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Keough, Noel; Ghitter, Geoff

University of Calgary Press

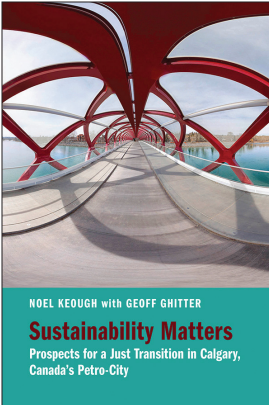
Keough, N., & Ghitter, G. (2021). Sustainability Matters: Prospects for a Just Transition in Calgary, Canada's Petro-City. University of Calgary Press.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/113895>

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SUSTAINABILITY MATTERS: PROSPECTS FOR A JUST TRANSITION IN CALGARY, CANADA'S PETRO-CITY

by Noel Keough with Geoff Ghitler

ISBN 978-1-77385-249-2

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Justice, Fairness, and Inclusion



“There is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt as injustice,” declares Pip in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. Like Pip, we all have a keen sense of fairness. Research shows that faced with an unfair situation, people will often make decisions against their own interests just to deny other individuals unjust rewards.¹

Nobel economist Amartya Sen puts a finer point on injustice, arguing that leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King did not expect perfect justice—they were simply acting “to remove clear injustices.”²

A sustainable society is a just society. Furthermore, the path to sustainability has to be seen to be just and fair, or people will not offer their support. In this chapter, we discuss, from several perspectives, some of the “clear injustices” in our city and how they relate to sustainability. Some of the essays address big questions, while others approach the topic from seemingly mundane local issues.

Secondary suites may not seem to be a crucial issue in the face of the vast sustainability challenges we face, but it is an example of the everyday small decisions we make that can either advance sustainability or impede it. The issue of secondary suites is only one aspect of the larger affordable housing issue. It touches not only on issues of diversity, fairness, and equity but also on the debates over urban sprawl, transportation, and car dependence.

Another essay delves into the idea of affordable living. Research pioneered in the United States and adapted to Calgary demonstrates the advantage of integrated thinking in urban planning. What if we considered housing and transportation policy together? What difference would it make to how we plan cities and to the decisions that households make about where to live?

A sustainable society nurtures economic, ecological, and cultural diversity. In this chapter, we reflect on the importance of recognizing, celebrating, and leveraging the diversity that the processes of globalization create. We examine research conducted by Sustainable Calgary on the amount of diversity in positions of power and influence in our city. The data suggest that in twenty years, there has been negligible movement on inclusion of women, visible minorities, or Indigenous people around the decision-making forums in our city.

We close the chapter with “How Much Is Enough?”—an essay on consumerism and its implications for our own well-being and that of our neighbours in the global village. We argue that to achieve sustainability, we need to resist the consumerist society and the advertising that invites us to partake in it and to consciously reflect on what lies beyond materialism.

HOME SUITE HOME: A PRIMER ON SECONDARY SUITES

Tens of thousands of Calgary households rent a secondary suite—most of them operating outside of the law.³ Council has been divided on this issue for years. To paraphrase a former prime minister, does government have any business in the secondary suites of the city, or should this relationship be left to the discretion of consenting owners and renters?

There are well-worn claims for why secondary suites should not be permitted. Some say they bring unsavoury characters into the neighbourhood and lower property values. But a Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) study found that most occupants of secondary suites share similar social values to those of the neighbourhood they rent in and are looking for quiet, family-oriented neighbourhoods.⁴ The truth is, obnoxious, messy, loud neighbours can be either renters or owners and are found in every sort of housing—single family dwellings, condos, acreages, and, yes, secondary suites.

Overcrowding is another complaint levelled at secondary suites. “We’ll be living like sardines!” people cry. Yet today, half as many people live in twice as much space as we did a generation ago—that’s about one-quarter the density.⁵ Surely the issue can’t be too many people. Too many cars, perhaps? An Ontario study found parking to be the biggest concern with respect to secondary suites.⁶ In fact, modest increases in density, coupled with smart transit investment, moves us toward fewer cars, not more. If the issue is too many cars, secondary suites are part of the solution.

