Urban Planning, Immigration and Diversity

The Perspective from Ottawa-Carleton

by Carl Nicholson

"Both globally and domestically, immigrant settlement is overwhelmingly an urban phenomenon. In 1996, 85% of all immigrants to Canada lived in 25 census metropolitan areas. 1 Of these, the Ottawa-Carleton region is consistently among the top five.

In 1996, immigrants made up roughly 20% of the population of Ottawa-Carleton, up from about 10% in 1985, making this group one of the fastest-growing segments of the regional population. More and more immigrants are arriving from countries that have not traditionally sent immigrants to Canada. These individuals bring with them a wide variety of languages, traditions, and ideas about society.

Another fundamental shift taking place in our region involves the tremendous growth in size and importance of the high-technology sector. It is expected that within the next two years this sector will overtake the federal government as the largest employer and generator of jobs in the region. Although formal studies have not confirmed this, conventional wisdom is that immigrants make up an even larger percentage (greater than 20%) of this work force, and that immigrants account for more than 20% of students in elementary schools.

Taking responsibility for creating harmonious communities

The urban context is where most people – both newcomers and members of the host community – experience the effects of immigration. This milieu is where we encounter both “the problems” and the “benefits” of living together in one society with several ethnic groups with diverse cultures and social conditions. 2

Municipal government in the Region of Ottawa-Carleton has taken steps to respond and adapt to this rapidly increasing diversity. One of the strategic directions of the Community Vision of the Regional Official Plan involves “respecting bilingualism and diversity” within a community that “thrives on cross-cultural respect and understanding and which celebrates its aboriginal, bilingual, and multicultural nature.” The Region has created:

- a multicultural health coalition;
- policies to enhance multicultural access to Homes for the Aged, subsidized housing, and careers in policing.

The Region has also entered into partnerships with several multicultural organizations, and has recently developed an employment strategy which, among other things, proposes ways to reduce barriers to employment.

The immigrants’ perspective

In spite of these efforts and other less official but no less important actions to embrace newcomers, many immigrants to the region, even after years of residence, report that they continue to feel like outsiders.

Planning and policy development are the tools available to municipal authorities for creating a socially cohesive urban environment where people exchange services, find companionship, live in relative harmony, and have a sense of community. We can understand planning at the municipal level as a process of community building. The fact that significant segments of the population do not experience this sense of belonging and community is a major challenge for planners that will tax their creativity and offer opportunities for risk-taking.

The Catholic Immigration Centre in Ottawa, where I work, is one of several immigrant-serving agencies in the region. In general, the mandate of these agencies involves welcoming immigrants and refugees and striving to build a more hospitable community. We offer a range of services to newcomers designed to smooth their transition to their country. The range of partnerships that we maintain spans the public, private, and voluntary or social service sectors. We work to develop programs and policies that respond to the needs of newcomers, represent community interests, engage the media and government, speak on behalf of immigrants and refugees, and help nurture formal or informal leadership in emerging communities.

Our vantage point affords us an opportunity to hear first-hand how immigrants feel about their new environment. Although newcomers are not a homogeneous group, we can make some consistent observations. Above all, most immigrants want very much to be Canadian. They are grateful for the opportunity to live in our country and they want to fit in. But they frequently bring with them different values, beliefs, social standards, and social behaviours, and they have to work at conforming to Canadian cultural norms.

Another challenge concerns employment. Because formal qualifications and experience acquired in other countries are not always recognized in Canada, newcomers often end up underemployed or living on welfare, with limited opportunities to upgrade their skills in job hunting. This is a tremendous barrier to gaining a sense of community and belonging, and yet no level of government seems to own the problem. Without assistance in entering the work force at an appropriate level, they end up creating costs that all of us pay. The numbers speak for themselves: 51% of visible minority youth under 19, along with 59% of immigrant youth under 19, live in poverty in Ottawa-Carleton.

Access to recreation also helps reduce the isolation of immigrants and refugees. Many immigrant families and individuals come from circumstances in which they were able to rely on extended family for support in parenting, or where they had community centres that were a focus of social activity. Most Canadian community centres are designed to sell and deliver services. Many immigrants cannot participate because they cannot afford the user fees or because the programs conflict with cultural issues or family responsibilities. In addition, some of the programs simply do not appeal to immigrants. Supports for hockey, for example, are well developed and implicitly recognize that this activity has a social dimension. The same cannot be said for soccer – a popular sport amongst today’s newcomers.
Another challenge for many immigrants is their interaction with the school system. Many come from countries in which teachers have a greater "parenting" relationship with students. This and other culture-based perception gaps lead to misunderstandings. More teachers familiar with the cultures of the major recently-arrived groups would help, as would more opportunities for parent-teacher interviews.

Immigrants also want access to public space for their celebrations. A recent Toronto study of immigrant and minority claims on public space—particularly on streets for parades, marches, and processions—found that of 165 recorded requests for parade permits in 1996, 155 were from ethnic, racial, or religious organizations and groups.

In spite of this strong desire to express collective citizenship and assert their presence, many immigrants, especially visible minorities, feel little sense of ownership of their community and are reluctant to participate at the political level.

**What does this mean for planning?**

Several of these problems do not seem to fit within the normal scope of urban planning. Yet the problems are part of today's demanding urban environment. Spatial planning has a social dimension and is informed by ideas about what is accepted and acceptable. If our ideas about society are undergoing major shifts, planning must reflect these ideas. In other words, this new environment demands new strategic thinking and planning.

We need to redefine urban planning to include social planning. We also need to recognize the importance of working collaboratively and of finding multidisciplinary approaches to problems. Creating harmony in our communities may require us to broaden our view of municipal jurisdiction.

We also need to rethink our ideas about leadership. Our current model of leadership is transactional, focused on ensuring that organizational goals are met and the status quo is maintained. This kind of leadership can be effective in a stable environment, but can easily become a hindrance in a rapidly changing milieu. What is needed is transformational leadership, involving passion, creativity, vision, and the ability to create what does not yet exist.

The challenge facing us is to manage the increasing diversity of our cities, to find a balance between the interests of long-established residents and recent arrivals, and to build that all-important sense of belonging and community. Achieving these goals may involve re-examining some of our fundamental assumptions about urban planning, about assimilation versus integration. It may also require changing the policies and rules that govern urban life. The issues are important enough that they deserve our attention, patience, and investment.

Our shared goal is to feel at home.

**Summary**

Immigrants make up about 20% of the population of the Region of Ottawa-Carleton. Despite many municipal initiatives designed to ensure that newcomers feel at home, many immigrants feel like outsiders. The Catholic Immigration Centre in Ottawa works with many immigrants who express a need for better access to employment opportunities, housing, education, recreation facilities, and spaces for public celebrations. In order to ensure that everyone feels at home in the city, planning must take ownership of the problem and work towards establishing transformational leadership.

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**References**