

THE SUBURBAN TOWER AND TORONTO'S FIRST MASS HOUSING BOOM

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“In Toronto, an unusually large number of high-rise apartments poke above the flat landscape many miles from downtown... this is a type of high density suburban development far more progressive and able to deal with the future than the endless sprawl of the US...”¹

Richard Buckminster Fuller, 1968

BEYOND DOWNTOWN: TORONTO'S MODERN FABRIC

Much of the mythology surrounding Toronto is focused on the image of a “city of neighbourhoods”, enabled by the city’s early rejection of modernism through citizen groups and the Reform council. Yet what is perhaps of equal interest is the thoroughness and completeness with which Toronto accepted the modern project prior to this point.

Of the radical changes affecting the region in the era of vast economic expansion following the war, none were as tangible as the shift in the patterns of settlement. In what is perhaps the most significant development period in the city’s history, between the late 1950’s and the 1970’s the Toronto area grew to a region of millions regulated by thoroughly modern guidelines.² By 1965, Torontonians inhabited an urban area over twice as large

as the ‘historic city’ of the 1940’s, and, perhaps more significantly, hundreds of thousands were being housed in large-scale high-rise apartments (fig. 1).³

In an about face from policies restricting the development of ‘multiples’ prior to the war, city planners encouraged modern apartments to become the predominant form of housing.⁴ By 1966, at the peak of Toronto’s first mass housing boom, nearly 40% of the city’s housing stock and 77% of housing starts were apartments of this type.⁵ Seas of bungalows were built in concert with hundreds of tower blocks throughout the entire Metro region.

As a consequence, Toronto currently contains the second highest number of high rises in North America (defined here as buildings of 12 stories and higher).⁶ According to the real estate research orga-

¹ Fuller Geometrics, Architects, Engineers, Planners, “Project Toronto: A Study and Proposal for the Future Development and Design of Toronto”, (Cambridge, Mass, 1968).

² Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board, *Metroplan, Official Plan of Metropolitan Toronto* (Toronto, 1977).

³ Metropolitan Planning Board, *The Study of Apartment Distribution and Apartment Densities in the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Area*, (Toronto, 1966).

⁴ Richard Dennis, “Zoning Before Zoning: The Regulation of Apartment Housing in Early Twentieth Century Winnipeg and Toronto”, *Planning Perspectives*, 15 (2000).

⁵ Metropolitan Planning Board, *The Study of Apartment Distribution and Apartment Densities in the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Area*, (Toronto, 1966) 10.

⁶ “Toronto Highrises” Emporis 2006 <http://emporis.com>



fig. 1 Highrise apartment buildings within the City of Toronto built circa 1955 to 1975.

nization ‘Emporis’, Toronto contains less than half of New York’s yet nearly double that of Chicago’s.⁷ In contrast to its American counterparts, however, Toronto’s towers are predominantly located away from the downtown core in what were the former suburban boroughs of Metropolitan Toronto. This has resulted in clusters of residential high-rises as far as 20 km from downtown with densities as high as 350 people per hectare⁸.

In many respects, portions of Toronto’s suburbs more closely resembled British ‘New Towns’ or Soviet dormitory blocks than the suburban communities typically associated with North America (fig. 2). However, unlike the European experience, the majority of Toronto’s apartments were the result of market forces. They were built by large corporate developers who saw young professionals and their families as a lucrative consumer base.⁹

Today, inside the boundaries of the new City of Toronto, the pre-war typology popularized by the late Jane Jacobs represents a minority within a City of predominantly modern conception. The influence of Metro guidelines has resulted in a dominant fabric both typologically and organizationally at odds with the historic city, and with many of its North American counterparts.

This poses some interesting questions, in terms of Toronto’s developmental relationship within

the North American city system, and in assessing contemporary planning issues facing the region. Specifically: how did this form come to be and what does it mean for our future?

**THE INVERTED METROPOLIS:
CREATING THE SUBURBAN TOWER**

Although apartments were considered a detriment to society prior to the Second World War, the modern high-rise became a significant feature in the post-war urbanization of Metropolitan Toronto.¹⁰ This typology was first introduced to the city through City Park apartments, a complex developed only two year after Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’habitation* in Marseille.¹¹ The project was built downtown in response to density allowances as a result of the subway. Yet it would be in the suburbs that the modern tower would gain its prominence.

The process of Metropolitanization was set in place almost immediately after the war. The Toronto Planning Department was established in 1942, soon followed by the Toronto and Suburban Planning board.¹² These agencies quickly developed a series of plans for the region. Highway, mass transit and other infrastructures were defined as well as suburban organization. Regional administrative consolidation officially took place on January 1st, 1954 when Metropolitan Toronto was established.

7 “Toronto Highrises” Emporis 2006 <http://emporis.com>

8 This figure was determined using GIS data with 2001 census tract data as its base, and was compiled by Paul Hess in the Department of Geography at the University of Toronto. Figures for the Kipling and Steeles area were determined by taking the residential population numbers (the area consists entirely of high rise towers) and dividing that by the property area of the apartments using property data maps. The ravine system, which is also included in the census tract, was excluded to give the density of the housing and not the larger neighbourhood.

9 Graham Barker et al., *Highrise and SuperProfits*, (Toronto: Dupont Press, 1973).

10 Richard Dennis. “Zoning Before Zoning: The Regulation of Apartment Housing in Early Twentieth Century Winnipeg and Toronto”, *Planning Perspectives* 15 (2000).

11 Peter Caspari, “City Park Apartments”, *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Journal*, 34 (1957) 132.

12 Bureau of Architecture and Urbanism, *Toronto modern: architecture, 1945–1965*, (Toronto: Coach House, 2002) 26.

This was the first North American metropolitan government to be formed since the creation of New York, marking the beginning of Toronto's greatest modern project.¹³

A large push for the creation of Metro was to stimulate the development of housing. Despite numerous efforts, the Toronto area was lagging behind other regions in terms of new private and public developments. The purpose of Metro was to encourage growth through the harmonization of private development and public infrastructure through effective planning. Premier Frost stated while tabling the new legislation that created Metro: 'the solution of the housing problem is dependent... on arterial roads, credit... water sewers and co-operations of municipal governments'¹⁴. It was felt the unification of services and planning was a key process in fostering new development and economic growth.

The borders of Metro were extensive, contain- ing Toronto and several adjacent townships and

villages, allowing for coordinated planning of the urban centre, suburban periphery and agricultural hinterland under one administration. Given the opportunity to outline the shape of new growth, planners advocated for development of the periph- ery. Following contemporary European rebuilding projects as well as the development strategies of new American suburbs¹⁵, planners pushed the pro- vision of 'health, space and light' as fundamental to new development (figs. 3-4).

Early plans for the region followed a model inspired by Ebenezer Howard's *garden city*, thus creating a definitive greenbelt and populating the periphery with self contained satellites.¹⁶ Alterna- tive plans argued for complete 'expansion', which conceptualized the entire area as 'developable'. A major concern of both approaches was the inte- gration of mixed forms of housing and industry into the periphery. It was the 'expansion' approach which was eventually chosen as the operating model by Metropolitan Toronto.

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James Lemon, *Liberal Dreams and Nature's Limits; Great Cities of North America since 1600*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997) 258.

14

Albert Rose, "The Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto", *Community Planning Review*, 111:1 (May, 1953) 11.

15

John Sewell. *The Shape of the City: Toronto Struggles with Modern Planning*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 53.

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Report of the Toronto and Suburban Planning Board. Toronto and Suburban Planning Board, (Toronto, 1947).

fig. 2 Moscow/Toronto. Toronto's inner suburbs are reminiscent of Moscow.

OUR EUROPEAN PROBLEM:

"...this could be Belgrade, this could be Moscow"

- European Writer Cor Wagenaar during a recent trip up the Don Valley Parkway in Toronto

TORONTO



MOSCOW

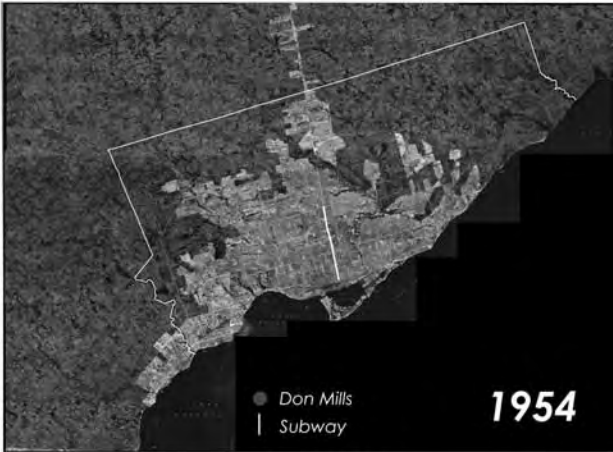


AS A RESULT OF BUILDING PRACTICES DURING THE PERIODS OF EXPLOSIVE GROWTH FOLLOWING THE WAR, TORONTO'S SUBURBAN FABRIC IN MANY WAYS MORE CLOSELY RESEMBLES EUROPEAN AND SOVIET EXAMPLES, THEN IT DOES SUBURBS OF OUR AMERICAN COUSINS. THOUGH CREATED UNDER RADICALLY OPPOSING CIRCUMSTANCES, WE ARE CURRENTLY FACING SIMILAR PROBLEMS TO MANY OF THE STATES IN THE 'NEW' EUROPE. WHAT HAVE THEY TO TEACH US?

Toronto's Urban Growth



GTA 2006



Toronto at the formatoin of Metro

fig. 3 Toronto in 1954. The borders of Metro encompassed large areas of undeveloped farmland.

fig. 4 Lawrence Avenue and DonValley Parkway, 1952 and 1972.



The ‘expansion’ model was first proposed in the 1946 plan for Etobicoke (fig. 5). The plan had been developed by Roman-trained Hungarian architect and planner E. G. Faludi. Faludi was a key figure in bringing the principles of modernism to mainstream Toronto planning circles. His Toronto office was a regular consultant to the City in planning matters and was responsible for developments such as Thorncrest Village in Etobicoke.¹⁷ Faludi’s plan articulates the relationship between residential and industrial land use and clearly identified urban zones using the principles close to those elaborated by CIAM. Most strikingly, it extended Toronto’s macro grid into the countryside, outlining a framework for new low and high density projects. “Gradual growth by accretion” was felt to bring the best social and economic benefit.¹⁸ The expansion plan was favoured (paradoxically) as it pro-

vided a means of containing future growth within Metro’s servicing zone. Planners were sceptical of the garden city model’s ability to contain new population within servicing limits, as well as the challenges it posed for private development. One of the key missions of Metro was the use of government intervention to ensure the “continued climate of economic expansion”.¹⁹ The organization of Metro was as much a plan for economic growth as it was one of housing and form. Planners would determine the overall framework and private developers would be the instrument of execution. The expansion plan satisfied the desires of planners, municipalities and developers alike.²⁰ Faludi was not the only European ex-pat influencing the planning department. Both Englishman Gordon Stevenson and German Hans Blumenfeld left the US for Canada during the turbulent years



fig. 5 Plans for Toronto's Western End, 1940s to present.

17 E.G. Faludi, *Land Development in the Metropolitan area of Toronto: Ten Years of Achievement in Land Development by Realtors, Developers* (Toronto, 1952).

18 Hans Blumenfeld, *Life Begins at 65*, (Toronto: Harvest House, 1987) 242.

19 Bureau of Architecture and Urbanism, *Toronto Modern: Architecture, 1945–1965* (Toronto: Coach House, 2002) 20.

20 E.G. Faludi, *Land Development in the Metropolitan area of Toronto: Ten Years of Achievement in Land Development by Realtors, Developers* (1952).

of McCarthy politics.²¹ Coming to Toronto perhaps out of necessity, they were pleased to find a strong planning body with a mandate of regional management. Put in charge of drafting the new official plan, they were given the authority some considered “a planner’s dream”.²²

Once in Toronto they advocated employment and mobility as key planning considerations. They were sceptical of unregulated free market development and favoured comprehensive planning of the peripheral regions. They set about establishing guidelines, which would equitably distribute employment, transportation, and housing throughout expanding regions.²³ Fundamental to the strategy was providing accommodation for all classes of workers.

Gordon Stevenson also saw a brief tenure at the University of Toronto’s nascent planning department, working with fellow British expatriate and CIAM member Jacqueline Tyrwhitt. The relationship between Toronto and England’s Modern Architectural Research group (MARS) and the work of the London County Council (LCC) has been discussed previously in this publication.²⁴ This relationship is evident in Stevenson’s advocacy for mixed housing typologies and densities (known as ‘mixed development’) within new suburban zones.²⁵ It was believed that significant apartment housing was needed in peripheral regions in order

to facilitate employment and transit objectives²⁶. This was synonymous with contemporary English discourse which, at the time, increasingly favoured high-density suburban development. Projects of this type, such as Roehampton in the suburbs of London, had been introduced to the Canadian consciousness through early publications of *Community Planning Review*²⁷ and The *Canadian Housing Design Council*²⁸ (fig. 6). Master-planned and mixed density peripheral development had become an interest of national housing agencies. The creation of official plans of Metropolitan Toronto and its municipalities helped push these ideas into policy.

Notions of mixed development first manifested themselves in practice in Don Mills, a project both ground breaking in its modern urbanism and a financial success for developer E. P. Taylor. It was described by English planner Sir William Holford as “(of) the most attractive (new) town that I have ever seen.”²⁹. Yet it was not until North York Township removed its height restrictions that suburban apartments reached their full potential in the housing mix. The project which fully catalyzed the use of the suburban apartment tower was Flemington Park. Begun in 1958, it was the first privately developed apartment neighbourhood in North America.

English planners, influenced themselves by Scandinavian projects, saw the modern ‘tower in the park’ as key to providing equitable and healthy

21 Hans Blumenfeld, *Life Begins at 65* (Toronto: Harvest House, 1987) 251.

22 Christopher Klemek, *Urbanism and Reform: Modernist Planning and the Crisis of Urban Liberalism in Europe and North America: 1945–1965*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 252.

23 Hans Blumenfeld, *Life Begins at 65*, p. 240.

24 Kelly Crossman, “Alsop’s Art”, *AI*, IV:2 (2005).

25 Miles Glendinning, *Tower block: modern public housing in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland*, (London: Yale University Press, 1994) 94.

26 Metropolitan Planning Board, *The Study of Apartment Distribution and Apartment Densities in the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Area* (Toronto, 1966).

27 *Community Planning Review*. VI:1, (Ottawa: Community Planning Association of Canada, 1956) 12.

28 A. Hazeland, *Housing in Cities: Some Examples of Multiple Housing Recently Built in Canada*, (Ottawa: Canadian Housing Design Council, 1964) 70.

29 Bureau of Architecture and Urbanism, *Toronto Modern: Architecture, 1945–1965* (Toronto: Coach House, 2002) 20.



fig. 6 Roehampton development, London, 1954.



housing at high densities. British advocates working for the London County Council (Metro's counterpart), such as Frederick Gibberd, saw towers as the model that combined the best housing standard possible with the responsible use of land. This approach avoided the zones of sprawling houses frequently criticized by the LCC.³⁰ Many of these same arguments were used by Flemingdon Park's planner, Macklin Hancock in describing the project: "... to create a new community of urban character – to correct the formless sprawled peripheral sectors of Metro Toronto (fig. 7)."³¹

Flemingdon Park offered three times the density and an equal amount of open space as did Don Mills.³² The project had many similarities to London's Roehampton, whose 'towers in the landscape' were described by architectural critic Nikolaus Pevsner as contributing to a "specifically English version of International Modernism".³³ After Flemingdon Park was completed, variations on this theme were adopted as a core approach to development.³⁴

If the legacy of Don Mills was the acceptance of large corporate developers as the mechanism of delivery, Flemingdon Park can be credited with establishing tower living as a desirable mode of suburban habitation as well as private development. Densities offered profit margins for both speculative developers and municipalities looking

for tax revenues. This generated fierce competition among municipalities for new projects.³⁵ A convergence of planning ideology and the development market created a diaspora of the typology, with towers quickly appearing throughout the entirety of the Metro region. And, ironically, the towers became the symbol of both top-down planning and free market development.

By the early 1960s, the "tower in the park" was not only the most popular form of development, it was also the only legal type of mass housing.³⁶ Guided by the official plan, and supported by Faludi's critical review of apartment clusters emerging in the Annex and South Parkdale, maximizing open space became a key concern.³⁷ The 60% to 70% open space formulas common in the suburbs became endorsed by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation as a requirement for all new projects in the City (figs. 8+9).

The planning policies not only reinforced the mode of development now common in the periphery, as a corollary it stipulated the application of this form within the historic city.³⁸ Eager to make up for tax assessments and status lost to the suburbs, Toronto forged ahead with towers of this type in its older districts. The contentious situation which resulted, and the innovative response of the architectural community, citizen groups and the Reform council need not be reiterated here.

³⁰ Miles Glendinning, *Tower block: modern public housing in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland*, (London: Yale University Press, 1994) 54

³¹ John Sewell. *The Shape of the City*, p. 100.

³² John Sewell. *The Shape of the City*, p. 102.

³³ Pevsner, Nikolaus, *The Englishness of English Art*, (London: Architectural Press, 1956) 172–176.

³⁴ Metropolitan Planning Board, *The Study of Apartment Distribution and Apartment Densities in the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Area*, (Toronto, 1966) 12.

³⁵ Redfern, