

# URBAN DESIGN FOR DEVELOPING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN CULTURALLY-DIVERSE NEIGHBOURHOODS

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## **Abstract**

*A sense of community is a fundamental requirement for communities to thrive and prosper. However, in today's multi-ethnic environments developing or maintaining a sense of community is becoming increasingly challenging especially in cities such as Calgary, Canada, which are experiencing rapid population diversification. Thus, there is a growing need for such cities to actively support their diverse populations in building a sense of community.*

*Nearly a century of scholarship points to the link between the physical environment and social behaviour and recognizes the urban environment as a catalyst in enhancing a sense of community among citizens. However, assessments to identify how urban environments can facilitate a sense of community among diverse populations remain rare in urban planning and design.*

*The aim of this case study was to identify how the physical environments can support building a sense of community among culturally-diverse populations, and thus identify strategies for making cities more resilient and sustainable in the face of rapid demographic changes. For this research, the Family Housing Complex at the University of Calgary was selected as a case study due to being a widely-diverse population living in a single neighbourhood. Using a number of observation techniques and interviews, the study focused on the diverse day-to-day encounters among residents to identify opportunities for developing a sense of community among them.*

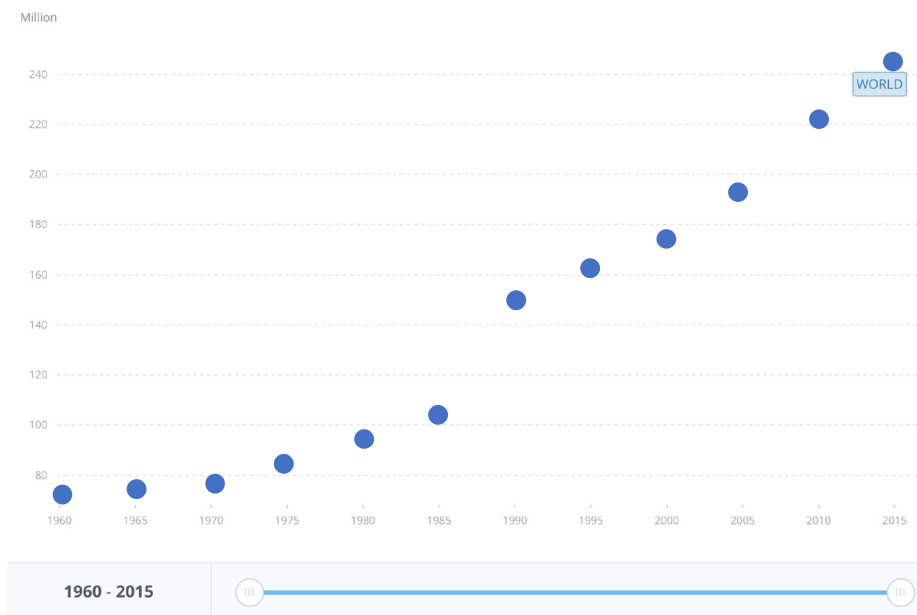
**Keywords:** culturally-diverse neighbourhoods, urban design, ethnographic research, and sense of community

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## Introduction

As a result of rising globalization and urbanization, many people are on the move seeking new locations to live and work. Due to this phenomenon, contemporary urban environments in migrant host countries are becoming increasingly multicultural. This increased movement is evident through the worldwide migration level data issued by the World Bank (2012). As illustrated in **Fig.**, the total number of migrants rose from nearly 70 million to nearly 80 million between 1960 - 1975, this rose again to nearly 105 million in 1985, to 160 million in 1995, and to 190 million in 2005, where today the world-wide migration is at nearly at 243 million (The World Bank, 2012). These statistics show that the scale of migration has significantly increased in today's context, bringing with it cultural diversity to the host cities.



**Fig.1:** International migration levels  
Source: (The World Bank, 2012)

As highlighted by Wood & Landry (2008) in *The intercultural city: planning for diversity advantage*, cultural diversity within a given city can immensely affect the development of the city. This impact can be either positive or negative to the social, political and economic development of that city. This, in turn, could determine whether that city will flourish or decline in the 21st century.