One thing is for sure—Calgary has a chronic affordability problem. Remember the horrific situation in 2008 at the height of the economic boom? Rent increased 50 percent between 2005 and 2008—in extreme cases, more than doubling overnight.⁷ By 2009, there were eighteen thousand fewer rental units than in the mid-1990s—mostly due to an aggressive apartment-to-condo conversion trend.⁸ Rental affordability has eased in recent years, but still, in 2016 more than eighty-eight thousand households spent more than they should on housing, based on CMHC affordability criteria.⁹ The number of Calgarians who have no roof over their heads or who are one paycheque away from homelessness has increased dramatically this past decade, and substantially more renters find themselves in this fix than do homeowners.¹⁰ The bottom line is that Calgary

needs more modestly priced rental accommodation, and secondary suites offer a flexible, affordable way to provide it. For example, a three-bedroom secondary suite rents for about the same price as a one-bedroom condo.

A survey of research on the topic published in a 2017 special issue of *Canadian Geographer* found that the stock of available secondary suites rises and falls in step with both house prices and rental housing availability.¹¹ It also found that secondary suites are particularly important for new immigrant families, whether they are tenants or landlords. A Calgary-based study suggests that, especially in areas with high percentages of new immigrants, the rationale for secondary suites has four distinct elements: the desire for proximity of generations with a level of autonomy, care provision, pooling of financial and human resources, and accommodation for visiting family and friends.¹² Another Calgary study suggested an element of NIMBYism in the resistance to secondary suites, and perhaps some xenophobia.¹³

A 2019 survey in Kamloops, BC, found that more than 75 percent of respondents agreed that secondary suites provide an affordable housing option, assist with mortgage payments, and allow families to stay together by housing young adult children or aging family members.¹⁴ So with a strong secondary-suite policy in place, more Calgarians would get to join the ranks of homeownership, and renters would have more options in a more stable market. Secondary suites bolster that key ingredient of urban sustainability—resiliency!

But if we allow secondary suites in all communities, are we going to be inundated with renters and their cars? Hardly. In Canada's large cities, secondary suites make up about a quarter of all rental units.¹⁵ Since Edmonton introduced its policy in 2000, the uptake has been quite modest, with fifty-five hundred legal secondary suites as of September 2020—about 3 percent of housing stock.¹⁶ As of September 2020, there were just under thirty-six hundred legal secondary suites in Calgary, with inner city and northeast neighbourhoods being the most popular locations.¹⁷ That's hardly a radical remake of Calgary neighbourhoods. The sky is not falling! In fact, the data suggest that most of the secondary suites we will ever see in the city already exist.

The Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF) and the Chamber of Commerce are strong supporters of liberalized rules for secondary suites.

The CHF, through its 10 Year Plan (2008–18), hopes to provide “11,250 affordable and specialized units” and to work toward “increasing the supply of legal and safe secondary suites” over ten years as a contribution to ending homelessness in our city.¹⁸ The Foundation proposes requiring that new developments have a percentage of housing that are ready for secondary suites.¹⁹ The Chamber of Commerce proposes permitting the suites in every residential neighbourhood and housing type, with only the minimum of regulation needed to ensure safe operation and building code compliance.²⁰

So the available research strongly supports the benefits of secondary suites, and respected local organizations have examined the issue and are advocating for a more liberal policy. The kicker is that Calgarians are out in front on this issue. A 2011 survey commissioned by the University of Calgary Students Union found that 74 percent of us support secondary suites in our own neighbourhood.²¹ Almost half of us are not that concerned about parking issues. Even laneway housing—the most contentious form of secondary suite—was supported by 60 percent of respondents. A study by graduate students in the School of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape found that laneway housing could provide forty thousand new housing units in Calgary.²²

A liberalized policy on this issue hits a sustainability sweet spot. Not only do secondary suites increase housing opportunities for Calgarians of modest means; they also help reduce sprawl and car-dependence by increasing the amount of affordable housing close to transit—all with a negligible impact on our lives.

Come on, Calgary. In ten years we’ll look back at this and wonder what all the fuss was about.

AFFORDABLE LIVING: THE HOUSE HUNTER’S NEW MANTRA

In 2012 an interesting casting call for the show *Urban Suburban* appeared in local papers—HGTV was recruiting families who were home hunting but couldn’t decide between the inner city and the suburbs.

