

City of Towers



City of Towers



From City of Houses to Apartment City

Beginning in the 1950s, Torontonians took to high-rise living. While apartments were nearly prohibited for the first half of the 20th Century, they were fundamental to the growth of Toronto during the post-war boom.

The first example of modern apartment towers in Toronto was the City Park Apartments near Maple Leaf Gardens (1954), built in conjunction with the subway. Peter Dickinson's award winning Regent Park South (1958) was built soon after, followed by similar towers throughout the city and suburbs.

Images

Top: Miami North; modern tower built as luxury apartment in North York.
Opposite: Lawrence Avenue and the Don Valley Parkway, 1966; single-family homes and modern tower blocks provide housing options in new communities. Courtesy of the Archives of Lockwood Survey Corporation Limited.
Section Cover Image: City of Towers. Courtesy of Sandy Kemsley.

Toronto is a City of Towers

Toronto contains more high-rise buildings of twelve stories and over than any other city in North America other than New York. The vast majority of these are concrete apartments buildings, built during between 1960 and 1980. These concrete residential towers are found throughout the region; in both the city core and, more significantly in the communities that emerged as suburbs. The majority of Toronto's towers are found in neighbourhoods throughout the former boroughs.

Following the Second World War, modern apartment buildings became the most popular form of housing during Toronto's post-war growth. For the most part privately developed, they became a part of the housing mix in nearly all new communities of the era, and a key feature in a series of modern planned high-rise neighbourhoods unique to North America.

Also present from Ottawa to Windsor, the modern tower block is one of the defining housing types of Southern Ontario. In Toronto, they make up approximately 30 percent of the housing stock, representing about 1,000 buildings.

Rarely found in the suburbs of cities such as Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, or elsewhere in North America, these buildings are a symbol of Toronto's metropolitan era growth, an enormous housing resource, and a distinctive feature of the region.

Built with a progressive city in mind, these towers offer several challenges, as well as advantages for the 21st Century.



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Greenfields

Though many towers were built in the central city, often near subway stops, the vast majority were built in new communities on the fringes of the core. Promoted as a more responsible land use than single-family homes, fields for pasture rapidly changed to fields of towers in the two decades between 1960 and 1980. The first major projects of this type were the planned communities of Thorncliffe (1955) and Flemingdon Parks (1959).

