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RAC Zone

By Graeme Stewart, RPP

RAC Zoning: Creating new ways to live, work, and play in apartment tower neighbourhoods
ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL ROTZTAIN

Toronto is unique, it contains over 2,000 high-rise apartment towers built in the post-war boom. Unlike any other city in North America, these towers are found in nearly every community, from city centre to outer suburbs, and are home to more than one million people. These towers and the neighbourhoods they form are at the core of Toronto's diversity, its urban form, and its future potential.

Planned in the 1960s with the ambition of creating the suburban communities of the future, these 'tower in the park' neighbourhoods provided views and natural green space a convenient driving distance from local suburban amenities. Today, as outlined in the United Way report Vertical Poverty, these communities face challenges. Blocked by chain-linked fences and restricted by single-use zoning regulations, which largely inhibit community facilities, shops, grocery stores, small business, markets, local entrepreneurs and social innovators, many of these communities are not meeting the needs or aspirations of their diverse and dynamic resident communities.

Toronto's tower residents are not typically drivers or

car owners: they rely on walking and transit to get around. That means that the neighbourhood destinations of the '60s which were designed with drivers in mind are no longer within reasonable reach, and many neighbourhoods find themselves isolated, lacking the needed shops, services, local opportunities, and other ingredients of healthy neighborhoods.



Yet Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods have incredible potential. Large tower neighbourhoods are home to tens of thousands of residents. The open spaces between buildings have ample room to host markets, festivals and community gathering spaces, the base of buildings can host shops

and community facilities; and towers can be retrofitted as models of low-carbon living. With new rapid transit planned, some of these communities can host new mixed-use housing, and be connected to the city at large through new paths, cycle networks, and transit. As has been demonstrated the world over, tower neighbourhoods can be the foundation for vibrant, connected, and low-carbon community hubs for a more dynamic city, and a more prosperous and sustainable region.

The project team and community partners have been working to remove zoning barriers and enable tower neighbourhoods to reach their full potential as vibrant, thriving, and sustainable communities. We imagine a Toronto in which every community thrives.

Through research, advocacy, and collaboration, a new zoning framework was developed—the Residential Apartment Commercial zone—and is poised for implementation in hundreds of Toronto’s vertical neighbourhoods.

This new zone will remove barriers for a range of exciting small-scale businesses and community services. With a new framework that aligns better with residents’ needs, Toronto’s tower neighbourhoods can begin the process of incremental change toward more complete, economically diverse, and more convenient communities for the hundreds of thousands of Torontonians that call these neighbourhoods home.

From pop-up markets, to new retail spaces, to specialized community services, the aim of the new zoning is to allow services in and to let people experiment—to open new opportunities never before possible.

“This is a change that in 10-15 years from now we will look back and say this transformed Toronto,” commented former Planning and Growth Management Committee chair then-councillor Peter Milczyn.

But changing the rules is just the start. The next phase of the project will be to work with residents,

community organizations, and other stakeholders to realize the RAC zone’s potential on the ground. This will include: continued coordination among the city, property owners, and residents; helping already established businesses and programs become legitimate; providing information, support, and resources to tower owners and entrepreneurs working to start businesses and programs; and working towards connecting available space with people and ideas.

Implementation of RAC zoning will be an incremental process that prioritizes equity, community ownership, and outcomes that result in maximum community benefit.

ERA Architects, Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal, United Way Toronto, City of Toronto and Toronto Public Health share the 2017 OPPI Excellence in Planning award for municipal statutory planning studies / reports with the City of London.

Graeme Stewart, OAA MRAIC RPP MCIP CAHP, is a registered architect, member of OPPI, a principal at ERA Architects. Graeme was a key initiator of the Tower Renewal Project, a modern heritage and community reinvestment initiative that examines the future of Toronto’s remarkable stock of modern tower neighbourhoods in collaboration with the United Way, City of Toronto, Province of Ontario, University of Toronto, and other partners.

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