served by extensive surface parking. Eight of the structures on the north side of the boulevard are owed by institutional investors. Some buildings have traditional touches, like peaked roofs (Figure 4), while others feature a contemporary look.

Figure 3: Highlighted buildings owned by institutional investors on Larry Uteck Boulevard.



Source: The authors.

Although institutional investors have purchased numerous buildings on the street, some respondents noted that Halifax remains a small player in the market. For instance, a developer [D1-M] noted, ‘Halifax is still in Canadian terms a tiny little market. … You know, we’re a blip. But there’s still money that comes here for geographic diversity and for a bit of return.’ Why have institutional investors begun to consider Halifax? A planner [P2-M] explained the shift in housing going on in the city: ‘Bedford West, Bedford South area starting around 2012, I think, … there was almost a complete inversion in the proportion of single-detached to multi-units. Whereas before it was 80% single-detached, 20% multis, it’s now about 80% multis, 20% single-detached.’ What specifically attracts financial firms to purchase on Larry Uteck? The buildings and clusters of buildings are large enough to garner investment interest. Scale was a common investment criterion that respondents noted. A developer [D1-M] said, ‘An institutional investor isn’t going to buy a 3-storey brick walk-up, typically.’ A planner [P2-M] concurred: ‘But just in general, I mean I think one of the biggest things that sort of differentiates a real-estate project as one that would be attractive [to institutional investors] is just the simple scale of it.’ Those with large sums of money to invest prefer large-scale products instead of numerous small ones to achieve economies of scale.

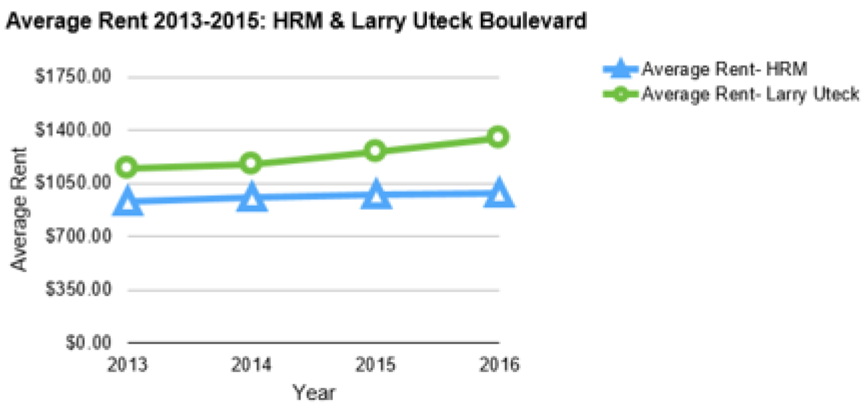
Investment grade property usually means new product, in prime location, with luxury amenities (Poorvu & Cruikshank, 1999). Several respondents [e.g., BR2-M, D1-M] explained that Larry Uteck Boulevard features newly constructed buildings with up-scale amenities. A broker [BR3-M] noted: ‘All of the new product was very, very good. And in Halifax, rental product [on Larry Uteck] is as good and sometimes better than condo product’. Low vacancy rates in the buildings make them especially attractive to building owners, and increasing rents in the area (CMHC, 2017) promise long-term returns (Figure 5). Respondents [BR3-M, P2-M, D1-M] explained that investors such as REITs and pension funds do not develop land in Halifax, preferring to purchase fully-occupied buildings: that lets them avoid protracted approval timelines, delays in leasing units, and the need to develop local partnerships. The appeal of

Larry Uteck is strong for institutional investors because they can assume clusters of new, fully-leased structures.

Figure 4: Apartment building on Larry Uteck Boulevard with peaked roofs.

Source: Google Street View TM, October 2016- 359 Larry Uteck Blvd

Figure 5: Comparing rents for the city with those on Larry Uteck Boulevard



Source: CMHC Housing Portal https://www03.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/hmiportal/en/#Profile/1/1/Canada

Rutland (2010) describes three types of developers operating in the market: Mega Developers partner with local firms on specific projects (the former provide access to capital markets, while the latter provide local expertise); Local Developer/ Owners develop property and maintain it as an investment; Developer-Traders develop property with the intent to sell to an institutional investor rather than maintaining it as investment. The latter two types are active on Larry Uteck Boulevard. A planner [P2-M] said that Halifax's small development community features several local developer/owners or high net worth individuals who develop and then manage properties for the on-going revenue. The buildings on Larry Uteck that are not controlled by their original local developers are held by institutional investors.

