

## Community-led planning in(action): the Case of Kingsland, Calgary

**Christopher G. Bell**

*Urban Studies, Department of Geography, University of Calgary*



### **CHRISTOPHER BELL**

Christopher Bell is a fifth-year Urban Studies at the University of Calgary. An active member of his campus community, Chris has worked in varying capacities with organizations in his department, faculty, as well as the broader community. In 2015, Chris founded Young Calgary, a local ‘think-and-do tank’ that works to improve conditions for current and future generations. His undergraduate research has focused on the intersection of neighbourhood change and public participation. Chris will be commencing graduate studies at the University of Waterloo in September 2017. He hopes to pursue a career in urban planning.

### **Abstract**

This article examines the impacts of the Kingsland Community Plan (KCP), a document prepared by a local neighbourhood group, in shaping the built environment of Kingsland, Calgary. The research methodology combines document analysis with Actor-Network Theory as a theoretical approach. Applications to ‘rezone’ land within the Kingsland community district, filed from the KCP’s creation in October 2009 to December 2016, were analyzed for reference to and conformity with the goals and intent of the KCP. Overall the KCP has not been effective at directing land use change in Kingsland. However, the Plan has acted as an ‘informal’ intermediary, rendering visible the local neighbourhood group’s influence and interests within the planning process. Given recent initiatives to formalize civil society participation in Calgary’s planning system, this research may aid decision-makers in determining the appropriate role for neighbourhood groups.

**Keywords:** Calgary, Neighbourhood Groups, Participation, Community-led Planning, Land use



## Introduction

Calgary's Community Associations (CA's) are volunteer-led neighbourhood groups with a degree of influence in the local planning system. The City of Calgary relies on these organizations to provide a 'broad, community perspective' on urban planning matters, allowing them to influence the city's evolving built form [1]. CA's liaise with developers, are circulated by The City for comment on individual planning applications, and advocate (often successfully) for or against change in their neighbourhoods' physical environments.

Over the past several decades Community Associations have become steadily more involved in Calgary's planning system, in line with the ever-increasing emphasis being placed on public participation [2-5]. For example, one study of Calgary's planning process revealed that some local developers felt these groups were far more influential than themselves [6]. Despite this, very little research has been done on Community Associations' actual impacts on planning decisions [3,7-10]. Even the Federation of Calgary Communities, the umbrella organization representing Community Associations, tacitly admits the highly 'informal' and thus unregulated [11] role of these groups. In part due to this informality, The City of Calgary has recently initiated a review of Community Association inputs into the land use and development planning system, with the goal of developing a 'Community Representation Framework' [12]. To establish such a framework it is crucial to better understand how Community Associations currently impact planning outcomes. This research is positioned to serve this end.

Historically CA engagement in planning issues has been in reaction to large-scale private or public sector initiatives, and is often dismissed as "NIMBY-ism" [8,9,13]. In response, some CA's have taken their involvement one step further by producing pro-active and thorough documents that lay out visions for the future development of their neighbourhoods [14-17]. This article explores the materialities of these groups' influence on the planning process by focusing on

a single Community Association-produced neighbourhood plan and its impacts.

In 2009, after being informed by the local planning department that an official Area Redevelopment Plan would not be prepared for Kingsland, the Kingsland Community Association created their own 'Kingsland Community Plan' [17]. The Plan was drafted by a committee of residents and addresses a variety of concerns including local parks, rezonings, and public realm concerns. The effects of the Kingsland Community Plan are traced by qualitatively analyzing applications to rezone land within Kingsland, filed from the Plan's creation in 2009 to 2016.

The objective of this research was to examine the materiality of public participation's impact on planning outcomes by analyzing a planning document produced by a neighbourhood group. Overall, the Kingsland Community Plan has negligible influence on land use decisions. However, the Plan does act as an informal intermediary, rendering visible the local Community Association's meagre influence in the land use planning process.

## Background

### *Public participation and neighbourhood plans*

Since the 1960's, in North America and around the world there has been growing recognition of public participation's importance within land use planning [2,5,18]. This stems both from normative concerns for democratic decision-making, as well as practical concerns for ensuring community support for planning outcomes. Writing in 1969 and capturing the zeitgeist of her time, Arnstein [19] famously proposed a ladder of participation, ranging from citizen control over program decision-making to various forms of non-participation, such as outright manipulation by authorities.

In Calgary, the 1970's represented a virtual 'golden age' of citizen participation in neighbourhood planning. During this decade residents of many inner-city communities such as Inglewood [9], Victoria Park [13], Hillhurst-Sunnyside [10], and Crescent Heights [8] demanded their voices be heard on community

planning issues. Most often this involved successfully defeating freeway expansion proposals and blanket rezonings. These local examples however, almost exclusively involve reaction against proposals, as opposed to setting forth proactive visions for future neighbourhood development.

