

Tower Renewal Project Series

THORNCLIFFE PARK

Ripe for renewal

By Michael McClelland and Graeme Stewart

Thornccliffe Park was a bold 1950s plan by the Town of Leaside to redevelop a former racetrack overlooking the Don River. Conceived in 1955 it was proposed to be the first apartment neighbourhood in Canada. Though breaking ground slightly after neighbouring Flemingdon Park, it was recognized internationally as an ambitious attempt to better organize population growth in response to the sprawl found in Toronto's outer boroughs.

While already containing many of the ingredients that make great communities work, this culturally unique area of some 15,000 people is not without its problems. Lack of investment, a neglected and disconnected public realm and the need for further community-specific programming require thoughtful solutions for it to become a genuinely sustainable and complete community.

Changes are on their way. Located along the proposed Don Mills rapid transit line, it will benefit considerably from the TTC's Transit City Plan. Planned as a self-sufficient new town, Thornccliffe Park may indeed become the model of a high-density suburban community in the 21st Century context.

Part of the goal of Thornccliffe Park was to promote a European approach to apartment living, as equally viable for the young, the elderly and families. To accomplish this, apartments were arranged with generous spaces and two, three and even four bedroom configurations—seeking to provide genuine family-sized units and enticing tenants for the long term.

The apartment towers themselves were the peak of modernity, for the first time offering panoramic views of the city, underground parking, indoor pools and other amenities unthinkable before World War II. In something of a "Jetsons" aesthetic, Thornccliffe's modern towers were a symbol of a prosperous and confident nation after the war. The luxury Leaside Towers of 1970, at 130-metres in height remained the tallest buildings north of Bloor Street for 37 years. The neighbourhood was also remarkable for the efficiency in which it was constructed, resulting in publications in prominent construction journals worldwide.

The neighbourhood was based on a community master plan. The low, mid and high-rise apartment buildings in the neighbourhood were organized around a central park, elementary school, shopping centre and community facilities,

with apartments located along the escarpment edge. Overlea Boulevard, which is Thornccliffe's main commercial street, connects the neighbourhood to the rest of Toronto via bridges to the north and south.

Today the area is one of the city's most prominent immigrant reception zones. It is home to Canada's largest Islamic community and is one of North America's most diverse neighbourhoods, with a vibrancy and street life usually found in the central city.



Image clockwise from bottom:
 Thornccliffe Park as seen from the Leaside Bridge
 Uses within Thornccliffe Park: natural space and park (green), school and community (blue), religious (orange) and commercial (yellow)
 Thornccliffe Park under construction, early 1960s
 Images Courtesy: E.R.A. Architects



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 of Toronto, is being developed in collaboration with E.R.A. Architects and an interdepartmental municipal staff working, City of Toronto agencies, the University of Toronto and CMHC and the Clinton Foundation, among others. **NRU**

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Alexander Moyle, Artist



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