The main purpose of our research is to identify how urban design can facilitate an intercultural sense of community among culturally-diverse populations, and thus identify material strategies for making cities more resilient and sustainable in the face of rapid demographic changes. We achieved this by examining the impact of urban design on residents' behaviour and thought in a particularly intercultural community, Varsity Courts at the University of Calgary, Canada.

## **Cultural Diversity**

The term “culture” is a commonly used word. However, it is also a very complex term, which holds various interpretations and perceptions. As Jenks (1993) and Eagleton (2016) highlights, among the varied understandings of the concept of culture, the main concepts that can be seen in the existing literature are as follows:

1. culture as a process of intellectual and cognitive development.
2. culture as an intellectual and moral development.
3. culture as a body of intellectual and artistic work.
4. culture as a whole way of life.

The analysis of these concepts and the thinking behind them, points to two main shared characteristics among these concepts. The first is the understanding of culture as being realized through the behaviour and beliefs of groups of people and the second is the perception that cultural forms and norms inform the behaviours and beliefs of people. Thus, while we can identify culture as a constantly changing and developing aspect, we can also recognize culture as being both influenced and as influencing the experiences of individuals. Therefore, as Seidler (2010) has pointed out, culture is an important facet of our lives that can “impact various aspects of society, including economic and political systems that exist within a given community”.

Accordingly, cultural diversity can immensely affect the social, political, and economic systems within that city. As many theorists such as Wood (2010) have noted, under the right conditions, cultural diversity is an asset that holds the potential for many positive outcomes due to the greater pool of people who bring with them a range of skills, life experiences and knowledge. For example, increased potential for gaining more advanced solutions for various problems and enhanced access to markets and capital. Similarly, they have also pointed out the potential negative effects of such diversity in instances where the proper conditions do not exist. For example, the possibilities for conflict that could lead to segregation, rivalry for resources and economic uncertainty. Hence, there is a growing need for migrant host cities to positively and creatively adapt in responding to these growing demographic shifts.

## **Building a sense of community in culturally diverse neighbourhoods**

Previous research done to identify the favourable conditions to enhance the positive and minimize the negative effects of cultural diversity, has identified the need for building a shared sense of belonging and overcoming differences among culturally diverse individuals through providing the opportunity to support one another (Council of Europe, 2013). In essence, these literature point to the need for developing a sense of community among culturally diverse populations. McMillan & Chavis (1986, p.9) have defined a sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together”. Furthermore, as Peterman (2000, p.21) has pointed out, the strength of such a sense of community relies on “the extent to which the members of that community interact with each other, spend time together, rely on each other, celebrate together, mourn together and even simply talk to each other”. Thus, to improve the positive aspects of this ever-increasing cultural diversity, a sense of community among culturally diverse populations must be developed.

As highlighted above, the development of a mutual sense of community relies on cooperative mixing that occurs among a group of individuals. To develop this mutual sense of community in a multicultural environment, communities must be provided with favourable conditions that enable positive interactions and reciprocities among individuals. As authors such as Wood & Landry, (2008) and Zapata-Barrero (2015) have highlighted, there are many ways through which such mixing can be promoted. Among them, the physical design of urban environments has been identified as one such catalyst contributing to the development of a sense of community among culturally diverse individuals (Talen, 2008 and Wood, 2015). Hence, it becomes vital to identify how the urban environments of such neighbourhoods can be designed to build a sense of community among those living there. While many authors such as Jacobs (1961); Kim (2007) and Mumford (1961) have highlighted the need to facilitate social mixing among populations, assessments to identify the conditions of the urban environments needed to facilitate a sense of community among culturally-diverse populations remains rare in urban planning and design. Hence, there is a need to fill this gap in the research through design analysis and occupancy evaluation of existing culturally-diverse neighbourhoods, such as the University of Calgary's Varsity Courts, which functions very similar to an ordinary neighbourhood in Calgary.