A Modern Planned Region

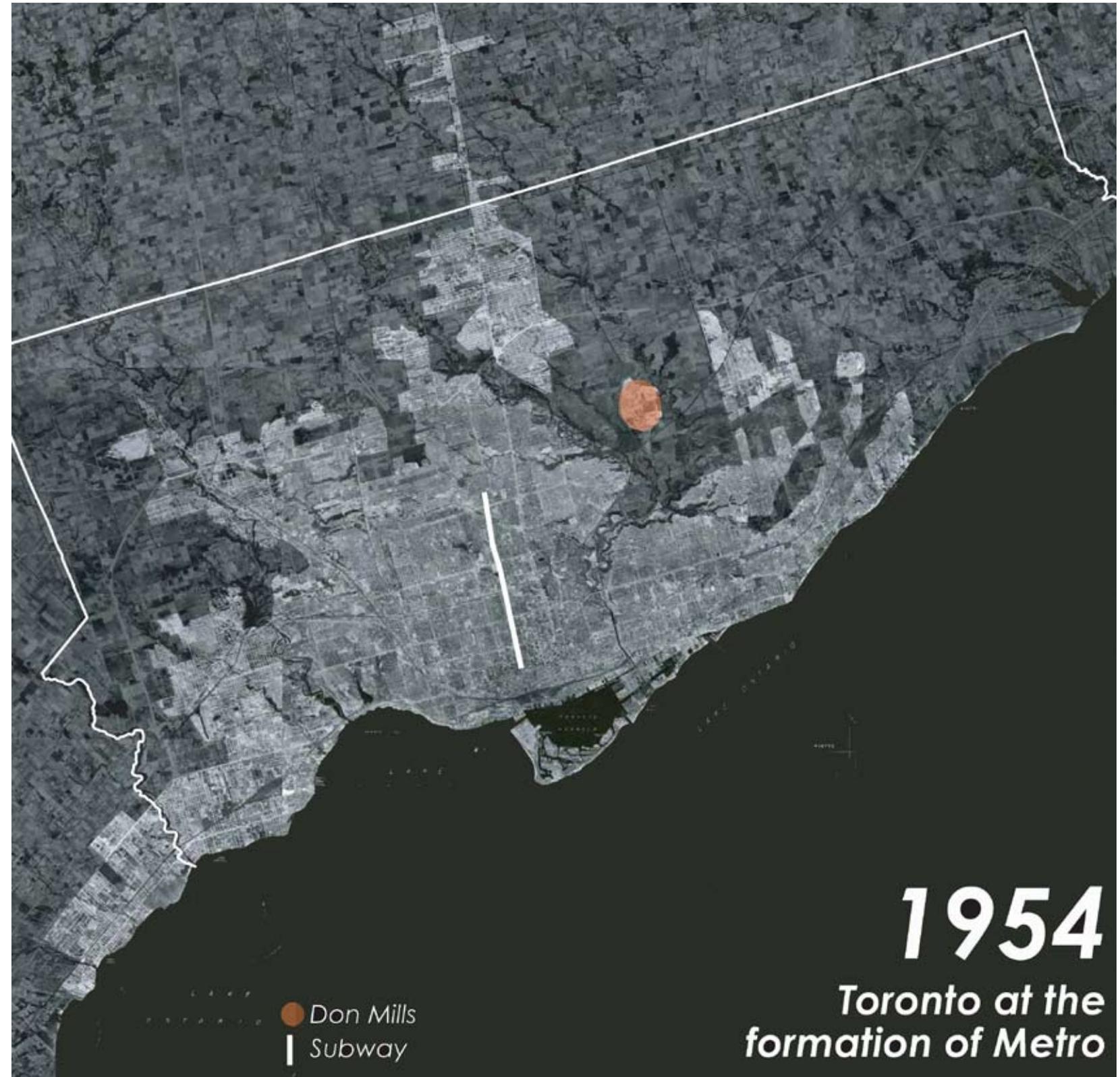
After World War II, Toronto, and its neighbourhoods, were about to grow to a region of millions.

In anticipation, Toronto and the surrounding areas formed a Metropolitan government; the only region to do so since the formation of New York City. The borders of Metro were extensive, which allowed for coordinated planning of the urban centre, suburban periphery and agricultural lands under one administration. The challenge was to provide housing and employment for millions within the boundaries of Metro, while leaving the area beyond untouched. Uncontrolled sprawl was discouraged in favour of managed growth.

Metro Toronto became a magnet for modern planners, both trained at home and abroad. They advocated for the comprehensive planning of new communities.

Key concerns were that neighbourhoods provide a mix of housing types and tenures; residential areas should have access to open space, parks and natural areas as well as to local shops and services. It was also felt that all communities should be in close proximity to public transit and employment.

The result is an experiment in modern planning which is unique to North America and perhaps the world. Throughout, the high-rise apartment took a leading role.



Images

Top: From farmer's fields to fields of towers; Toronto's outward expansion in the early 1960s. Courtesy of the Archives of Canadian Architect. Opposite: Toronto's urban area at the time of the formation of Metropolitan Toronto in 1955, overlaid with the subway and the satellite community of Don Mills. Courtesy of the City of Toronto

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Learning from Europe

Thornccliffe and Flemingdon were influenced by similar post-war communities in Europe. Two tower communities of the 1950s that were of great influence on development in Toronto were Vallingby outside of Stockholm and Roehampton on London's edge. Both communities make significant use of the high-rise tower, organizing suburban populations in high-density concentrations adjacent to shops, transit and open space. Communities like these were visited by Toronto councillors prior to the approvals of Flemingdon Park.



progress continues . . .

Images

Top: Master plan for Flemingdon Park. Courtesy of the City of Toronto.

Bottom: Master plan for Thornccliffe Park. Courtesy of the City of Toronto.

Opposite: View over Thornccliffe and Flemingdon Parks looking south; built adjacent to the Don Valley on either side of the new expressway, 1970. Courtesy of the Archives of Lockwood Survey Corporation Limited.