In more recent years there have been many high-profile experiments with direct citizen control over planning processes, such as empowering non-expert residents to create proactive strategic planning documents to guide future neighbourhood change. Examples of this include the City of Seattle's neighbourhood plans, prepared by committees of interested citizens in the 1990's [20] and the United Kingdom's experience with plans produced by parish councils (the lowest level of government in that country, at the neighbourhood scale) during the same time period [21]. These plans, produced by non-expert residents, on the surface represent a high degree of citizen control over planning. Outside these well-documented and high-profile examples however, there is a wide gap in the literature on the impacts of these 'grassroots' plans, particularly in Canada.

### *Calgary's planning system*

Very broadly, urban planning in Calgary (and in the province of Alberta) takes the form of policy planning and implementation planning [11]. In Calgary's case, policy planning includes the statutory Municipal Development Plan, Area Redevelopment Plans (ARPs; which guide change in existing communities), Area Structure Plans/Outline Plans (in new communities), as well as various non-statutory plans such as land use studies. These documents provide normative guidance when planning decisions are being made, either by planners or by City Council itself. Statutory plans (such as ARPs) are legally binding upon the municipality and land owners. When a proposed development does not meet the criteria of the local ARP, the plan must be amended before the proposal can be approved. Non-statutory planning documents provide local context and history, which may (or may not) be deemed

relevant to planning decisions.

Calgary's Land Use Bylaw is at the core of implementation planning. The Bylaw defines 'land uses' (e.g. various types of multifamily housing, single detached housing, or commercial uses) and then groups these uses into Land Use Districts, which are then applied to every parcel of land within the municipality. Each Land Use District details what uses are permitted on any given parcel, and often includes other requirements, for example providing a certain number of parking stalls.

If someone wishes to change the Land Use District of their property, they must file an application with The City to do so. A planner analyzes the application, relevant plans and policies, gathers feedback from the local Community Association and any affected landowners, and compiles this information into a report alongside their recommendation to approve or deny. This report is then presented to the Calgary Planning Commission, which then recommends to City Council whether it believes the application should be approved. Before voting to approve or reject a rezoning, City Council holds a public hearing where any person may speak in favour or in opposition. Oftentimes councillors propose changes in response to opposition from community members.

### **Methods**

The research methodology hinges on document analysis and 'close reading', informed by Actor-Network Theory as a general approach. The agendas of all City Council meetings between October 2009 and December 2016 were searched to identify applications to rezone land within the Kingsland community district. Each application includes a report containing the specifics of the land use change being requested, a site analysis, feedback from the public, a summary of applicable legislation and policies, and a rationale prepared by the applicant requesting the land use change; a draft amendment to the Land Use Bylaw; and finally public submissions related to the application. These documents, as well as proceedings of related public hearings and final

council decisions, were analyzed for reference to, and general conformity with, the Kingsland Community Plan.

Land use change was selected as an avenue for examining the effects of the Kingsland Community Plan for a several reasons. As noted above rezoning process generates a significant amount of publicly accessible documentation. This relatively complete record stands in opposition to what some observers have called the otherwise informal nature of planning processes in Calgary [22], which often render them opaque to the public.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), despite its name, is a methodological approach that calls researchers to 'trace associations' between humans and non-humans [23], and emerged in the 1980's and 1990's in the context of Science and Technology Studies in particular the works of Bruno Latour. Put simply, ANT emphasizes the need to focus on the phenomena under study, as opposed to looking away from said phenomena towards larger organizing forces, for example societal discourses or economic factors such as profit incentives [24].

ANT assigns agency to both humans and non-humans, referred to as 'actants' as opposed to 'actors' to avoid anthropocentricity [23,25,26]. Here, agency is understood as the capacity for one actant to alter another. Actants come together to form complex networks bound together by heterogeneous associations [23]. ANT is interested in tracing these associations, and can do so through a variety of qualitative as well as quantitative methods [27]. ANT has been successfully used to examine the materialities of public participation processes generally, as well as the agency documents and representations of space such as consultant reports [28], low-carbon development guidelines [29], and maps [30] exert within spatial planning processes.

## Results

From October 2009 to December 2016, 12 applications to rezone land within Kingsland were filed with The City of Calgary. The majority were to increase permitted density. Table 1

summarizes the details of these applications. Information such as file names, parcel addresses, and names of applicants are omitted for privacy reasons.

Almost all applications involve increasing allowable density of residential parcels of land, which in practice are requests that city council authorize taller developments and/or developments with greater lot coverage. As is noted above, it is often owners of R-C2-zoned parcels who are (with success) requesting land use changes. Despite this, the Kingsland Community Plan (p. 15) does not support rezoning R-C2 parcels for increased density. It appears that the Plan has had virtually no impact on land use change. However, it should be noted that where applications have been approved with amendments residents as well as Kingsland Community Association volunteers had spoken in opposition during their respective public hearings. In all cases these councillor-proposed amendments reduced density increases and/or added conditions to future development. Applications approved outright faced minimal or no opposition at their public hearings.

