

Tower Renewal Project Series

FORGOTTEN INHERITANCE

Apartment neighbourhoods revisited

By Michael McClelland and Graeme Stewart

What makes Toronto unique? One of the least recognized answers to that question is that Toronto has more high-rise buildings than any other city in North America, outside New York.

Following the war, when most North America cities began sprawling out of control, Toronto's metropolitan government implemented a regional plan. Municipal and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation housing policies overwhelmingly favoured the tower-in-the-park model for much of the proposed new residential growth. Subsequently, the suburban apartment became the most popular form of housing for a period of twenty years, representing the overwhelming majority of housing starts. Unique to their European and American counterparts, these apartment neighbourhoods, which sprang up throughout the GTA, were privately financed and marketed as modern homes for a growing middle class.

The result is a hybrid suburban form, where 'bungalows' foreground rows of 1960's high-rises, more reminiscent of peripheral Moscow or Belgrade than the suburbia on this side of the Atlantic.

Now, after four decades of service life, many of these structures and their associated communities are in need of significant attention. Aging envelopes and mechanical systems make these towers one of the most energy-inefficient housing types in the city. Their sheer number (some 1,000 throughout the Toronto area) contributes significantly to the region's carbon footprint. Additionally, there is a growing association of tower clusters with the city's priority



neighbourhoods—those neighbourhoods that are currently under serviced and that require targeted investment. Rejected as failures of modernism, they largely exist outside the city's planning, architectural and urban discourse.

Yet are these tower-block communities, once considered among the city's most progressive, a key inheritance for a sustainable future? Today's planning mantra of 'smart growth' espouses high-density suburban growth as a cutting-edge solution. Forty years ago this was standard prac-



IMAGES CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Bathurst and Steeles in the late 1960s
Source - E.R.A. Architects

1958 site plan for Flemingdon Park
Source - E.R.A. Architects

Contemporary photo of Weston and Finch
Source - photographer Jesse Jackson



tice in Toronto and led to its high-rise housing stock, with some clusters as high as 350 people per hectare. How might this inheritance be re-engaged as a resource for the challenges of the 21st Century city?

In response to this question, Mayor David Miller will be bringing to council this spring a report on the Tower Renewal Project—an initiative that combines dramatic cuts in greenhouse gases with community revitalization in Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods.

In the coming weeks, NRU will be providing brief segments on the Tower Renewal Project—its research, its partnerships and its ambitions.

*Michael McClelland is a principal and Graeme Stewart is the project architect for Tower Renewal with E.R.A. Architects. The Tower Renewal Project, spearheaded by the mayor, is being developed in collaboration with E.R.A. Architects and an interdepartmental municipal staff working group with collaboration from Toronto Community Housing Corporation, the University of Toronto, CMHC, Toronto Atmospheric Fund and the Clinton Foundation, among others. **NRU***