Developing Modern Communities

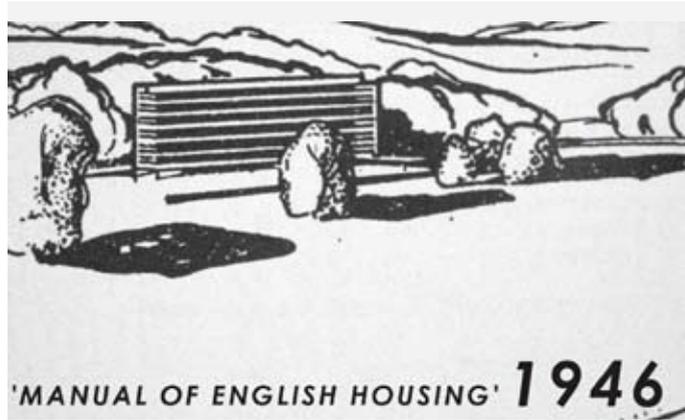
As early as the 1950s, alternatives to typical subdivision sprawl emerged in Toronto's suburbs. Planned 'complete communities', they provided industry, shopping, mixed-housing types and ample natural open spaces, and promoted modern design. They were also loosely based on the 'satellite' or 'new' town; an idea popular during European reconstruction, where new development was organized in self-sufficient and physically separated communities. A departure from the typical sprawl of single detached homes found elsewhere in Toronto and throughout North America, these planned communities offered an alternative form of more compact and diverse outward growth.

Toronto's first such development was Don Mills, quickly followed by Thornccliffe and Flemingdon Parks, planned in 1953, 1955 and 1958 respectively. Situated along the new Don Valley Parkway, these privately developed communities offered employment, shopping, ample natural open space, and notably, mixed-housing types including high-density apartments. While in Don Mills apartments were mostly of the low and mid-rise type, Thornccliffe and Flemingdon were designed with extensive high-rises. They were the first developments of their kind in North America.

Thornccliffe was built as an 'apartment only' community complete with schools, shopping centre, and central park, while Flemingdon was, for a time, to house the new headquarters of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Highly ambitious, they became a showpiece of high design and an attractive alternative to living downtown. They also set the precedent for high-rise housing in new communities throughout the city.

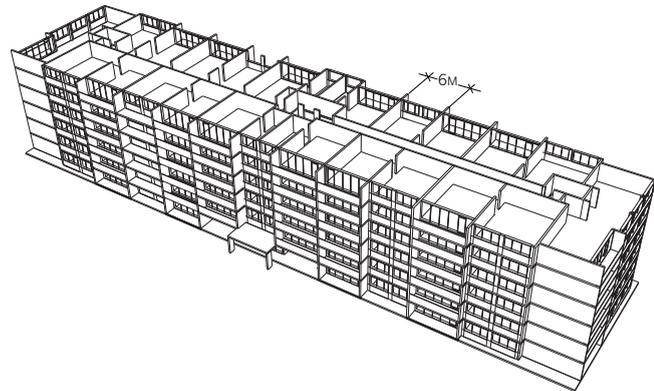


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Modern Construction

Nearly identical throughout the city, modern apartments consist of concrete structural frames efficiently built by the 'flying form'; a technique pioneered in Toronto where concrete formwork is hoisted floor to floor for rapid construction. Made up of concrete shear walls spaced at six metres, bays were easily adapted for one, two, three, and even four bedroom configurations. As projects became larger and larger, their size was ultimately limited in length by the maximum distance allowed between the fire stairs located at either end of the building, and in height by the structural limitations of the chosen concrete framing system; about 36 storeys.



Images

Top: Tower in the park promoted as ideal housing following the Second World War.
Bottom: Schematic of concrete structural system of modern tower block, made up of bays of concrete shear walls every 6 metres. Opposite, Top: Apartments on Emmett Avenue, former borough of York. Courtesy of Jesse Colin Jackson. Opposite, Bottom: Statistics and approximate chronology of modern apartments in Toronto.

A symbol of the Twentieth Century

The Tower in the Park is one of the defining housing innovations of the 20th Century.