## Discussion and Analysis

The Kingsland Community Plan takes up the bureaucratic "objectifying knowledge practices of documentation" [30, p. 35] as a strategy for enrolling actants into its actor-network. The Plan implements this strategy through highly selective citation and rhetorical arrangement. The Plan draws on the professional expertise of local urban planners: its original 'project chair' was and is currently a planner employed by the City of Calgary [31], it was prepared in consultation with the local planning department [17], and it increasingly viewed as 'legislation and policy' by local officials. In identifying itself as a 'non-statutory' document, a term usually reserved for a class of municipal policies, the Plan asserts that it reflects the community's collective goals for the future (ibid). Further, the political clout of the local councillor is enrolled in that he was explicitly sought out and engaged in the Plan's creation (ibid p. 2-3).

**Table 1:** Kingsland rezoning applications, 2009-2016

#	Initial Land Use District	Proposed Land Use District	KCP Reference	Status <sup>3</sup>
1	R-C2 <sup>1</sup>	M-C2 <sup>2</sup>	Yes (applicant submission, Community Association submission)	Approved
2	Direct Control	Direct Control (alter parking requirements)	No	Rejected
3	R-C2	M-CG	Yes (Community Association submission)	Approved with amendments
4	C-COR3	M-H2	Yes (Legislation and policy analysis)	Approved
5	R-C1	M-C1	Yes (Legislation and policy analysis, Community Association submission, applicant submission)	Approved with amendments
6	R-C1	R-C1s	Yes (Public engagement)	Approved
7	R-C2	M-C2	No	Approved with amendments
8	R-C1	R-C2	Yes (Legislation and policy analysis)	Approved
9	R-C2	M-CG	Yes (Legislation and policy analysis)	Approved
10	R-C2	M-CG	Yes (Legislation and policy analysis)	Rejected
11	R-C2	M-CG	Yes (Legislation and policy analysis)	Approved
12	M-H2	M-H2 (correct for clerical error)	No	Approved

Source: *The City of Calgary* [<http://agendaminutes.calgary.ca>]

<sup>1</sup> Land Use Districts abbreviated with the letter R denote low-density residential uses, for example single detached homes. The R-C1 Land Use District permits single detached dwellings only, while R-C2 permits single detached dwellings, as well as duplexes and secondary suites.

<sup>2</sup> Land Use Districts abbreviated with the letter M denote higher-density residential uses, for example apartment buildings. Land Use Districts in order from lower to higher densities: M-CG, M-C1, M-C2, M-H1, M-H2.

<sup>3</sup> In response to opposition by community members, city councillors sometimes will propose and vote on changes to rezoning applications.

As a result, the local councillor has both successfully and unsuccessfully introduced changes to rezoning applications, always with the intention to reduce or restrict density increases. In this way, the Plan speaks of the close ties between Calgary's Community Associations, urban planners, and city councillors.

Further, the Kingsland Community Plan attempts to draw on the authority of municipal plans and policies by enrolling them into its actor-network through strategically referencing and interpreting their dictates. The Plan argues that density increases should be directed towards the neighbourhood's periphery, and away from its core of single detached dwellings by citing the city council-approved Glenmore

Land Use Study as well as the MacLeod Urban Corridor Study (ibid p. 15). (This however, is a misappropriation of these policy documents as they are intended to guide the City of Calgary's actions as a landowner and as the local authority responsible for roadways, not to regulate privately owned parcels of land.) Further, the minutes of the Kingsland Community Plan Steering Committee, appended to the text of the Plan, discuss the new (in 2009) Municipal Development Plan and opportunities to enrol this document and thus draw on its legitimacy (ibid p. 30-35). Interestingly, the Plan lumps together private actors involved in built environment change (for example real estate agents, landowners, development companies, contractors, etc.) together under the broad

category of 'developers'.

By enrolling other development system actors, the KCP, without much success however, attempts to position itself as a network intermediary and thereby define relationships between actants. Similar to other analyses of document agency [28,29] in urban development processes, absolute statements and 'policy language' is invoked as means to this end:

*A community traffic study shall be completed by the City of Calgary prior to any major redevelopment projects occurring in Kingsland to ensure the intersections at the periphery of Kingsland can accommodate the additional traffic due to redevelopment. (p. 5; emphasis added)*

*Developers considering redevelopment or densification shall consult this Plan for guidance and discuss their plans with the Planning Committee in advance of submitting an application to the City of Calgary. (p. 9-10; emphasis added)*

The Plan is almost always ignored by City Councillors, who possess final authority to approve or deny rezoning requests. At a recent public hearing for example, one Kingsland resident pleaded with councillors to listen to the KCP's dictates. Council members ignored this plea, and immediately moved on to other matters. Ultimately, rezoning applications are most often approved regardless of the Kingsland Community Plan, barring minor changes in response to individual presentations in opposition.

