Modern Tower Blocks and Apartment Neighbourhoods: Toronto's Urban Asset

Toronto's heritage of modern residential towers is an important built legacy which distinguishes Toronto from other cities.

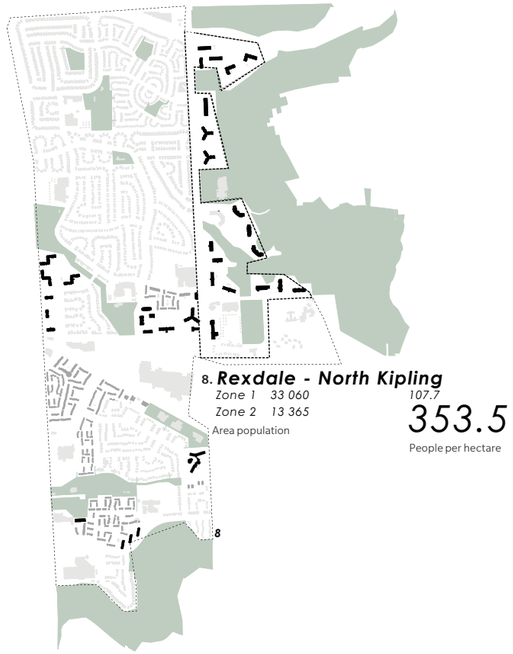
While the core of many North American cities are becoming increasingly sustainable via new green buildings, intensification and new transit infrastructure, one of the greatest unresolved challenges facing North American cities are the vast areas dominated by low-density post-war suburbs. They are preventing sustainable regions as a whole.

Toronto however is different. Found predominantly within the post-war suburbs (today known as the inner suburbs), the legacy of high-density modern tower block communities gives the city an urban form unique to North America, providing several advantages for meeting the challenges facing cities in the 21st Century, including:

- Existing high-density
- Large areas of open space
- Durability and flexibility
- Even distribution, multiple contexts
- Connection to existing and planned infrastructure

The factors that position our inherited modern towers as a valuable urban asset will be covered in this section.

Toronto's Urban Asset: Existing Density



Density

Toronto's Apartment Neighbourhoods are among the densest parts of the city. Many are several times more dense than typical neighbourhoods in the central city. With the recent trend of large groups sharing living accommodation, as many as eight people per two-bedroom apartment, densities are on the increase.

Images
Top: Density analysis of Kipling and Steeles in North Etobicoke.
Source Data: Statistics Canada. *Opposite:* The Peanut, Don Mills and Finch, under construction. Courtesy of Lockwood Survey Corporation Limited.
Section Cover Image: Apartments at Finch and Weston Road. Courtesy of Jesse Colin Jackson.

A City of Dense Nodes

Throughout North America, increasing high-density in the suburbs is commonly promoted as the solution for curbing sprawl as well as enabling a transit-oriented region. While this has been rarely achieved elsewhere, Toronto has a 40 year history of high-density suburban development evident in the hundreds of modern apartment towers in question.

Located throughout the city, Toronto's post-war tower blocks help give it a greater regional density than that of Chicago, Los Angeles and even Greater New York. Areas as far as 20km from the core, house up to 350 people per hectare (see sidebar). Post-war planning has given Toronto, particularly the inner-suburbs, a network of high-density nodes.

By understanding and building upon the successes of these areas, and addressing their failures, these high density zones could be reinvigorated and reinvented as focal points of both new population and economic growth.

At the scale of the neighbourhood, the density found in apartment neighbourhoods provides the critical mass to make environmental upgrades and local services viable. At the scale of the city, these high-density clusters can be a catalyst for rapid transit and other infrastructure.

For Toronto, the most significant question is not simply the form and placement of new density, but how to take advantage of our enormous pockets of inherited high density; enabling sustainable and complete communities. Toronto offers a unique model and can build upon a substantial legacy.

Toronto's Urban Asset: Existing Density

Comparative Densities of Toronto Neighbourhoods

People Per Hectare

Comparative International Urban and Metropolitan Densities, in People Per Hectare