Analysis of sales information suggests that many of the properties owned by institutional investors were built by a single local developer who diversified his business model to include the potential of developing multi-unit residential projects for sale after completion. No one has had a greater impact on the form and character of building on Larry Uteck Boulevard than Victor Kielbratowski. He founded his real estate development firm, Kiel Developments, in 1974, and has developed residential and commercial projects in Bedford, Clayton Park, and Dartmouth (AllNovaScotia, 2016). Between 2006 and 2016, he built seven apartment buildings on Larry Uteck for sale to institutional investors such as pension funds.[2] He also developed and maintains the commercial plaza at the corner of Larry Uteck and Dellridge Lane (AllNovaScotia, 2014). Kiel has an atypical business model in Halifax's development community. Kielbratowski has become largely a developer-trader, who develops major properties, builds buildings, and leases to commercial interests or sells to institutional investors. He also builds detached homes. As the company sells an apartment building on Larry Uteck, it moves on to begin the next project. With willing investors coming into Halifax, and relatively low residential vacancy rates, Kiel has taken advantage of the opportunity to provide multi-unit high-rise apartment buildings for resale to institutional investors looking for investment-grade properties.

Buying newly constructed and leased apartment buildings in an established neighbourhood with good transit access to downtown fits the mandate of investors such as pension plans for safe investments with consistent returns of around 5%, a broker [BR2-M] told us. Buildings are constructed to a high standard and professionally managed. The same broker [BR2-M] commented on the quality of units in the area: 'So you can get a 3-bedroom in Larry Uteck… 1400 square feet, for under $1400 a month, with a massive patio, quartz countertops, stainless steel appliances – what everybody's looking for these days – and a view of the freaking harbour for $1400! It sounds pretty appealing'. The Nova Scotia Pension Services Corporation, London Life, and the Canadian Apartment REIT all made purchases from Kiel Developments on Larry Uteck Boulevard (AllNovaScotia 2013, 2014, 2015).

In the final section, we discuss the kinds of urban form and patterns that result from current investment processes in Halifax suburbs, and consider the factors causing them.

Effects on urban form and pattern

Although the city had hoped that Bedford South would develop with an urban feel, with Larry Uteck Boulevard characterized by commercial uses at ground level fronting main roads with residential uses above, the plan provided the developer with flexibility to allow residential uses at ground level for buildings more than 15 metres from the street. The apartment buildings on Larry Uteck owned by institutional investors are all more than 15 metres from the street, with residential uses at ground level. None front the main street in an urban way. Several factors explain the patterns.

Why are uses at such coarse grain? Because building out is cheaper than building higher, especially in areas where land remains relatively cheap, buildings in the suburbs have large footprints. A planner [P2-M] told us, 'the built form of the apartment buildings themselves [is] sort of very large and low, and the units are large, because they can afford to give everyone more land per unit'. The demand for surface parking increases the space left between structures, both in residential and commercial areas. To provide privacy, reduce noise, and offer scenic harbour views the apartment buildings don't face the street, but sit back at some distance from it.

Why are uses not mixed in the way envisioned? First, with concentrations of commercial uses near the Highway 102 interchange and in some structures on other parts of Larry Uteck, commercial space more than suffices to meet local demand. Second, in suburban areas perceived to be relatively safe, leasing agents find demand for residential units even at ground level; also, large structures may feature common rooms, gyms, other shared facilities, and service spaces at ground level for the exclusive use of tenants. Third, builders find it easier to finance residential projects than mixed-use projects (Crosby & Henneberry, 2016), increasing the influence of finance on form (Guironnet *et al.,* 2016). A broker [BR3-M] explained that obtaining financing for purely residential projects proves significantly easier than for a mixed-use project: 'the banks would really like to have pure-play residential if they can. Every time you add another component like office or retail or hotel, you're discounting the amount of money that the banks are willing to offer. From a financing perspective, pure-play residential is golden'. Together these factors make it more likely that multi-unit structures in the suburbs will not involve mixed use.

Several respondents [BR1-M, BR2-M, BR3-M, P2-M] noted that the area remains auto-oriented in land-use patterns, despite the availability of direct transit routes to universities and the city centre. Larry Uteck has areas of steep incline, with little protection from winter winds or rain: pedestrians find few amenities to make the area walkable (Figure 6). While the structures are well-built, several feature repetitive designs and materials. Builders often use 'off the shelf' designs: good, but not award-winning. Urban design standards are not as strong as the standards used for finishing the interior of structures. Yet some respondents, especially real estate brokers, identified this as a good area. One [BR2-M] commented,

> A client of ours is building in Larry Uteck: 150 units. They own in their portfolio 1400 units, all out in that area: Larry Uteck, Clayton Park. They have one vacant unit in 1400 units. …All of us are, 'where are all these people coming from? Who's living there? Why are they still building?' Well, they're still building because there just seems to be demand.

Another broker [BR3-M] complimented the quality: 'In Halifax, it's very much a renter's market, so the product that was being built at Larry Uteck is very, very nice product. Mostly … rental. And new infrastructure, new buildings, new retail. It all seemed to work.' A planner [P1-M] said,

> I think there's a fair bit of good in Larry Uteck. It seems to have developed pretty much as a full community from the start. You know, I sometimes go there to restaurants …, so it's not just a residential place. You know, there's schools there. There's some amenity. But there is a lot of density in one place: probably not the ideal place at all. You know, it's pretty far out there.