Once upon a time, the rule of thumb was “drive ’til you qualify,” meaning that the further afield from the inner city you go, the more the price

of your dream home drops—or the bigger the house gets for the mortgage you qualified for. But research out of the US is challenging the “drive ’til you qualify” approach to house hunting. *Penny Wise Pound Foolish*, a 2010 groundbreaking research report by the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), argues that you ignore transportation cost implications of where you choose to live at your peril.²³

The emerging wisdom is that rather than having a singular focus on affordable housing, the savvy buyer will look for affordable living. The CNT researchers found that the combined costs of transportation and housing in twenty-eight of the largest municipalities in the US consumed about 60 percent of household income, and that inner city living with good public transit is often easier on your pocketbook than suburban living. For example, living in more compact neighbourhoods resulted in annual combined transportation and housing cost savings of \$1,830 in Minneapolis and \$3,850 in Boston. The Housing and Transportation Affordability Index continues to track these data by neighbourhood across the United States.²⁴ A more recent report from CNT found that for those who do choose to locate in proximity to good transit, a home maintains its price more robustly than homes not in a transit shed.²⁵

A research report by Sustainable Calgary, *Affordable Living: Housing +Transportation*, applies this approach to our city, and the results may surprise you.²⁶ In 2014, 29 percent of the average Canadian household’s spending went to shelter, while 20 percent went to transportation.²⁷ When you add up all private transportation spending in Calgary, it works out to about \$5.2 billion annually, with the overwhelming portion devoted to buying, operating, and maintaining our cars.²⁸ That’s equivalent to about three southwest LRT lines plus one thousand kilometres of streetcars—all for what we spend in just one year on our cars!

Some of the implications of these numbers for choice and affordability are eye-popping. For example, if a family with an income of \$80,000 could live without a car (or with one less car), and devote that savings to their mortgage, the number of Calgary communities where they could afford the average house price increases fourfold. With house prices flat and the average price of a car at record levels, the figures are probably even more impressive in 2020. The research is clear that more transit can increase housing choice and affordability for the average Calgary family.

The implications are even more dramatic for low-income Calgarians. Imagine a family with a meagre \$20,000 income looking for a place to rent on an average day in 2009. Using the 32 percent affordability threshold, this family would need a place costing no more than \$500/month.²⁹ But if they could devote \$300 more to rent—the difference between what a family spends on a private car versus their costs for public transportation—such families would have ten times as many rental units to choose from, based on a survey of the city’s most popular rental accommodation website (rentfaster.ca).

All fine and good, you say, but Calgary is a car-dependent city. Well, yes and no. Life in most Calgary communities is certainly hostage to the car. But as we shift to more residential construction in inner city neighbourhoods, and as transit investment increases, more people will have the option of going car free. A 2011 issue of the City’s *Mobility Monitor* newsletter shows us where some of those communities are located.³⁰ Communities like Sunalta, Hillhurst, Sunnyside, and East Village score “excellent” because “most trips are convenient by transit,” whereas anywhere south of Southwood scores “minimal,” with the comment “It is possible to get on a bus.” More investment in active transportation would also make communities less car dependent. Recent research at the University of Calgary suggests that rapid expansion of bicycling infrastructure could bring ten times as many Calgarians within the catchment zone of the existing LRT with relatively modest investment.³¹

A big piece of the puzzle here is information. If the City developed a reliable transportation-housing affordability index similar to the one developed by the CNT, mortgage lenders might be persuaded to offer “location efficient” mortgages that provide better terms for individuals living in prime transit accessible and walkable neighbourhoods.³² This could guide families to neighbourhoods where transportation costs are lower, helping both lenders and borrowers make more prudent decisions.

Calgarians love their cars, or so we tell ourselves. We can’t possibly change, right? And why should we? Because the downside is getting too big to ignore. Given a choice, maybe some of us can change. With or without location-efficient mortgages or improved transit service, these savings are real—today. So the next time you are in the market for a new home, think affordable living. It could mean substantially less time in congested

traffic, more money in your wallet, and more time with your kids. The HGTV series might be stage managed, but the savings from reduced car dependence are real.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY, SOCIAL INCLUSION, AND SUSTAINABILITY: OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Cowboy imagery is an important part of Calgary's identity. We put it everywhere—the airport, Stephen Avenue, City Hall. But our true character is much different than the image we cultivate.

The 2009 election of Mayor Nenshi made the rest of the country, and not a few Calgarians, reconsider their impressions of our city. The mayor is perhaps the most visible manifestation of a dramatic change in the face of Calgary over the past twenty years. No less significant is the fact that his “colour purple” campaign struck gold at the end of a decidedly rainbow collective of supporters and campaign workers.

Taking advantage of the opportunities that Calgary's gender, ethnic, and cultural diversity provide could be the key to our sustainability. We can talk about diversity in various ways. Demographically speaking, Canadian cities are among the most diverse in the world. According to World Cities Culture Forum, at 47 percent in 2016, Toronto was just behind Miami as the North American city with the highest percentage of foreign-born residents.³³ Metro Vancouver was close, with 44 percent. In 2016, 29.4 percent of Calgarians were foreign born, making our city the third most ethnically diverse major city in Canada.³⁴ The Canadian Census also reports that 33.7 percent of Calgary's metro population comprises visible minorities—again, third in the country behind Toronto (51.4%) and Vancouver (48.9%).³⁵

A truly good news story is how our diversity has helped define Calgary as a more vibrant, sophisticated, and welcoming city. This is especially visible in our arts and culture scene. Though it is still dominant, gone are the days when the Calgary Stampede was the only cultural game in town. Our city's cultural mosaic is multi-faceted and expanding. From imagineAsia, to GlobalFest, Sled Island, Afrikadey, and Carifest, the diversity of our city is finding its voice. No question, we are a diverse community, and

increasingly, we celebrate that diversity through festivals of music, food, dance, and theatre.

But although the Canadian multicultural experiment is envied around the world, it is not without its failings. Evidence suggests that we don't practice inclusion or embrace diversity in the political and economic life of our city. Since 2001, Sustainable Calgary has been tracking the diversity of approximately 220 positions of power and influence in the city. The list includes elected politicians, from trustees to MPs; the boards of directors of the city's largest social development and private sector organizations; and media personalities. The survey asks, With respect to gender, visible minorities, and Aboriginal peoples, does the diversity within political and economic life represent the diversity of our city? Sadly, the answer is no.

As reported in *State of Our City 2020*, in 2018 women constituted 50 percent of Calgary's population; visible minorities, 36 percent; and Aboriginal people, 2.9 percent. Among the 218 positions of power and influence identified in the survey, 34 percent were women (the same as in 2001) and 12.4 percent were visible minorities. The group included just three Aboriginal people (1.4% of the total).

With 39 percent in the government and media, women were best represented in those sectors, followed by 36 percent in the not-for-profit sector. At 21 percent, visible minorities were best represented among our politicians. Of the five largest private sector employers surveyed, 23 percent of board members were women, 10 percent were visible minorities, and only 2.1 percent of the sample of forty-eight directorships were Aboriginal people.

Of course, Calgary is no more or less diversity-challenged than the rest of the country. Women make up 29 percent of our parliamentarians, ranking Canada sixty-fourth among nations of the world. In contrast, in countries such as Rwanda (63%), Cuba (53%), Sweden (47%), and Costa Rica (46%), women's representation among elected representatives parallels their percentage of the populace.³⁶ Canadian women fare no better at the Toronto Stock Exchange. Of those companies who self-reported in 2018, women held only 16.4 percent of board seats. Twenty-four percent of boards were all male, only 4.4 percent of companies had a female board chair, and only 52 percent of those reporting had a policy to increase female recruitment.³⁷

Research has shown that embracing diversity builds social capital; improves the quality of political debate; and enhances our capacity to understand, communicate, and trade with the wider world. Research published in 2019 by Dr. Irene Herremans from the University of Calgary found that more gender-diverse boards delivered better environmental performance, especially in the high-impact resource industry.³⁸ The Maytree Foundation, an Ontario-based not-for-profit, reports that diverse boards make better decisions, provide greater legitimacy in the community, and are more in keeping with our representative democracy.³⁹

The embrace of diversity also resonates with the latest business trend and social media buzz around the wisdom of the crowd. James Surowiecki makes the case in his 2005 book *The Wisdom of Crowds* that the crowd is talented, creative, and stunningly productive but that, crucially, wise crowds need a diversity of opinion.⁴⁰

Collectively, Calgarians represent a wide range of life experience, world views, spiritual beliefs, and cultural knowledge—assets that we will need to create a competitive, resilient, and sustainable economy in the twenty-first century. Diversity is smart business strategy, provides equality of opportunity, and leads to better decisions. Valuing gender, ethnic, and cultural diversity makes us stronger.

We've come a long way and there is much to celebrate, but there's no room for complacency. Our future will be brighter if we honour, nurture, and leverage diversity in all its dimensions. Opportunity knocks.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH? BUY NOTHING DAY AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REFLECTION AND REDIRECTION

On November 1, no more than twelve hours after the Hallowe'en festivities, with bags of sugar-infused treats in the closet and never-to-be-worn-again costumes shoved into the garbage bin, shopping malls across the city roll out Christmas music, displays, and discounts. It used to be that we marked the passage of time by natural phenomena—the seasons, phases of the moon, bird migrations. Now we can set our calendars by the orgies of consumerism.

We don't wish to deprive our kids of the joys of trick or treating or the magic of Christmas morning. But we do want to take issue with the

diminished and destructive vision of a hyper-consumerist culture that we adults offer them.

In 2020, August 22 marked what has come to be known as Earth Overshoot Day—in eight months, humanity exhausted the earth’s resource budget for the year (overshootday.org). Because of COVID-related industrial shutdowns, work closures, and air travel groundings that gave non-human nature a temporary reprieve, this was actually better than in 2019, when the date was July 29. But the pandemic arrived in Canada too late to impact the country. On March 18, just as the first shutdowns were occurring, Canada arrived at its own overshoot date.⁴¹

Back in 1992, we made it all the way to October 22 before overshoot. We are now well into overdraft, maintaining our collective lifestyles by harvesting more fish than the sea can replenish, cutting trees faster than the forests can grow them, pumping more carbon into the skies than the earth can assimilate back into the biosphere.

While this is starting to cause noticeable discomfort in our country, it is unconscionable what it is doing to our neighbours in the global village. In September 2012, the Climate Vulnerable Forum and DARA, a non-profit committed to working for the well-being of the most vulnerable countries on the planet, released the *Climate Vulnerability Monitor: A Guide to the Cold Calculus of a Hot Planet*. In a plea to the most affluent countries, the report decries what it calls “fundamental injustices that simply cannot go unaddressed.”⁴²

Despite having contributed negligibly to climate change, the least developed countries—places like Gabon, Central Africa Republic, Mozambique, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Vanuatu—will suffer most. Over 90 percent of the mortality forecast to result from climate change and fossil fuel combustion will occur in developing countries. Working from 2010 data, the report estimates that 400,000 deaths every year are caused directly by climate change and another 4.5 million deaths annually are a result of our carbon-intensive economy, via hunger, malaria, meningitis, air pollution, and cancer associated with the burning of fossil fuels. Furthermore, the report estimates \$700 billion in economic losses annually from climate change.⁴³ A 2019 paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* estimates that between 314,000 and 736,000 deaths per year are caused by climate change.⁴⁴

According to the *Climate Vulnerability Monitor* report, “while some countries are committed to change and making progress, there is still a lack of conviction among the governments of too many industrialized and developing nations.”⁴⁵ Sadly, under the Harper government, our country became the poster child for the lack-of-conviction club.

In 2012 the *Global Environment Outlook (GEO) 5* found that growing population, glaring inequality, and a precarious environmental base were causes for profound concern.⁴⁶ The 2019 *GEO 6* report warned that the “overall environmental situation globally is deteriorating and the window for action is closing.”⁴⁷ The frank assessment of the *GEO 5* report was that “globalization allows goods to be produced under circumstances that consumers would refuse to tolerate in their own community, and permits waste to be exported out of sight, enabling people to ignore both its magnitude and its impacts.”⁴⁸

The collective tragedy is that the evidence suggests that hyper-consumption, fueled by fossil fuel combustion and unsustainable resource extraction, is not even improving our own well-being—quite the opposite. While GDP in the US has tripled since 1950, measures of happiness have remained essentially unchanged.⁴⁹ In general, the research finds that at a given point in time, more wealthy people rate their happiness higher, but over time, increased wealth does not make individuals happier. According to the 2020 *World Happiness Report* and the *OECD Better Life Index*, the bottom line is that once the basics of life are taken care of, it is the quality of human relationships that determines happiness and life satisfaction, not material affluence.⁵⁰ Upon reflection, most people would acknowledge this to be true, which is why advertisers worldwide spend more than US\$500 billion every year to convince us otherwise.⁵¹

So the lifestyle we sell to our kids and ourselves is making the earth uninhabitable, short-changing most people on the planet and all future generations, without any appreciable improvement in well-being, contentment, or happiness. While this realization is rather overwhelming, there is something small but meaningful that you can do to focus attention on hyper-consumption. Every year on Buy Nothing Day, you can “relax and do nothing for the economy and for yourself—at least for a single day.”⁵² On the last Friday in November—not coincidentally Black Friday, the annual orgy of consumerism in the US and, more recently, in Canada—take

time out to think about how much is enough. Buying absolutely nothing would be a heroic act, but why not experiment? Refuse to even stroll in a shopping mall. Buy only locally grown food—say, within five hundred kilometres—from locally owned businesses (see belocal.org for inspiration). Sell your car and get healthy by walking or biking to work. Subscribe to bike-, scooter-, or car-share services. Talk to friends and neighbours about how to redirect your passion and energy toward life-affirming non-material pursuits.

And take consolation in the words of the late Kenyan Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai: “There is a huge amount to be done if we are to reach a state of sustainability. Do not despair, do not be weighed down by it. All I ask of you is that you go home and do what you can.”⁵³

NOTES

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