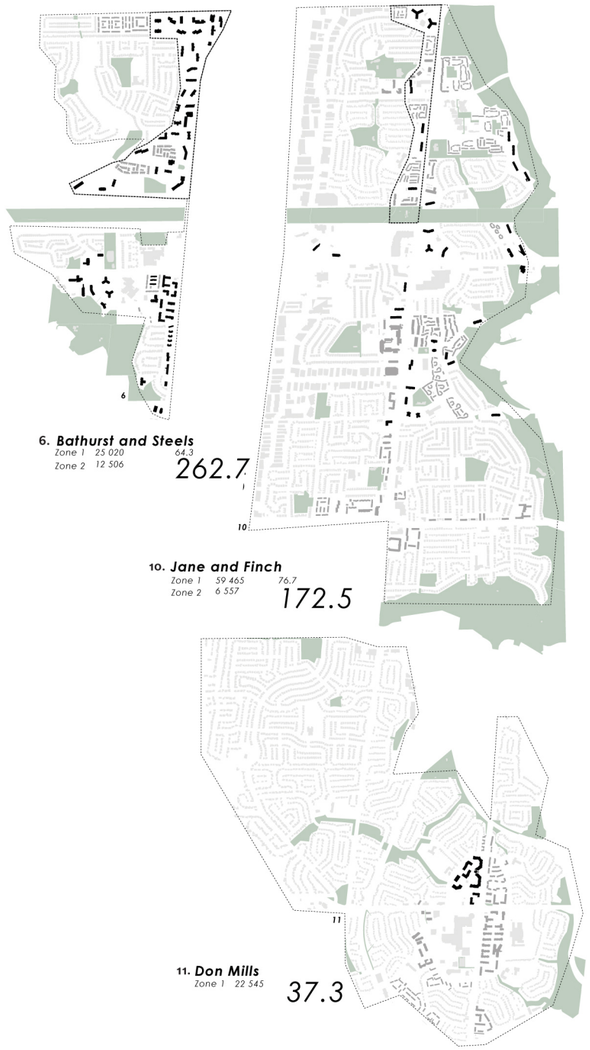
URBAN

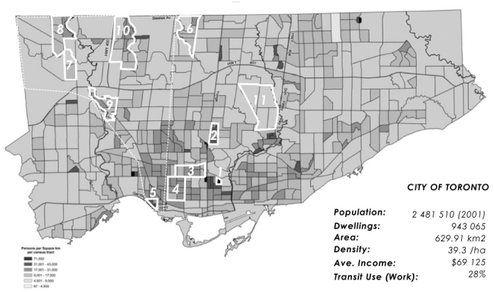
TORONTO AREA	
Old City of Toronto	69.6
Etobicoke	27.2
North York	34.3
York	64.8
Metro Toronto	**39.9**
Mississauga	21.2
Richmond Hill	13.0
Markham	9.8
OTHER NORTH AMERICA	
Chicago	49.2
Atlanta	12.2
Houston	13.0
Washington DC	34.8
Vancouver	47.5
Manhattan	258.4
New York	102.9
EUROPE	
Vienna	69.4
Berlin	56.0
Madrid	85.9
Copenhagen	28.5

METROPOLITAN

Greater Toronto Area	**26.5**
OTHER NORTH AMERICA	
Chicago	16.8
Atlanta	6.4
Houston	8.8
Washington DC	14.3
Vancouver	23.9
Greater New York	20.5
EUROPE	
Vienna	39.3
Berlin	38.1
Madrid	51.9
Copenhagen	19.3

Source Data: The Neptis Foundation, Statistics Canada, U.S. Census Bureau.





Density

The Toronto area is dense by North American standards. The following analysis examines a variety of urban and suburban neighbourhoods to illustrate how density relates to built form. In each area, large neighbourhoods, and a smaller cluster within that neighbourhood, is examined.

Neighbourhoods throughout the city have unique density patterns. Very high density is found in suburban areas, and some of Toronto's most vibrant neighbourhoods lack high density. There are very few parts of the city with less than 35 people per hectare, and many routinely have over 100.

In the central city, the Annex, with its many apartment buildings, has only half the density of Little Italy's semi-detached houses. This is due to the tendency for the large houses in the Annex to have single-family occupants, while the houses in Little Italy are divided into many apartments.

The highest densities in the city are found in its Apartment Neighbourhoods, such as Kipling and Steeles, Bathurst and Steeles, Jane and Finch and Yonge and Eglinton. St. Jamestown is Canada's most dense neighbourhood.

Images
Density analysis of Toronto Neighbourhoods. *Source Data:* Statistics Canada.

Toronto's Urban Asset: Open Space

Open Space at Bathurst and Steeles

The Apartment Neighbourhood at Bathurst and Steeles (opposite), contains some 40 towers and over 20,000 residents. Within these large apartment properties, the footprint of bulidings takes up only 10 percent of the site. The rest is open space. Today, this vast area is underused and for the most part inaccessible; primarily dominated by surface parking and separated with fencing. However, this land remains a remarkable resource, awaiting an opportunity to respond to the future needs of the neighbourhood.

Open Space in Study Area:

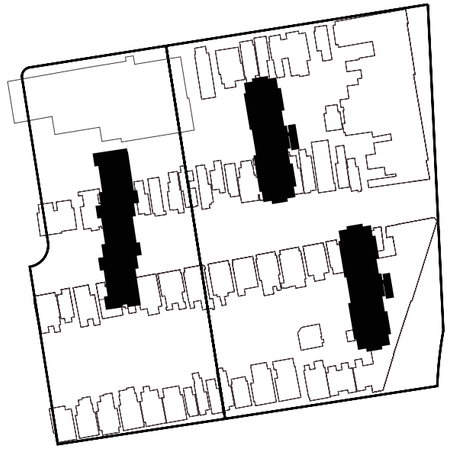
- Apartment Properties: 395 Hectares
- Apartment Footprint: 36 Hectares (11%)
- Surface Parking: 121 Hectares (30%)

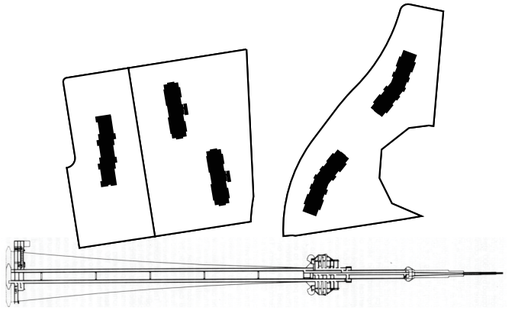
Images
Top: Image of apartment property at Kipling and Steeles.
Opposite: Open space analysis of Bathurst and Steeles

Room to Grow

There is room to grow. Toronto's highest concentrations of residential density corresponds with its largest areas of open space. Planned within modern guidelines requiring as much as 90 percent of the site to be undeveloped, residential towers sit within hectares of under-utilized land, today largely relegated to surface parking and in many cases surrounded by chain-link fence.

This represents an enormous land resource, presenting a great opportunity for reengagement and reinvention. Allowed to evolve in response to the ambitions and needs of the resident community and stakeholders, this inherited open space provides a remarkable opportunity for the future of apartment neighbourhoods and the city at large.

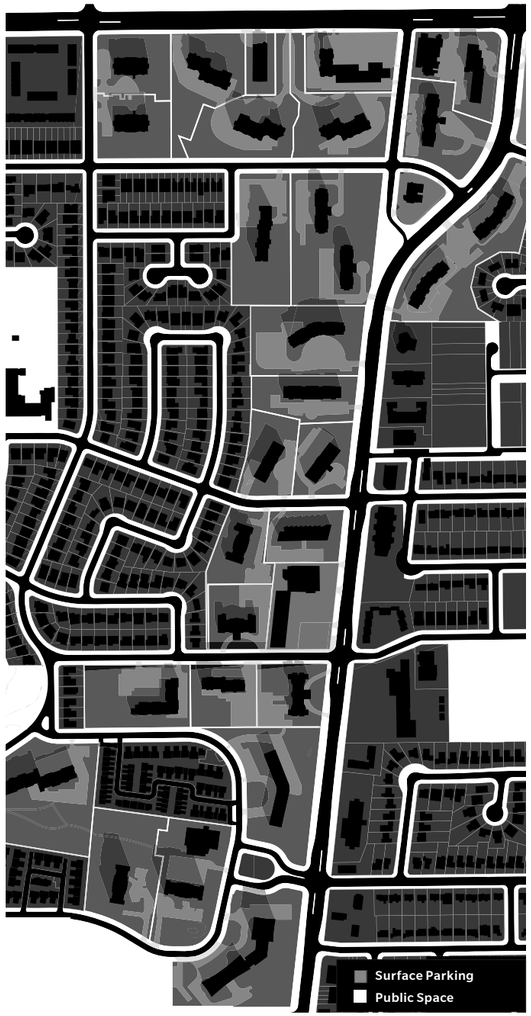




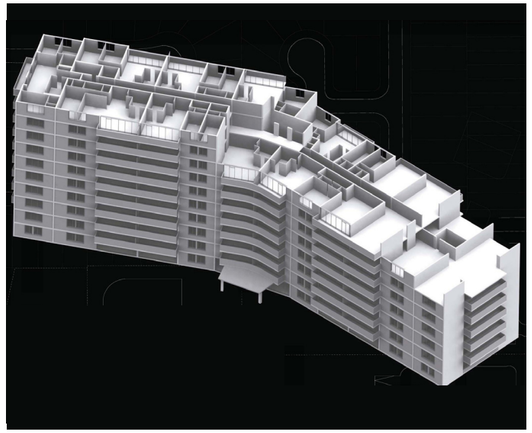
Top: The urban fabric of College and Grace Streets overlaid with apartment properties at Bathurst and Steeles. There are significant opportunities on these sites.

Bottom: Apartment properties at Bathurst and Steeles beside a scale representation of the CN Tower. These neighbourhoods were built at an incredibly large

Open Space at Bathurst and Steeles



Toronto's Urban Asset: Sound Infrastructure for Housing



Retrofit vs. Demolition:

When evaluated through the lens of ecological footprint, the embedded energy contained within this extensive building stock is substantial. Demolition would be an incredible waste of resources.

A Durable Concrete Filing Cabinet

These buildings are aging, yet can provide housing well into Toronto's future.

Planned for 30-year life spans, which have since passed, their single glazed windows, aging sealants and mechanical systems have carried them to the end of their first life cycle. However, this building stock is far from obsolete.

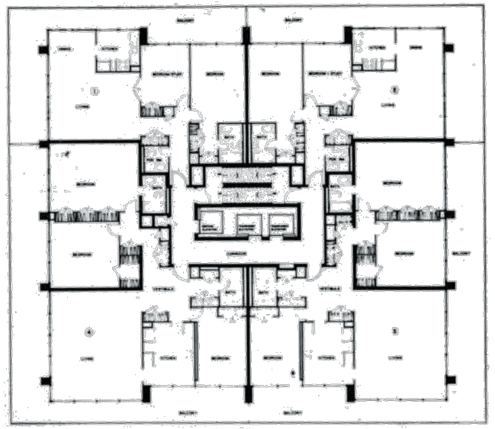
According to research conducted at the University of Toronto, the durable concrete construction is sound and perfectly suited for upgrade to meet 21st Century expectations of building performance and amenity. Properly maintained, they can continue to be a viable housing resource for many more generations.

Containing the majority of Toronto's three and four bedroom units, modern apartments provide the vital role of family-sized multiple units, as well as affordable accommodation for working Canadians. As housing needs increase in our growing region, updating existing housing will be a key concern.

Images

Top: Schematic of durable concrete frame of apartment building. *Opposite Top:* Durable masonry façade of apartment building. Courtesy of Canadian Architect. *Opposite left:* Plan showing unit layouts for two and three bedroom apartments. Courtesy of Canadian Architect. *Opposite Right:* Apartment tower under construction in the mid 1960s. Courtesy of Canadian Architect.

Toronto's mid-century apartments contain the majority of the city's two, three and four bedroom suites



Toronto's Urban Asset: Even Distribution

Multiple Contexts

Toronto's high-density apartment clusters exist in all areas of the city. Situated along ravines, arterials, close to industrial zones and within the historic city, these groupings respond to a variety of contexts and housing market strata. Some are adjacent to intense urban surroundings and others are in almost pastoral settings.

The wide distribution and similarity of this building type offers an economy of scale; making widespread reinvestment possible. These buildings are home to a great number of Torontonians, and strategies developed for their renewal will be widely repeatable.

Conversely, their diverse contexts provide opportunity for varied responses designed to meet local needs and the needs of the community. Faceless buildings can evolve into important neighbourhood landmarks, and the surrounding sites into unique and vibrant communities.

The prevalence of this repeating housing type is a great advantage.

Existing Infrastructure

Toronto is a connected and transit-oriented city. This is largely possible due to the prevalence of modern towers.

All apartment clusters within the city are connected to the TTC's surface transit network. The planning which guided Metro Toronto to encourage the development of high density in new communities also called for the creation of an extensive metropolitan public transportation network servicing all areas of the city. Today, this surface network is the most extensive in North America, and accounts for the largest share of the City's transit riders, apartment dwellers ranking among the highest users.

Apartment neighbourhoods have enabled viable transit service in all areas of the city. With many of the busiest routes servicing apartment communities in the inner suburbs, transit, and transit-oriented development is found throughout Toronto.

Building on this foundation, the City is in the process of implementing 'Transit City' – upgrading major arterial bus lines with rapid transit, many of which correspond with Toronto's largest apartment clusters.

As the city and region aim to contain sprawl, improve transit options and foster vibrant and sustainable communities, bringing rapid transit to the existing high-density throughout the city provides a remarkable set of opportunities. In this regard, Toronto is ahead of many of its north American counterparts.

Images
Opposite Top: Map of diversity and multiple contexts of Toronto's Apartment Neighbourhoods. *Opposite Bottom:* Map of Toronto's rapid and surface transit networks as they relate to clusters of post-war apartments.