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AN EVALUATION OF SOCIALLY RESPONSIVE PLANNING IN A NEW RESOURCE TOWN

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ABSTRACT. New resource towns on the Canadian frontier have presented planners with opportunities to experiment with innovative planning ideas which attempt to resolve the persistent problems of such communities. In the planning of Tumbler Ridge, a new coal mining town in British Columbia, "socially responsive planning" was an attempt to develop a town using principles derived from social science research. In this paper the reactions of residents to selected attributes which reflect the application of these principles are examined five years after settlement began. Ratings of community attributes offer an indication of aspects of residential satisfaction, while the results of a principal components analysis suggest the dimensionality of residents' evaluative structures and provide a useful framework within which to consider planning issues. Issues examined are: the association between employment and the community environment; the suitability of the environment for children; and the social environment. While social aspects of the new community are judged as satisfactory, less positive elements reflect the underlying influence of the economic well-being of the mining company on overall community satisfaction. When compared to indicators of community satisfaction in other western Canadian resource towns, ratings for Tumbler Ridge tend to be fairly low. It is concluded that the inability of planners to adequately control implementation or continuity of their ideas has resulted in a community not distinctly different from other resource towns. Efforts have been further hampered by a lack of adequate models of the distinctive dynamics of resource communities.

INTRODUCTION

Social engineering to improve the quality of life has always been one of the objectives of town planning, thus at the turn of the last century the early "garden cities" of Ebenezer Howard were a solution to the industrial slums and associated social pathologies of urban Britain and later the design of neighbourhood units as proposed by Clarence Perry offered social benefits to counter the rapid growth and impersonalisation of the cities (Hodge, 1986). Until recently the underlying social theory directing such ideas has been ill-defined. Ruralism was at the root of much early planning with a belief in the moral and spiritual values endowed by a rural or small town environment and there was a belief in environmental determinism whereby human behaviour was
seen as a direct one-way response to the physical environment. More recently it has been recognised that the relationship between behaviour and the built environment is more complex requiring a more thorough knowledge of social and behavioural response to design. To address this need environmental design research has evolved as an interdisciplinary area of study which attempts to establish social and behavioural principles as the basis for planning and design. While research began in the early 1960s, application has been slow, primarily due to the problems of translating social principles into design elements (Churchman and Ginsberg, 1984).

The objective of this paper is to examine the application of “socially responsive planning” (Paget and Rabnett, 1979) — an approach which applies the principles of environmental design research — to ascertain its effects on community satisfaction in a new Canadian mining town. The study community is Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia, a coal mining town situated in the Peace River district of the province, 1200 km northeast of Vancouver, in the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The town, which was completed in 1982 and has a population of approximately 5000, represents the only attempt in Canada to comprehensively plan an entire community using social concerns as the guiding principles.

A multi-method approach to data collection was employed to examine the planning of Tumbler Ridge which included quantitative data derived primarily from a resident survey as well as qualitative data from key informant interviews and other community-based data sources. To place this study in context a brief overview of the history of planning in new Canadian resource towns and the distinctive problems that these communities experience is first presented. The socially responsive planning model employed in Tumbler Ridge is then described, before the details of the present study, as the research design parallels the planning process. Various measures of community satisfaction derived from the resident survey form the basis of discussion which draws upon other data to aid in illuminating the findings.

NEW RESOURCE TOWN PLANNING IN CANADA

It has been common practice in Canada to build new towns to support