REIMAGINED STREET NETWORK FOR SUBURBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS CHOSEN AS SHIFT2025 WINNER

A SHIFT IN SUBURBAN THINKING

Lana Hall

A design proposal named as one of the **Ontario Association of Architect**'s (OAA) winning SHIFT2025 Challenge selections seeks to reimagine suburban street networks to make them more walkable and community-oriented.

The design concept, coined the "subdivillage," was led by **Smart Density** founder **Naama Blonder** and Smart Density architect **Misha Bereznyak**. The subdivillage concept embraces low-density growth by redesigning suburban street networks to improve walkability, cycling, and local trips within the constraints of low-density urban form, car reliance, and limited public transit, which are often the reality of suburban neighbourhoods.

Blonder calls it a "softer, more resource-effective way to build the standard subdivision."

The premise of the subdivillage is all about adaptation, Blonder explains to *NRU*. People are always going to want (or need) to live in the suburbs, so the question for the design team became how can subdivisions be designed to be walkable and community-oriented on a hyper-local scale, even within the context of a larger, more car-dependent suburb?

To accomplish this, the subdivillage design proposes a combination of three street types, chosen for their potential to accommodate pedestrians, cyclists, and, where needed, vehicles. A mews, for example, is a short residential street designed for very slow driving that allows for more useable front yards. A through street accommodates vehicle traffic, but in the subdivillage design, uses perpendicular street parking, meaning sidewalks and front yards remain contiguous and are not interrupted by driveways. A green street permits only pedestrian, cycling, and emergency or service vehicle access.

In addition to carefully choosing the street types themselves, the subdivillage design proposes a street network layout where the major pedestrian and cycling travel networks are separate from the major car street network.

In a contemporary subdivision, says Blonder, residents walking or cycling significant distances are often forced to use major arterial streets, increasing the risk of vehicle-pedestrian conflict and discouraging active transportation. The conscious choice of street design in the subdivillage helps pedestrians, including children, feel prioritized, while gently influencing the behaviour of motorists.

"…Design can shape behaviour," says Blonder. "… We're saying, to access your garage you need to drive slow, but that the streets are very short, so you don't have to

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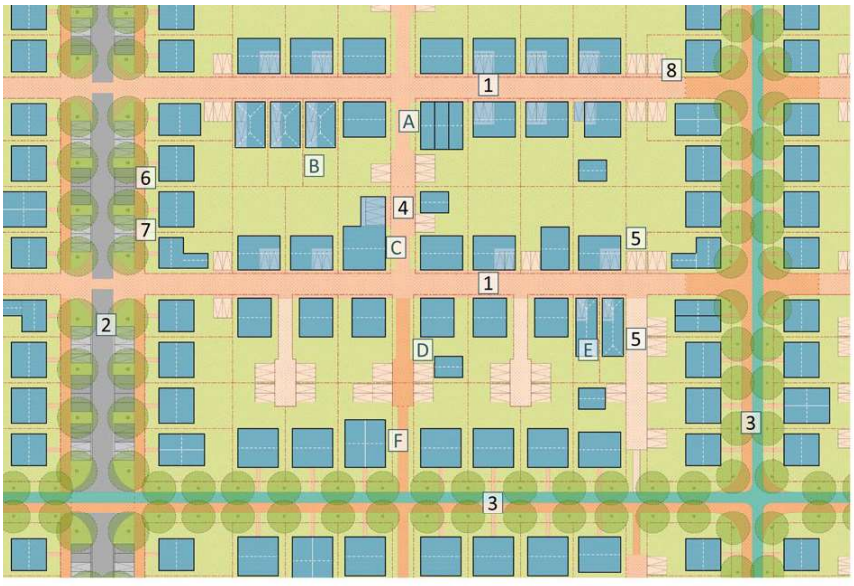

Image of a proposed street layout using the "subdivillage" design concept. The Subdivillage, created by Smart Density, was named as one of the Ontario Association of Architect's (OAA) SHIFT 2025 challenge selections. It seeks to reimagine suburban street networks to make them more walkable and community-oriented, even within the context of a larger, more car-dependent suburb, by carefully combining through streets for vehicles, streets for lower driving speeds (mews), and streets for cyclists, pedestrians and service vehicles only (green streets).

SOURCE: SMART DENSITY

A SHIFT IN THINKING

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drive slow for too long."

As institutions like churches and local businesses play a decreased role in neighbourhoods, there are fewer places for people to interact locally, so it's even more important for suburban street networks to facilitate pedestrian interaction, she notes.

The subdivillage concept is intended for the communities where the dominant type of development is the standard subdivision: a low-density area composed almost exclusively of single-family homes, usually with two parking spaces per household. This is the most common development form at the edges of cities throughout the GTA, in most small towns, and in rural areas, places where most development takes place across Canada, says Blonder, noting that the sites that lend themselves well to development of a subdivillage have limited transit infrastructure, dispersed employment opportunities, and low land values that would not support the full urban development package of transit access, high-density housing, and a wide range of local amenities.

"We learned that 85 per cent of all the new homes [developed in the suburbs] are single family homes, and we said 'What can we do with that stat?' …That's what people want. So how can we make [suburban living] better?"

Jurors for the SHIFT2025 Challenge praised the subdivillage's ability to respond to real-world limitations. "This is a smart, ambitious, but realistic proposal that sets up what it can't do and what it can do," reads an anonymous juror comment. "It's sensitive to what it can actually accomplish in terms of changing the scale of relationship between people, cars, and homes."

This year, the SHIFT2025 challenge's theme was "reshaping communities," a subject that focuses on the critical need for adaptable and sustainable architectural solutions to tackle challenges like climate change, the housing shortage, and social shifts. The subdivillage addresses this theme by helping car-dependent neighbourhoods become more adaptable and functional for cyclists and pedestrians, while still allowing residents to travel by car if necessary. It also responds to the physical and social changes of suburban design. Over time, home sizes and car ownership rates have increased in the suburbs, while lot sizes have shrunk. The subdivillage allows these areas to regain the community feel that made older suburbs a more attractive option for homeowners.

In a statement announcing the six winning selections, OAA president **Ted Wilson** said each of the finalists showcased "how architectural thinking can inspire and shape a future where communities not only adapt, but also thrive in the face of uncertainty."

To learn more about this year's winners of the OAA SHIFT Challenge, please visit the OAA website here, and watch this space for upcoming stories on other winning projects.