



Mapping the development of Oak Bay

By Leah Pence

UVic urban geographer Larry McCann has always had a passion for Oak Bay. He grew up playing roller hockey in the parking lot of Oak Bay's municipal hall. But McCann's current interest in the municipality is less about places to practice his slap shot than it is about municipal zoning, social politics, and land development.

Using public assessment and building records from Oak Bay's Community Archives, McCann and his graduate students Esther Parker and Ian Buck have compiled a database of every house – some 7,000 – ever built in Oak Bay. It includes such information as when the house was built, its size and original value, as well as builders and architects when recorded.

The database provides McCann with the basis for comparative research on land development, town planning, and the architectural heritage of Western Canadian cities. With the Oak Bay database now complete, McCann can begin comparing information on communities with similar databases.

The database already reveals certain trends about Oak Bay's residential development. There was a construction boom before the First World War, a lull during the war years, and then steady construction during the 1920s and even throughout the 1930s depression years. Very few houses were built during the Second World

War, but there was considerable development, mostly north of Carnarvon Park, following the war.

McCann will give the municipality a copy of his database for heritage planning purposes and use in the Community Archives. In so doing, he is generously placing the results of years of work into the public domain, for use by others.

"There's no doubt people will analyze our database, perhaps some will use it to publish their own findings on Oak Bay's development. But if it helps the heritage process and the interpretation of Oak Bay's history, then fair enough," he says.

The database is more a work of art than a simple number chart. McCann and his team entered the housing information into a computer-based Geographical Information System (GIS). Using a GIS, researchers can choose numerous ways to select and present information.

McCann is able to map Oak Bay according to the construction date, size, or value of houses, for example. Information is shown on a computer screen as layers of varying colour, enabling them to quickly notice trends in the data. "By hand, it would take a week or two to draw a single map. But with a GIS it's a matter of seconds," says McCann. "It allows you to explore many questions about urban development."



Dr. Larry McCann looks out over Oak Bay, flanked by graduate students Ian Buck and Esther Parker

DIANA NETHERCOTT PHOTO

The database is of particular interest to geographers and heritage planners because of its ability to show the growth of Oak Bay and to identify important historic buildings. "No map has ever been compiled to indicate how the municipality was actually built-up over time," says McCann. With his database, planners will have a powerful tool for illuminating Oak Bay's past development and making decisions about the municipality's future.

facts from the **EDGE**

- Dr. Larry McCann is this year's recipient of the Massey Medal, Canada's highest geographical honour, awarded by the Royal Canadian Geographical Society. He's also an award winning teacher, receiving UVic's social sciences faculty Award for Teaching Excellence in 2000. He has received research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada .

- Originally home to First Nations' peoples, Oak Bay was next settled by the Hudson's Bay Company, including its Uplands Farm. Before municipal incorporation in 1906, large estates mixed with working-class houses. But from the 1930s to the 1960s, Oak Bay passed zoning bylaws based on the building restrictions of the Uplands that allowed only the construction of houses mostly over 1,000 square feet, which usually required a middle-class income. For more on McCann's research on the development of Oak Bay, see communications.uvic.ca/Ring/99feb19/roots.html



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EDGEwise The American roots of Oak Bay

The Union Jack on the flag pole outside the Blethering Place helps reinforce the idea that Oak Bay is a little England. But the area's urban development has been influenced more by American than British ideas. The Uplands, which set the standard for Oak Bay's development from the 1930s to 1970s, was designed by an American firm.

"We sometimes like to think that we are very British in character, but the American influence

on the urban landscape of western Canadian cities is really quite profound," says McCann.

The Uplands was designed by an American, John Olmsted, who was then North America's leading landscape architect. Olmsted's father, Frederick Law Olmsted, planned New York's Central Park and Montreal's Mount Royal Park.

The Olmsted firm was hired by the CPR and the Hudson's Bay Company — some of Canada's largest corporate land developers — to create

neighbourhoods in Victoria, Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary and Winnipeg.

The firm designed many prestigious subdivisions of large lots and curving streets, including the Uplands in 1907. The park-like feel of these neighbourhoods results from breaking the grid pattern and designing with nature. The innovation of curving streets caught on and became a trend in many neighbourhoods planned after the Second World War.