### Research methodology and methods

For this research, we employed a qualitative research approach, primarily through ethnographic observation, interviews, and informant-guided tours. Varsity Courts at the University of Calgary was selected as the case study for this research as it is an existing example of a widely-diverse population living in a single urban residential area. While the ethnographic observations were conducted in the public spaces within Varsity Courts, a random sample consisting of 30 current residents of the complex were selected as informants for the study. Fig. , Fig. , Fig. , and Fig. indicates the religious background, nationality, age, and gender distribution of the study participants respectively. An effort was made to recruit participants who represented the diversity within Varsity Courts.

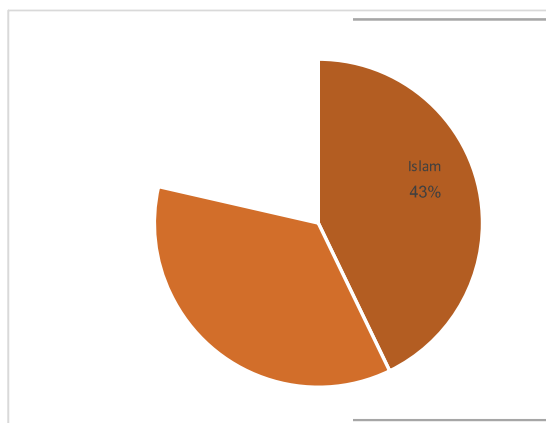


Fig. 2: The distribution of the religious backgrounds of the study participants

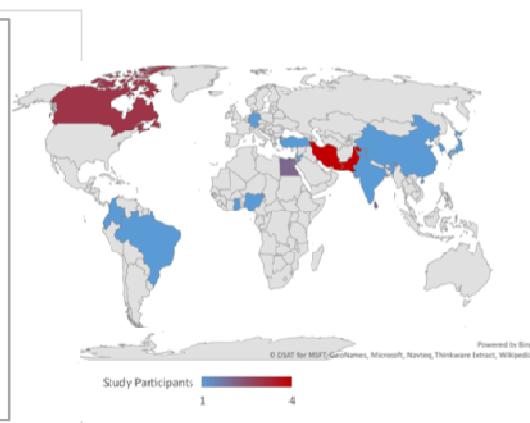
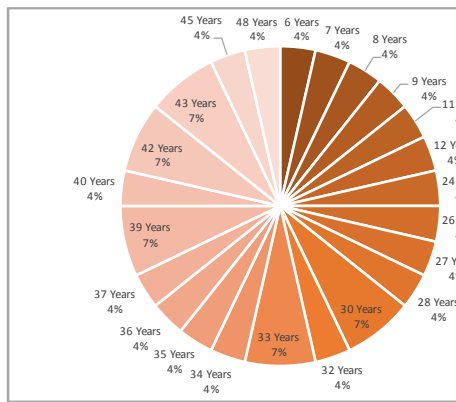
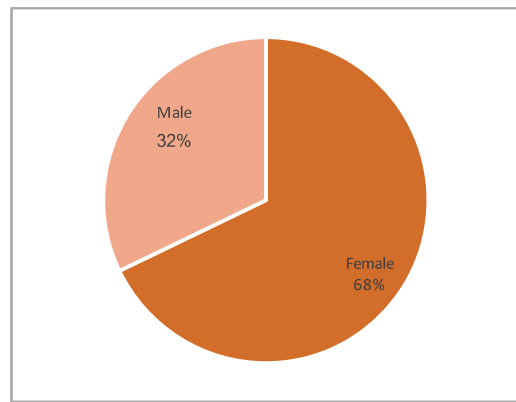


Fig. 3: The distribution of nationalities of the study participants



**Fig. 4:** The distribution of the age of the study participants

Source: Author



**Fig.5:** The distribution of the gender of the study participants

Source: Author

The study interviews took a semi-structured format with some predetermined questions, which participants were encouraged to expand on. During the interviews, the participants were also asked to guide the researcher through a map of the complex, showing the routes they take and the spaces where they interact with other residents. The focus of the interviews and the guided walks were to elicit the following four points;