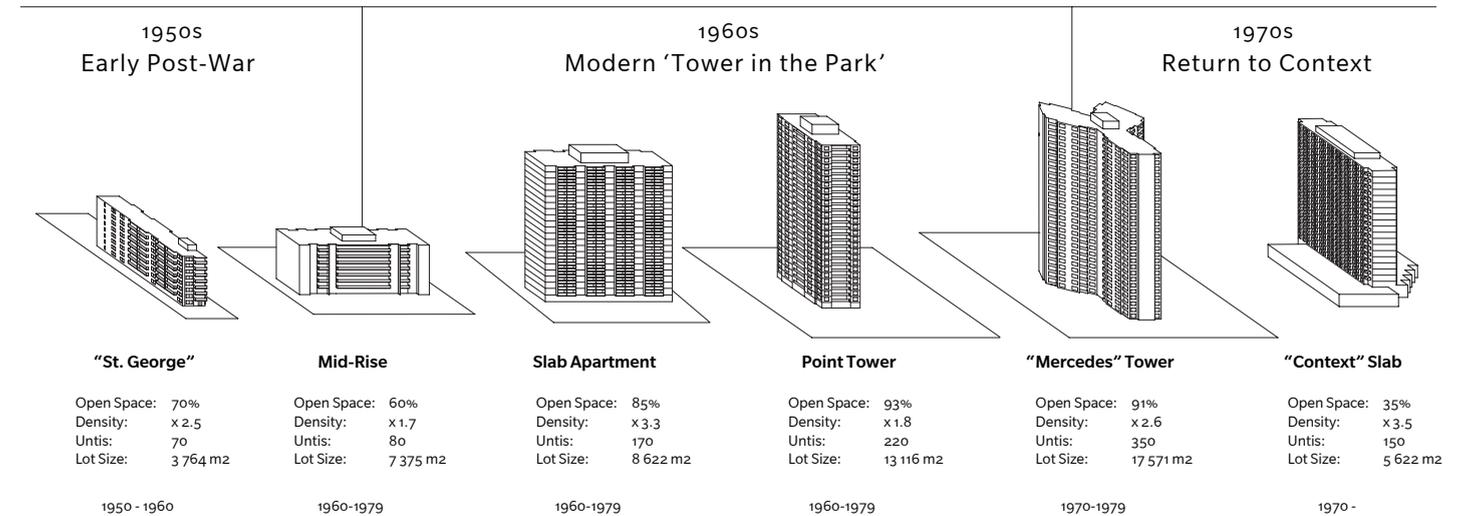
The idea of the tower in a genuine 'park' or 'landscape' setting became popular in Europe during post-war reconstruction. Open space around high-density developments was encouraged to provide breathing room, accessible community recreation space, and also allow for unobstructed sunlight into apartment units. Felt to be the housing model that combined the best standard possible with a responsible use of land, the modern tower became a leading approach to urban growth the world over.

In Western Europe, these apartments were built in the wake of housing shortages during post-war reconstruction. In the Soviet Union, they represented nearly all new housing from the mid 1960s onward. In America, modern towers were almost exclusively used as social housing for very low-income residents. In Toronto on the other hand, these buildings became popular to a wide range of income groups and both public and private builders.

Readily accepted in Toronto, these buildings were adapted to the Toronto context by the design and construction communities.

Toronto's developers favoured modern concrete towers for their efficiency of construction and popularity within the booming housing market. The local invention of the 'flying form' technique of concrete construction made building these towers remarkably fast and cost effective.

Toronto planners, particularly the Hungarian born architect/planner E.G. Faludi, promoted the open space around multiple dwellings as best practice; ensuring what was felt to be a humane urban environment. If more open space was provided, taller buildings were possible in exchange. The legacy is the large towers and up to 90 percent open space found in apartment properties across the Toronto area.



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Apartmentmania – Toronto’s Largest Housing Boom

By the end of the period of rapid post-war growth, ‘multiples’ outpaced single detached homes by a ratio of 2:1. By 1966, at the peak of Toronto’s first mass housing boom, nearly 40 percent of the city’s housing stock and 77 percent of housing starts were modern apartments. Nearly 30,000 high-rise units were built in 1968 alone. Seas of bungalows were privately developed in concert with hundreds of tower blocks throughout the sprawling region.

As a result, the Toronto area contains the second highest number of buildings twelve storeys and over in North America (see sidebar). The majority of these buildings are the concrete apartments in question, making modern towers a definitive housing type in the GTA.

Modern living and the Sexy Slab

Fuelled by the population and economic boom of the 60s and 70s, hundreds of thousand of high-density units appeared throughout the region. Echoing today’s condo market, these buildings were targeted at a growing consumer base of singles, young couples, empty nesters and young families.

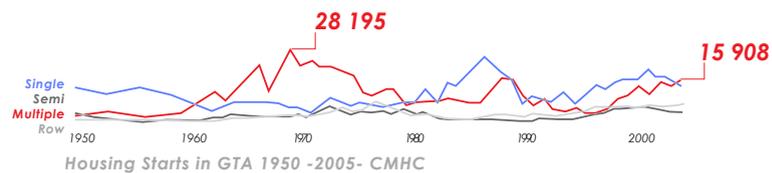
When originally built, modern apartments were often marketed for their sophistication. Promoting a ‘Jetsons’ aesthetic, they offered for the first time panoramic views, underground parking, indoor pools and an alternative to the traditional Victorian house or walk up. For many, high-rise apartments symbolized a new world and a nation confident after the war.

Many of Toronto’s leading architects, including English / Canadian Peter Dickinson, Toronto native Irving Grossman, and perhaps most notably Estonian / Canadian Uno Prii (famous for his swooping towers), provided their interpretations of modern housing.

