**Urban and Regional Planning**

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In broadest terms, urban and regional planning is the process by which communities attempt to control and/or design change and development in their physical environments. It has been practised under many names: town planning, city planning, community planning, land use planning, and physical environment planning. The object of planning is the "physical environment," which is taken to mean land and all its uses, along with everything that has tangible existence on or beneath the land surface. Planning also includes the manner and style by which buildings are laid out in a city, and the design of public places.

Physical environments are partly natural and partly man-made. A satisfying man-made or "built" environment is the ultimate goal of planning, but relations between natural and built environments, and interactions between people and their environments, are also of vital concern. Human activities can have negative impacts upon the natural environment, just as certain natural conditions are hazardous to human well-being. Planners are equally concerned to protect natural environments from the adverse effects of human use (eg, water pollution), and to protect people from adverse natural circumstances (eg, flood zones).

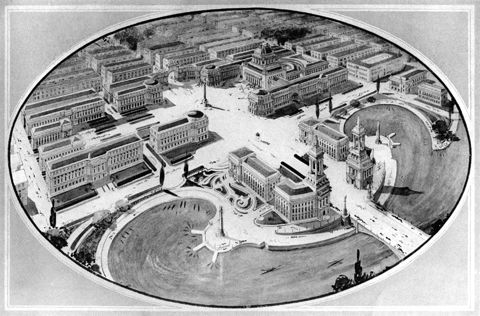
To plan the physical environment means to impose some deliberate order upon it, with the aim of achieving a desired standard of environmental quality. Environmental quality is the heart of planning practice, although there is no universal agreement about the characteristics of a "good" or well-ordered environment. Different cultures have tended to value environmental qualities differently and to organize their environments in different ways. Many factors influence the choice of qualities that are most desired at a particular time and place. Each community, through social and political processes, must set its own standards of a good physical environment. Also, people's needs, tastes and economic circumstances influence the quality of environments that are planned and built.

A variety of issues fall within the scope of urban and regional planning, depending partly on the geographical scale of the planning area. Regional planners will be concerned with such matters as the protection of farmland or other valued resource sites (eg, forests, mineral deposits, seashores, lakeshores); the preservation of unique natural or historical features; the locations of highways and other transport facilities, such as [PIPELINES](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/pipeline) or airports; and the growth prospects of communities located throughout the region. If the region is organized around a large city, the planners must also take account of the problems caused by the city's expansion, and its impact upon the surrounding countryside and nearby towns.

For cities and towns, planning issues are of 2 general kinds. First there is a need to think ahead to accommodate the city's growth - deciding which lands should be built on and when, and whether they should be used for residential development, for industry or for some more specialized function, such as a shopping centre or playing fields. Eventually, more detailed plans will also be required to determine the layout of every piece of land. The street network has to be designed; sites have to be reserved for schools and parks, shops, public buildings and religious institutions; provision has to be made for transit services and utilities; and development standards have to be set and design ideas have to be tested to ensure that the desired environmental quality is achieved.

A second group of issues concerns those parts of the community that are already developed. Planners will distinguish between areas where change is not desired and those where change is either unavoidable or judged to be needed. In the former case, the concern is for maintaining the built environment at its existing quality, regardless of pressures for change. This applies particularly to inner-city neighbourhoods which face pressures for apartment redevelopment or for streets to be widened to permit through traffic. In the latter case, the problem is to facilitate the changes that are considered most desirable. In one situation this may mean that a deteriorating area has to be upgraded; in another it may mean that buildings have to be demolished to allow their sites to be used in a new and different way. The problems of rapidly changing downtowns, of outdated industrial and warehousing districts, and of inner-city neighbourhoods experiencing a complex mix of social and physical changes all have to be dealt with by planners and public authorities. So, too, must special issues such as [HERITAGE CONSERVATION](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/heritage-conservation), the relocation of railway tracks, the provision of rapid-transit facilities, and the special housing needs of different groups of people.

Urban environments continue to change. As cities age, it becomes more difficult and more expensive to maintain environmental quality. People's needs and desires change as well, and the built environment must be constantly adapted. Special restoration or revitalization programs may be undertaken to try to draw business back to declining shopping districts and stimulate the local economy. Yet investment funds, both public and private, are in shorter supply than in times of economic growth. The download of services from the higher levels of governments to the municipal level also competes for municipal funds.

[](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/customcode/TCEMediaPopup.cfm?Language=E&ArticleID=A0008273&MediaID=6175&TB_iframe=true&height=612&width=885&modal=true)

**Calgary Civic Centre Plan**

Plan by English planner Thomas Mawson published in 1914 (courtesy City of Calgary Archives).



**Social and Political Foundations** Like all types of planning (eg, [REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/regional-development-planning); [NATIONAL CAPITAL COMMISSION](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/national-capital-commission); [URBAN DESIGN](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/urban-design)), planning cities and regions finds its rationale in the belief that a controllable future offers more promise than an uncontrolled one, and that a planned environment provides better opportunities for all people to enjoy their community setting. Urban and regional planning is but one of many approaches adopted by society for achieving the security, comfort and long-term betterment of its members. This does not mean that all plans are prepared by governments, or that all planners are public servants, but it does mean that planning systems are usually designed to ensure that the needs of the entire community are properly considered. Plans come from many sources - from individuals, private corporations and public agencies - all of which have special ends or interests to pursue. In the "planned" community a higher level of forethought and public control is imposed, not to prevent these individual plans from being realized but to ensure that they harmonize with one another and with the overall needs of the community.

It is rarely possible to demonstrate that an action taken in anticipation of the future will benefit an entire community. It is also difficult to show that a single public interest can be served. More commonly, planning is a matter of trying to decide which of many competing interests is more deserving, while also trying to treat everyone in a fair and lawful manner. Should a city council allow a shopping centre to be built in a residential area? An issue like this raises questions about personal rights and freedoms, and about the powers and obligations of public authorities. Hence, the ultimate planning decisions are political decisions, since politics is society's way of settling the conflicts that arise within a community.

Planning, then, is a way by which communities determine how they would like their environment to be. What kinds of benefits can they then look forward to? Official definitions in Canada have generally responded to this question by describing planning as a type of [CONSERVATION](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/conservation). It is aimed at the wise use and management of community resources, a critical one being land. The idea that land is both a private commodity and a community resource is controversial, but Canadian law has established that there is a legitimate community interest in the development of any land. Large amounts of public money have to be spent on such things as transport facilities, water treatment plants, schools and parks.