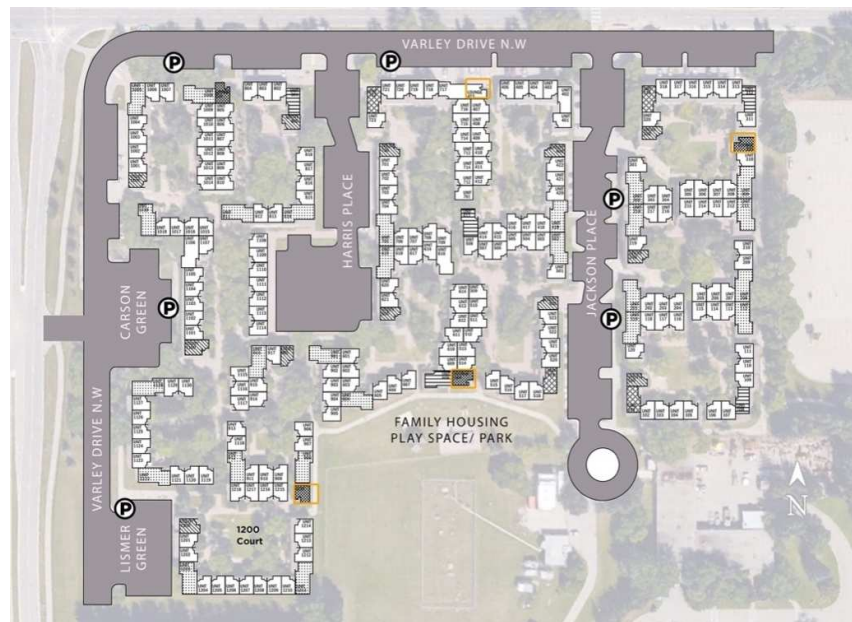
1. Their opinions on building a mutual sense of community in multicultural environments.
2. How their social connections are formed with other individuals in Varsity Courts, a culturally diverse residential area.
3. Their opinions on how the urban design of spaces help them form social connections at Varsity Courts.
4. Their opinions on how the urban design of Varsity Courts can be improved to build a better sense of community among culturally diverse individuals.

The interviews, together with non-participant observation, were conducted to examine the impact of the urban design of Varsity Courts on its resident's behaviour patterns and experiences. The purpose was to identify the urban design interventions that support or could support positive interactions among culturally-diverse individuals, and which can ultimately lead to developing a mutual sense of community among residents.

### University of Calgary Varsity Courts

Varsity Courts at the University of Calgary is a residential area designed in 1969 for University of Calgary students with families. As shown in

Fig. , this residential area consists of 244 townhouses, which varies from one-three bedroom units, arranged in clusters. There are 12 such clusters, which are almost identical in size and shape. One cluster approximately comprises 18-20 inward looking, housing units arranged around a garden court, common utility room, garbage collection areas, and a car park for both residents and visitors. Furthermore, the complex has in total three lounges, a children's resource library, and a playground area that is shared by all the families of the complex.



**Fig. 6 :**University of Calgary, Varsity Courts  
Source: Author

Currently, Varsity Courts contains families with over 25 different nationalities. Due to the variation in the types (i.e, single parent, nuclear, extended, etc.) and sizes and cultures of families, Varsity Courts comprises individuals belonging to various age groups, cultures, educational and economic backgrounds, and operates as an excellent existing example of a widely-diverse population living in a single urban environment. Hence, though this complex is managed and maintained by the residential services department of the University of Calgary, this area functions as a small neighbourhood on its own.

### **Analysis and results**

To analyse the derived data, we used five out of the seven scrutiny techniques for identifying prominent themes within the interviews highlighted by Ryan & Bernard (2003) in Techniques to Identify Themes. These include searching for repetitions, metaphors and analogies, similarities and differences, missing data and theory related material within the data. These themes were then analysed as five different categories described in the following section.

The need for building a mutual sense of community:

Interestingly, all the study participants, including children as young as 6 years, highlighted, diversity as an asset and a benefit for the neighbourhood. As Toma, a seven-year-old boy stated: "I really like it. We get to learn and play so many different games from different countries". Similar to Toma, a majority of the study participants claimed that they got along well with their neighbours, from diverse cultures. As a result, they felt they had gained new knowledge and obtained new resources for their lives. Most of these responders also recognized that the diversity of Varsity Courts is an unavoidable reality in most urban environments already, or will be in the near future.