Others, however, made disparaging or satirical comments about the area: for instance, a councillor [C2-M] opined, 'ugh, it's the worst!'

On the one hand, the municipality's vision of a complete community is coming together in suburban Bedford. As one planner [P1-M] said, 'It does go to show you what developers can do, if they're just given their head. They had a plan and they proceeded.' Larry Uteck Boulevard is a mixed-use street with retail, schools, professional services, shopping district, transit connections, and a highway interchange. Overall the suburb has a mix of housing types, increasingly tending towards multi-unit structures. On the other hand, many features of the post-war suburban model remain evident: segregated uses surrounded by seas of parking, under-utilized space, and landscapes that are not pedestrian-friendly. One of the councillors [C3-F] interviewed recognized incongruities with the plan and its results.

> I never really spent a lot of time in Larry Uteck. And then I drove up there, … in the past couple of months, and I looked, and I thought 'holy crow, wow!' But it's all approved development. It's all according to the plan. … This is the development node that we talked about. … You know, making decisions about where growth occurs is a big discussion, right? And we have these areas that we have designated as growth areas. Bedford South and Bedford West are those areas, the same as some of the other ones over in Dartmouth. And theoretically we bring them online when we feel that there's demand there. So theoretically it all fits with the plan. It's all going in accordance with the plan. You know, how walkable it is, is for me a question.

Figure 6: The street offers few amenities to pedestrians. Note the common design of the structures. [photo by authors]

Producing suburban stereotypes

Some urban design theorists and planning scholars argue that demographic and cultural change are creating conditions under which suburban patterns are yielding to urbanized forms with high-quality designs and amenities (Duany, et al., 2000; Nelson, 2013). While that may be true in large and rapidly growing cities, it is not universally the case. Peck (2011, p. 884) writes, 'The suburbs have been privileged sites for the rollout of actually existing forms of neoliberal governance'. As governments have transformed planning processes to stimulate growth and facilitate development, suburbs have become sites of deregulatory experimentation (Peck, 2011). Although planners had hoped that new policies and design guidelines would generate development areas with urban characteristics and high design standards, instead –influenced by financial and cultural processes beyond planners' control-- they have produced a new kind of stereotyped landscape.

As in other parts of the city, suburban spaces are co-produced by planners, decision-makers, developers, financiers, and consumers. Cities may have urbanistic policy in place and developers who talk about complete communities, but what gets produced depends on wider financial and cultural contexts. The form of the community reflects the preferences of residents who seek certain kinds of spaces, prices, and amenities (Perrin & Grant, 2014). It reveals the needs of financiers and builders using formulas and business models that predict better returns with some choices rather than others (Poorvu & Cruikshank, 1999). After several decades of implementing plans that try to promote mixed use, intensification, and urban land-use patterns, Halifax has made less progress than its planners had hoped.

In evaluating areas such as suburban Halifax, planners tend to think about the design of the public realm. One of the planners interviewed [P1-M] acknowledged that: 'I guess the talk, nowadays, in planning, is about the importance of design.' Design has traditionally been a concern of the planning profession, since City Beautiful and Garden City planners advocated for beauty and function in the early years of the 20th century. In practice, however, private interests build the city. They may share ideological commitments to creating beautiful spaces, but they define the desirable suburb in different ways than planners prefer. The kinds of spaces being created in places like Bedford South reflect the compromises and aspirations of a wide range of players. The companies building the suburb make the decisions necessary for them to succeed within the frameworks that affect the choices others make. In the Halifax suburbs those choices still produce segregated, auto-oriented, sprawling, and repetitive design (Brewer & Grant, 2015). Strong demand for well-appointed and fully-leased units with ample parking but access to speedy transit routes to key city centre destinations make this location attractive to renters who meet the *pro forma* requirements of institutional investors. As our study revealed, the market has robustly embraced the form that is evident in Bedford South, and new financial players are participating in strengthening the model. The result is a new, higher-rise but low-density, suburban stereotype.

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Notes:

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[1] We conducted 11 interviews. Codes indicate role of respondent (C= councillor, D= developer, P= planner, BR= real estate broker, A= Architect), sequence of interview, and gender (M=male, F=female). Details on the methods are available in Willwerth (2017).

[2] Kiel constructed a six-phase apartment project spanning 357-461 Larry Uteck Boulevard, called The Gardens, totaling 370 units. Gardens I and II sold for $26.2 million, or $192,671 per unit to a pension fund (MacAvoy, 2012). Timbercreek Asset Management purchased Gardens V for $17.4 million, or $223,076 per unit (AllNovaScotia, 2016). The sale price of units increased by 15.7% from 2011-2013. Gardens VI sold for $239,325 per unit in 2015, representing a 7% increase from 2013 (AllNovaScotia, 2016).