

On Infill and Imperfection



Winnipeg's Wolseley neighbourhood is an infill success story.

Lately, there's been a lot of ink spilled over infill and Winnipeg's participation in the Federal Housing Accelerator Program. Much of it pits the "not in my backyard" crowd against those who believe that increased density and reduced suburban sprawl is a good thing, both for the city's budget and emissions reduction.

In theory, denser walkable neighbourhoods, with nearby amenities, reduce motor vehicle traffic, encourage the use of active and public transportation and create a stronger sense of community.

I can attest to the validity of that because I live in Wolseley, a neighbourhood that has evolved, over decades, into a kind of testimony to the benefits of infill.

Here, you'll find apartment blocks on almost every second corner, and even plunked in the midst of single family dwellings and duplexes. There's a bakery as well as restaurants, gift shops, corner stores and grocery outlets, all within easy walking distance. In some areas we still have a gorgeous canopy of boulevard elms, and while most yards are small and most houses are tightly packed the neighbourhood also has two parks and a few smaller greenspaces, where a local committee plans to plant even more trees.

And there's a strong sense of community here as well, so much so that during the pandemic residents lobbied to have Wolseley Avenue closed to through traffic and opened to biking and walking. Neighbours even got together and created a winter wonderland on the river, with skating rinks, benches and community shovelled walking-paths that are open to everyone.

All in all, it pretty much meets the standards of a Jane Jacobs' ideal neighbourhood – walkable, interesting to explore and first and foremost, dense, with a mix of high and low cost housing.

And before you ask – yes, of course, being close to downtown we have our share of property theft, addiction problems and homeless camps, but we also have a community that overwhelming advocates for a humane and compassionate approach to those problems.



A typical Wolseley street

So, if we assume Wolseley provides a good, real world model for infill, why are folks getting their knickers in a knot over changes to the city's zoning regulations that would facilitate infill?

Truth be told – why have *I been getting my knickers in a knot* over infill?

Well, I can't speak for everyone, but I can tell you what my concerns are:

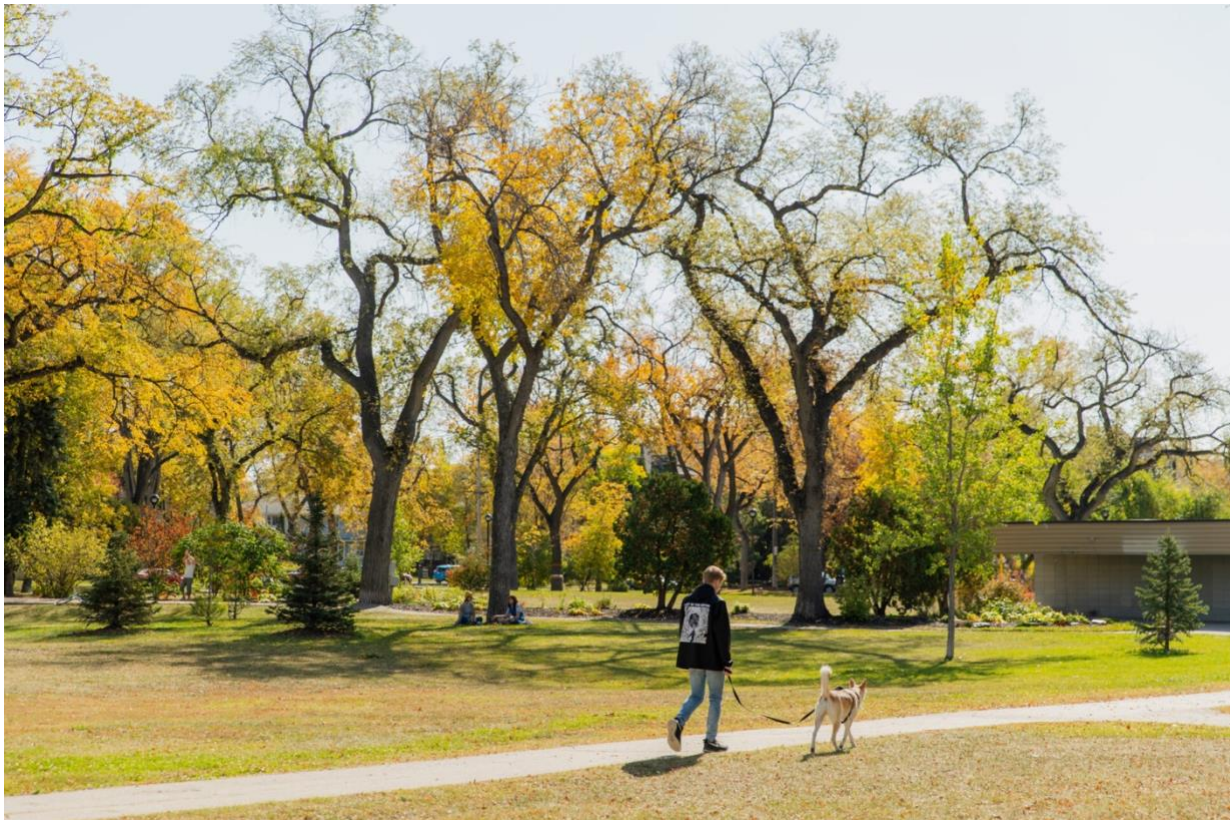
I'm worried that infill will proceed without clear regulations and bylaws governing everything from the protection of trees on private property to the retention of greenspace. I'm worried that housing projects like the one proposed for the Lemay forest will be passed off as infill when they're actually suburban greenfield developments.

But what I'm most concerned about, given our rigidly siloed city bureaucracy, is that grey infrastructure will win and natural infrastructure - the trees, intact forests and wetlands that help to mitigate climate impacts - will lose out, in the rush toward infill.

So what can we do to avoid that?

Well, one of the most important criteria for climate friendly infill would be an ongoing collaboration between city planning, water waste and the environment and the city's urban forestry, parks and naturalization departments.

The aim of that collaboration would be to ensure infill projects are designed to mitigate environmental impacts, which would include measures to retain mature trees wherever reasonably possible.



Vimy Ridge Park, Wolseley

The city should also adhere to the strictest definition of infill: housing constructed in areas where there's existing infrastructure. That way intact forests like the Lemay, riverside lots and public golf courses would not qualify as infill sites, while empty, abandoned or existing buildings and parking lots would.

I'd also suggest the city establish an infill department, within city planning. In addition to responding to residents' concerns, it should also have the teeth and manpower to monitor sites

during construction and penalize contractors who don't follow the rules, while offering incentives to builders that incorporate climate positive features - green roofs, trees, pervious surfaces, run off swales and alternative heating energy – into their infill projects.

In essence, as my friend and *Strong Towns* columnist, Emma Durand-Wood puts it: “We need to start seeing the city holistically as a complex, living thing in which every decision has the potential to help or hinder other aspects. But we also need to hit the ground running on infill and not be afraid to have things turn out imperfectly.”

So, despite my concerns, I'm going to take her advice and embrace imperfection as an inevitable feature of change. But I'll also keep my fingers crossed that by rezoning to accommodate infill, city council is actually planning for the creation of a climate resilient city, with green, walkable and livable neighbourhoods as its primary goal.

If that's not the case then they'll be hearing from me, and I suspect, thousands of other Winnipeggers.

For more about the history of Wolseley take the walking tour at:

<https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/features/walkingtours/wolseley/index.shtml>