Many study respondents also reported, that living at Varsity Courts, a multicultural environment, for several years, had dramatically changed their perceptions and attitudes towards certain cultural groups. As Kira, a middle-aged mother pointed out, “we met a lot of people and got to know more about other cultures. Once we spoke and became friends with one another, we realized that everyone is the same and deep down, we are all just human beings.”

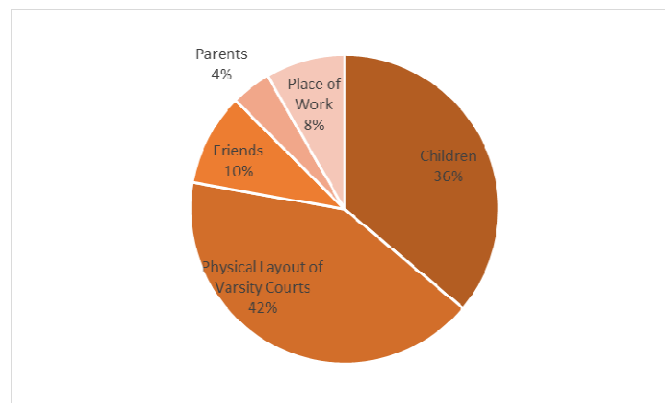
Despite their generally positive views on diversity, half of the respondents also recognized the challenges it presented. For example, culturally or religiously similar individuals often tend to group together, based on mutual interests and beliefs. This presents a challenge as such groups can segregate themselves from others, leading to a lack of social cohesion within a neighbourhood. On a similar note, an interesting notion respondents raised was that, in a multicultural environment, cultural differences create barriers. Thus, there is a need for building common denominators that unite them cross-culturally. Consequently, the need for building a mutual sense of community among culturally diverse individuals was clearly indicated by the vast majority of study participants.

#### Seeking Commonality

To identify the connections formed within Varsity Courts, respondents were asked to describe the connections they have formed in Varsity Courts, and the interactions that have led to these connections. Through the responses given by the adults it was revealed that the majority of connections formed by the adults were with those who were either from the same country, spoke the same language, or shared the same religious background.

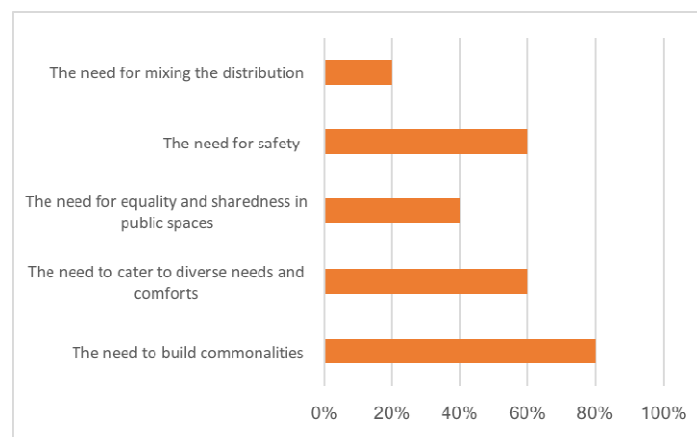
Furthermore, the analysis showed that the study participants recognized the physical layout as the highest contributing factor in relation to the formation of connections. The factor highlighted as the next highest in supporting connections are children. As pointed out by Janet a 43-year-old single mother, “all the people I know are because of my son”. Considering the

Fig., these two factors can be identified as the highest contributing aspects in developing connections. The analysis also pointed out that a handful of connections are formed due to sharing a similar work location, and through friends and parents.



**Fig.7** : Factors contributing for the formation of connections  
Source: Author

These patterns indicate that, in most instances, the connections formed among adults are due to some commonality. Likewise, though the connections created among the children were not limited to ethnicity, religion or even language, much of the connections children made were recognized as the result of the location of their homes and the schools they attended. Thus, it become clear that most connections were made due to a commonality of some sort, cultural, social or spatial. The interviews also revealed themes highlighting the type of environment required for building cross-cultural connections. This points to various spatial aspects that urban designers must consider in building a mutual sense of community among culturally diverse individuals. As Fig .reveals the common themes that emerged were the need for equality and sharedness, for safety, for flexibility. These themes comprise the last three sections of this paper.