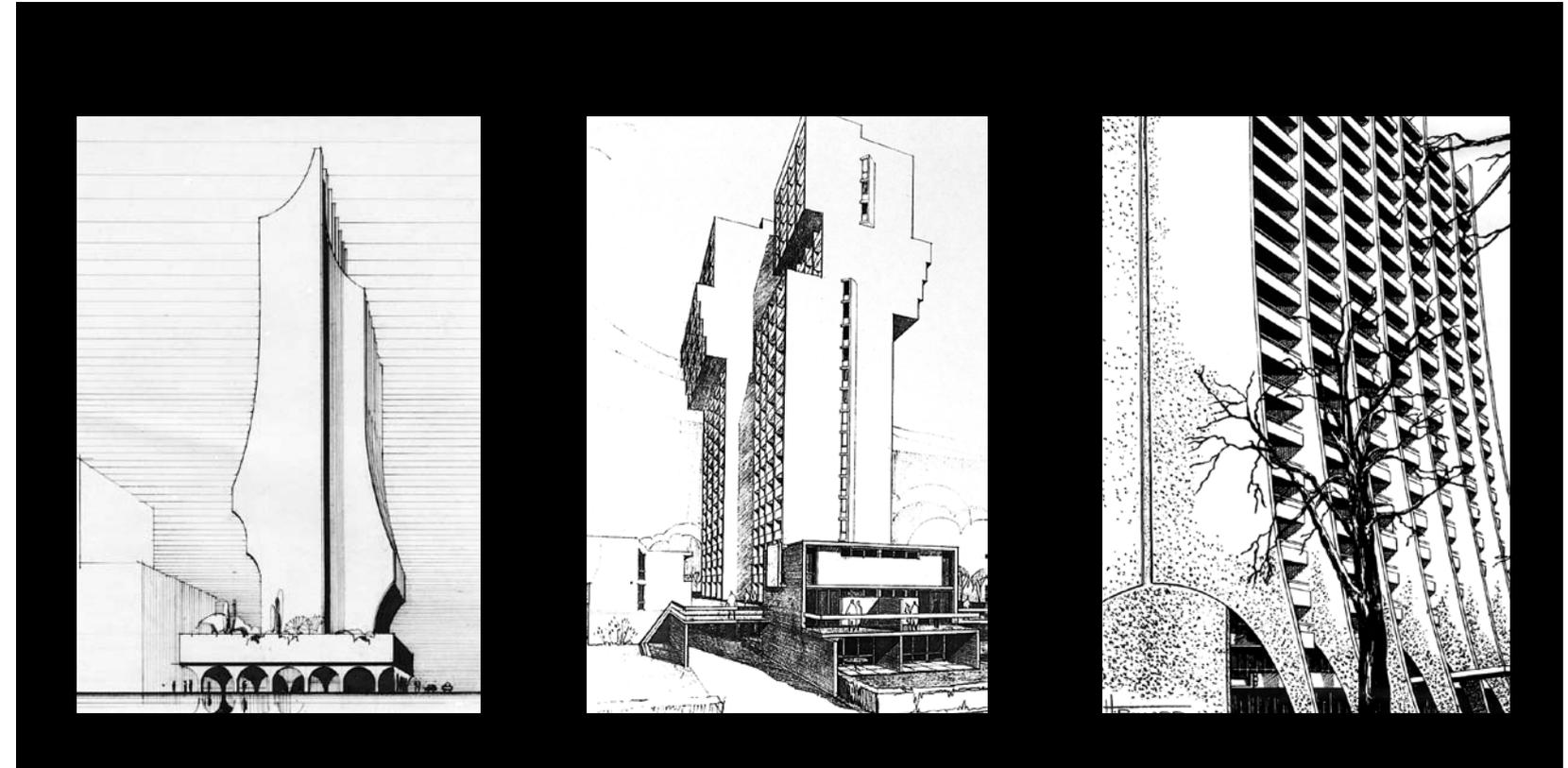
Images

Top: Thorncliffe Park under construction, with accompanying advertisement for modern living. Courtesy of the archives of Canadian Architect. Opposite, Top: Sketches of apartment buildings by Uno Prii. Courtesy of the archives of Uno Prii. Opposite, Bottom: Suburban density; towers in Toronto’s post-war communities.

Toronto’s suburban housing boom of the ‘60s and ‘70s created more apartment units than bungalows



The graph above depicts multiple unit housing developed in the GTA over the past 50 years, illustrating the recent turn of the century condo boom, and mid-century apartment boom. While the condo boom is at the time of publication the largest in North America, the previous apartment boom was significantly larger, overwhelmingly dominating the housing market for nearly 20 years.



North American High-Rise Buildings:

High-rise* buildings of all types, twelve storeys and over within metropolitan areas as of 2007. An estimated 1,000 high-rises in the Toronto area are the apartment buildings in question.

New York	5,568
Toronto	2,047
Chicago	1,076
Vancouver	614
Miami	535
Los Angeles	467
Montréal	447
San Francisco	436
Honolulu	431
Philadelphia	336
Houston	331
Ottawa	284
Washington DC	272
Dallas	241
Edmonton	237

*Data from Emporis



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Goals of Development

Toronto's post-war communities were planned with several progressive ideas and principles, such as the following list from the plan for District 10 (Jane / Finch) in Toronto's northwest. Properly implementing these goals in today's context would go a long way in achieving the healthy and well-planned neighbourhoods intended.

- A minimum park space requirement of 1.25 acres per 1,000 residents to be achieved by using ravine space or newly created parks;
- A balanced housing stock requiring a mix between rental and ownership, and providing family housing in low, medium and high densities;
- High density integrated into low density areas through diversified housing types;
- High density, if the development adjoined local parks, has a full range of community facilities within walking distance, has access to transportation, and the site could deal with the traffic created;
- Ravines used as park space that should have pedestrian access at regular and convenient distances with a minimum distance of 800m from a park to any dwelling.

Images

Top: Jane Finch with shopping centre and modern towers. Courtesy of Lance Dutchak.
Opposite: Apartment towers of Bathurst and Steeles at Metro's edge, with the greenbelt beyond, 1960s. Courtesy of the City of Toronto.

The Modern Tower as 1960s 'Smart Growth'

Providing dense nodes to enable transit and streamline services, as well as helping to control Toronto's outward sprawl, high-rise communities were encouraged throughout Toronto by planners. Though executed in a manner that reflects 1960s ideas of separated uses and the scale of the car, this was a genuine attempt at creating well-served and well-planned communities.