While the Plan is generally unsuccessful at defining relationships between land development actants, it effectively renders visible the limited influence of the Kingsland Community Association in directing land use change at the neighbourhood scale. Until very recently, the 'informal' [11] role of Community Associations has only existed as administrative convention [1,7]. In our case, the limitations of this influence become strikingly visible by tracing the KCP's movement through individual rezoning applications. This influence takes the form of some minor changes to rezoning

applications from time to time, for example through placing additional conditions on future development. Though cited in planning reports, invoked by residents at public hearings, occasionally referenced during council meetings, and at times discussed by applicants in their submissions, congruence with the KCP is almost never a deciding factor when it comes to evaluating land use change in the neighbourhood of Kingsland.

## Conclusion

The Kingsland Community Plan attempts to enrol developers, municipal officials, and city councillors to define their mutual responsibilities and relationships, and thereby direct land use change. The Plan works towards this end by drawing on official planning documents, and through the explicit involvement of municipal planners and the local councillor in its 'birth'.

The above analysis of rezoning applications filed from 2009 to 2017 reveals that decision-makers do not consider adherence to the Plan as crucial, or even necessary. Thus, the Plan is ultimately not successful in fulfilling its stated ends. Despite this lack of success however, as measured by its relative inability to direct change, the KCP renders visible the vaguely influential (but in no way determinative) role of the local Community Association within Calgary's planning system. These insights into the current realities of public participation in formal processes of land use change may prove useful to local policy-makers in developing Calgary's so-called "Community Representation Framework", as well as in larger discussions on the role of citizen engagement in planning generally.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Alan Smart for his guidance and advice over the course of this research project. I would also like to thank the JURA editorial board as well as my anonymous reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments. All errors and omissions remain my own.

## References

1. The City of Calgary, "Roles of Community Association, neighbours, and Ward Councillor". Calgary, 2016.
2. M. Fagence, *Citizen Participation in the Planning Process*. Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1977.
3. I. Townshend, PhD dissertation, University of Calgary, 2009.
4. The City of Calgary, "Public Participation in the Planning Process". Calgary, 1993.
5. M. Hickley, MA thesis, University of Calgary, 2003.
6. D. Rice, MA thesis, University of Calgary, 2000.
7. K. Peterson, PhD dissertation, University of Calgary, 2013.
8. D. Stamm, MA thesis, University of Calgary, 1979.
9. P. Dixon, MA thesis, University of Calgary, 1972.
10. J. Husband, MA thesis, University of Calgary, 1977.
11. Federation of Calgary Communities, "The Community Guide to the Planning Process". Calgary, 2014.
12. The City of Calgary, "Community Representation Framework". Calgary, 2016.
13. H. Hiller H, D. Moylan, *Can. J. Urban Res.* **8**(1), 1999.
14. Ramsay Community Association, "Ramsay Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Plan". Calgary, 2013.
15. Inglewood Community Association, "Inglewood Design Initiative". Calgary, 2011.
16. The City of Calgary, "South Shaganappi Communities Area Plan". Calgary, 2011.
17. Kingsland Community Association, "Kingsland Community Plan". Calgary, 2009.
18. M.B. Lane, *Aust. Geogr.* **36**(3), 2005.
19. S.R. Arnstein, *J. Am. Inst. Plann.* **35**(4), 1969.
20. C. Sirianni, *J. Am. Plan. Assoc.* **73**(4), 2007.
21. N. Gallent, S. Robinson, *Neighbourhood Planning: Communities, Networks and Governance*. The Policy Press, Bristol, 2012.
22. N. Kuzmak, L. Muller, *Can. J. Urban Res.* **19**(2), 2010.
23. B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 2005.
24. B. MacMillan, MA thesis, Carlton University. 2009.
25. A. Smart, J. Smart, *Posthumanism: Anthropological Insights*, forthcoming.
26. K. Ruming, *Aust Geogr.* **40**(4), 2009.
27. D. Cowan, K. Morgan K, M. Mcdermont. *Hous. Stud.* **24**(3) 2008.
28. R. Lippert, *Can. J. Law Soc.* **22**(2) 2007.
29. Y. Rydin, *Plan. Theory.* **12**(1) 2013.
30. M. Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. Univ. of California Press, Los Angeles, 2012.
31. Federation of Calgary Communities, "The Case for Community-Led Planning. Calgary". Calgary, 2012.