**Fig .8 :** The percentage of study participants who have indicated the identified common themes  
Source: Author

#### The need for equality and sharedness in public spaces

One of the most significant themes apparent in many interviews was the need for public spaces that portray equality and sharedness. As revealed by many respondents this feature aids in minimizing exclusion and increasing accessibility, which would result in drawing more people to public spaces and consequently, improving interactions amongst one another.

Many respondents identified the common playground, which is located at the edge of Varsity Courts, as the place where most new connections are created among residents. As pointed out by the respondents, this is mainly due to the sharedness of the space. However, participants also recognized that the number of interactions that take place in the playground would have further increased, had the playground been in the middle of Varsity Courts, with equal access for all residents. This highlights the need for equality with the sharedness of public space.

Similarly, the courtyard spaces located in the middle of each cluster of houses (i.e, each court) were identified as another location that provides many opportunities for interaction among the residents. Fig. and Fig. are great indications of the types of interactions that take place in these courtyard spaces. Nevertheless, most respondents claimed that the interactions which occurred in the courtyards was much different from those that occur in the playground areas. Many respondents identified courtyard spaces as excellent spaces for developing stronger and more



meaningful connections and relationships among residents due to the shared sense of belonging and high frequency of interactions that occur among the residents.



**Fig. 9 :** A typical evening in a shared courtyard space  
Source: Author

**Fig.10:** Residents gathering for a potluck in a shared courtyard space

#### The need for safety

Safety was another factor that was prominent among the themes identified throughout the interviews. Residents highlighted safety as an important factor contributing to their usage of the public spaces within Varsity Courts. The study participants highlighted two main types of safety, personal security and safety from vehicles.

Concerning personal safety, most participants indicated that they felt safe within the confines of Varsity Courts. The main reason behind this perception of safety was knowing that most residents are affiliated with the University. It was further revealed that this sense of safety is heightened due to the various design features of Varsity Courts. One such design feature is the layout of the neighbourhood, where public spaces are surrounded by houses, which provides a sense of safety. Another important revealed feature was the separation of communal spaces such as the playground areas, and the common courtyards, from vehicular movement, which greatly aided in providing a sense of safety from vehicles.

#### The need for Flexibility

When respondents were questioned about their perception of the current Varsity Court public spaces, and how they would improve them to increase cross-cultural interactions, most respondents highlighted the need for designing public spaces that facilitate the diverse needs of all residents. Most adult respondents revealed the inability to conduct preferred activities in the current spaces as most spaces are only appropriate for certain uses or user groups. A common example that was given by the respondents is the playground area, which currently only caters towards children. It was claimed that the usage of the playground would have further increased if the playground facilitated activities for a wider user group. Thus, while highlighting that different individuals have different requirements, especially in multi-cultural environments, the responses emphasized the need for designing flexible and adaptable public spaces that balance individual interests.

## Concluding remarks

Using a case study method, Varsity Courts was investigated to identify the impact of urban design on residents' behaviours and experiences. This was done to determine opportunities for using urban design in supporting positive interactions among diverse populations and thereby help promote a mutual sense of community among individuals within existing and future culturally-diverse neighbourhoods. While the interviews proved the need for building a mutual sense of community among culturally-diverse individuals, one of the study's key findings was that most connections between individuals are formed mainly due to commonality of some sort. This revealed the need for urban designers to facilitate in building commonalities among culturally-diverse individuals. For example, the Varsity Courts complex, with houses grouped around shared courtyards has led to building commonalities among culturally-diverse individuals. This is because the common courtyard has now become a shared common factor among the multicultural residents. Furthermore, the interviews highlighted the main environmental characteristics that are required for building cross-cultural connections, specifically: equality and sharedness, safety and flexibility. Maintaining such spatial characteristics is useful for building a sense of community not only in culturally-diverse residential areas but in any kind of residential area. We believe that these research findings will support planners, architects, policy makers and other parties involved in campus, neighbourhood, and city development to successfully develop intercultural communities in the future.

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