As described by German born Toronto planner Hans Blumenfeld, the idea behind district planning was to create self-sufficient neighbourhoods that minimized commuting by providing housing of all types and tenures, in proximity to major employment, and well connected to both private and public transit. High-rise apartments became a key feature in nearly all post-war communities, providing density to support public transit, and rental housing to support diverse population groups. Many areas developed as high-rise only 'apartment neighbourhoods'.

Possibly "smart growth" before the term was coined, Toronto's outward growth included vast amounts of high density. As seen in the 1960s image of Bathurst and Steeles (to the right), high-rise housing was a means of containing population within Metro's borders while maintaining, for a time, the greenbelt beyond.

Though the master planned approach of Flemingdon and Thorncliffe didn't take hold in most cases, the post-war communities that followed were based on a series of principles developed with the intention of creating "complete communities" (see side bar). In most cases these communities were developed on a site-by-site basis by both public and private developers.



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Toronto and Chicago

Toronto and Chicago are often compared for their similarities. However, Toronto's post-war communities and modern apartments give it a significantly different metropolitan form.

While Chicago has in recent years made great efforts to become a green city, the region itself faces many challenges in achieving genuine sustainability. Beyond the dense and well serviced centre, 'Chicagoland' is dominated by sprawling, low density suburbs, similar to those found in the sunbelt cities of Phoenix or Atlanta. Despite significantly larger infrastructure and population, Chicago's rapid transit generates less than half of Toronto's ridership. Similarly, despite a far more robust and extensive central city, the Chicago area is only half as dense as Greater Toronto.

The low-density suburbs that dominate the Chicago area, as well as most American cities, pose many obstacles in enabling self-sufficient communities with local services and transit, as well as resource networks such as local food and energy production. While these may be achieved in the city's core, the region as a whole remains inefficient and unsustainable.

Toronto on the other hand, contains a high-density framework from which a sustainable region can be achieved. Carefully considered, the extensive heritage of post-war towers is one of Toronto's greatest urban assets.

A Unique Metropolitan Form

While most North American cities have a dense core, and low density suburbs, Toronto's growth resulted in mixed densities and housing types throughout. As a result, more than 80 percent of renters live outside of downtown, most in dense clusters of residential high-rises as far as 20 km from downtown. (See density stats, p. 46-47).

Superficially, these towers give portions of Toronto's post-war communities a greater resemblance to outer areas of Moscow, Berlin, Paris or Belgrade, than to the suburbs of our American cousins. Compact by North American standards, the Toronto area has nearly twice the density of Greater Chicago, and surprisingly, slightly more than that of Greater New York.

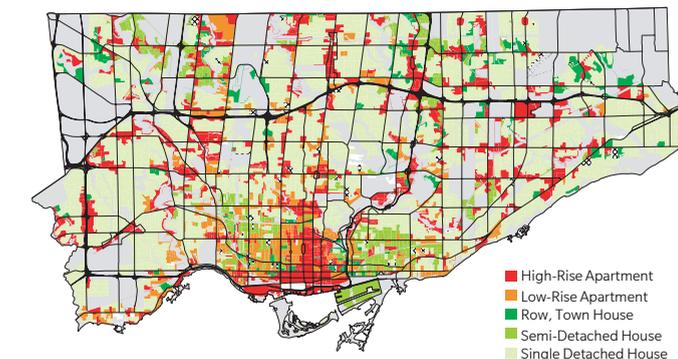
Through a hybrid of influences, Toronto's metropolitan form is unique. Toronto may be the only city where the juxtaposition of bungalows and concrete towers are the typical landscape.

Comprised of a network of nodes of high density, Toronto offers a framework within which the city can continue to evolve.



Apartment Distribution:

Apartment distribution (RED), in Toronto and Chicago. Chicago contains a significant amount of high-density apartments, for the most part located exclusively along Lake Michigan. Toronto's apartments on the other hand are located in clusters throughout.



Produced by City of Toronto, Urban Development Services, Research & Information - 2003



University of Chicago Map Collection, 2002

Images

Top: Apartments at Martha Eaton Drive, North York. Courtesy of Jesse Colin Jackson.
Opposite, Top: Apartments on Dixon Road, Etobicoke. Courtesy of Jesse Colin Jackson.