

ON LOCATION  
IN CANADA

# Garrison Woods, Calgary

Garrison Woods illustrates the regeneration of a former military base in the highly suburban Canadian city of Calgary to help meet the growing demand for an urban lifestyle.

The decommissioning between 1995 and 1997 of Canadian Forces Base Calgary (CFB Calgary) created an unprecedented opportunity for the redevelopment of a large parcel of land only seven kilometres from the city centre and surrounded by existing communities where linkages and complementary uses could easily be made. The 184 hectare parcel was acquired by Canada Lands Company (CLC), a self-funding crown corporation that purchases strategic government land no longer required by the federal government at market prices and oversees the socially responsible regeneration of the sites. The former base lands were divided into CFB East and CFB West. This case study concerns the regeneration and development of the 71 hectare CFB East portion which was completed in 2003 and renamed Garrison Woods.

## The redevelopment

- Integration of six hectares of pre-existing community facilities (a military museum and a twin hockey arena)
- Two specialised schools (a private academy and a French immersion public school) housed in refurbished former military buildings
- Parks, playgrounds and public spaces (8% of the total area)
- 6500 square metres of retail space
- Mixed residential neighbourhoods at 26 units per hectare – about 1600 units total
- Refurbishment of over 400 existing former military housing units, which provided more affordable housing



- 60% of housing units are multi-family, providing smaller and more affordable housing units
- Two complexes of seniors and assisted living housing
- Integration with and assisted in the regeneration of an adjacent commercial area

During its time as a military base, CFB East was a residential area for military families built at a density of approximately 7.5 units per hectare. Housing was primarily detached single family bungalows and semi-detached homes of 1.5 and 2 storeys.

Surrounding neighbourhoods of civilian housing are primarily low-density post-war suburban style of detached single-family homes with little diversity. These areas have begun to see some infill development as the city has grown and the market has strengthened.

To the north is an established commercial centre of small shops and businesses known as the Marda Loop Business Revitalization Zone (BRZ). An early component of the redevelopment scheme was the recognition of the importance of integration with this existing retail area. It now forms a more cohesive retail area surrounded by higher-density housing, which is located relatively close to public transport networks and regional pedestrian and bike networks.

As part of their mandate to promote socially responsible and environmentally sustainable development CLC pursued the principles of smart growth and the new urban approach of recent developments like Seaside, Florida; and Poundbury in Dorset. A further part of promoting the environmental aspects of the plan was the decision to refurbish the existing housing stock where possible rather than demolishing it and taking it to the landfill. Accordingly 400 of the 565 former military housing units were refurbished and, where necessary, moved in order to achieve higher levels of density. A great deal of effort was also made to retain existing mature trees and the existing historic street configuration.

As a community, Garrison Woods has quickly developed into one characterised by diversity of urban form particularly, it must be said, by Calgary standards. The City of Calgary has strategic planning

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policies with sustainable development, transport and diverse housing stock at their core, however these targets are rarely achieved and low-density detached single-family suburbs remain dominant. In the past ten years the city has experienced an economic boom and the resulting pressure on the housing market has led to even further urban sprawl.

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Garrison Woods is an important step in the right direction. Its popularity with young professionals, singles, seniors, and families alike demonstrates that, contrary to established belief, the market for this kind of development is strong.

### Character

The original street configuration and location surrounded by existing communities formed the context for the new plan. The original plan of the area when it was laid out for military housing was based on that of the garden city of Radburn, New Jersey and Garrison Woods has maintained some of the features of this configuration with some streets fronting (rather than backing) onto parks. Separated pedestrian and vehicle networks have been provided in some areas.

An important factor in developing a distinct character for the area was the desire to reference the military history of the site and retain as many existing features as possible. Former military houses were refurbished rather than demolished and mature trees were retained on the site. Streets are named after battles fought by Canadian troops during World War I and the landscaping has a strong interpretative element that recognises Canada's

military past and the former military history of the site. History generally is also a central point of reference for the development as the houses are also designed in various historical styles, typical of Calgary's much older residential communities.

It was important both to the developer, Canada Lands Company (CLC), and to the surrounding communities, that there be strong linkages and an element of continuity between Garrison Woods and existing, adjacent neighbourhoods and the Marda Loop commercial district. This was achieved through a modified grid street pattern that provides a sense of connectivity and legibility rather than insularity and division. There is no



“Public space is surrounded by houses that have frontage to it, ensuring that it is well used by the residents”



identifiable difference between the affordable housing and the market rate housing; they were subject to the same architectural codes.

Garrison Woods is located on the outer edge of Calgary’s older inner city neighbourhoods, making the shift to a more urban character appropriate.

Although it is largely surrounded by older inner city/inner suburban style development, Garrison Woods has introduced a far more urban character with features such as rear lanes for vehicles with garages to the rear, sometimes with studio flats above, housing above retail, row housing and other residential buildings built close to the street with front porches—elements that are usually found in Calgary’s inner-city neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood is compact and retail facilities and public transport (both existing and new) are located within easy walking distance. The overall character is one of an established urban village with an identifiable community focal point in the form of a retail area together with well designed and located public open spaces. The wide mix of housing styles and types and the relatively high density for Calgary standards adds to the urban feel and creates interest and diversity.

In a very unusual style for Calgary, some public spaces are surrounded by houses that front onto the space ensuring that it is easily accessible, well used by residents, visible, and provides for informal surveillance. A number of small and large public spaces – squares, parks and large verges – are dispersed throughout the area and act as focal points. An interconnected system of pedestrian and bicycle pathways connect these spaces. The emphasis on a high quality public realm was central to the vision of the developer and added to the expense of the development but also to the long term value and sense of place. Many features found in Garrison Woods – from street signs to special pedestrian lighting – were custom-designed to emphasise the public realm.

### Roads, parking and pedestrianisation

Although it would take more than Garrison Woods to break the dependence of many Calgarians on their cars, it is a very walkable

neighbourhood with a high quality pedestrian environment. It is also close to an excellent primary road network which links to the downtown and other parts of the city. Its convenient location accounts for part of its success. A main arterial through-road that runs from the far south to the far north of Calgary is located immediately to the west of the site and carries buses and private cars to the downtown, the Trans-Canada highway and other major commercial centres. The downtown is approximately ten minutes’ drive and this central location also reduces commute times.

Within the community itself, secondary roads are based on a modified grid incorporating numerous traffic calming measures such as narrow roads; curb extensions and boulevard trees to help reduce vehicle speeds. The road standards were customised specifically for the development to create a more pedestrian friendly environment, discourage drivers from taking shortcuts through the neighbourhood, and reduce speeds while integrating with the adjacent street networks.

The project evokes Calgary’s more pedestrian-oriented neighbourhoods built in the early part of the twentieth century. Elements that make the area friendly for pedestrians include the mature trees and high-quality landscaping, the interest provided by interpretive elements including signage relating to the history of the site and the network of landscaped pathways and parks.

### Environment and community

CLC placed major emphasis on the public realm and made considerable investments in high-quality landscaping, interpretive elements including signage, customised road standards, the incorporation of existing mature trees and a generally elevated design aesthetic. One consultant who worked on the project said the vision was to introduce a high standard of design for the public realm with more diversity than the typically low-maintenance ‘vacant grassed field approach’ to park design in Calgary. The investment in the public realm added to the initial cost of the project, but was offset by higher returns and the creation of a unique character. In

terms of sustainable design, virtually all aspects of the lay-out are geared towards creating opportunities to reduce car use, and facilitate more walking and cycling.

### Design process

The military pulled out of Canadian Forces Base Calgary to considerable resentment from surrounding communities concerned with the effect on local businesses and property prices. In order to overcome this resentment and apprehension from the public over the future of the site, an extensive consultation process was undertaken. Lasting 17 months, it was the largest and most comprehensive ever conducted in the city.

The process aimed to be open and transparent and allow free participation through a public advisory committee that included local residents and business owners. The design team also participated in the consultation and held open houses and meetings in order to explain design concepts to the public.

Once the community were assured of the potential benefits of the new urban model, there was relatively little opposition. The immediately adjacent neighbourhoods in particular were concerned with increased traffic but these concerns were addressed through the modified grid and the numerous traffic calming measures. The increased density was also a concern that required the public consultation process to clearly explain the advantages that it would bring in terms of environmental and community sustainability.

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### Design

The area has proven extremely popular to all demographics, including young families, seniors, and singles and seems set to develop into an established neighbourhood. The network of public spaces is thoughtfully laid out and the streets are lined by houses and apartments, providing a safe environment, through ‘eyes on the street.’

A particular testament to the public consultation process is the successful traffic calming measures and the direct way in which new streets have been knitted quite seamlessly into existing streets. The design of the new community raised the profile of surrounding neighbourhoods rather than shut them out.

### Environment

The living environment that has been created in Garrison Woods is often remarked upon for the diversity of the architectural design and streetscape. The increased density and emphasis on the pedestrian environment quality public space are successful environmental aspects of the project.

The decision to re-use most of the former military housing units and other community facilities, rather than demolishing them and building new homes and facilities contributed to the sustainability of the development.

The incorporation of existing mature trees into the development contributes to the established feel of the area and to the natural environment. Landscaping is of a high quality and

a great deal of attention has been paid to everything from the placement of park benches to the interpretation of Calgary’s military history.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that residents of Garrison Woods make fewer and shorter trips by car than those in traditional suburbs due to the location of the community and the commercial services offered locally. Public transport is by bus only and there are no plans to extend the train line here as yet, but bus stops are well-located within easy walking distance of all homes. The car is still very much prevalent, however, and a large number parking spaces must be planned for consistently. Garages at the rear of houses add to the quality of the streetscape by reducing the dominance of the car.



### Project team

**Developer** Canada Lands Company  
**Conceptual and land use planning** Brown and Associates  
**Strategic and market analysis** IBI Group, Transportation Stantec  
**Architectural consultant** Jenkins and Associates  
**Urban design and landscape architecture** IBI Group

Case study courtesy of CABE:  
[www.cabe.org.uk/default.aspx?contentitemid=1782](http://www.cabe.org.uk/default.aspx?contentitemid=1782)

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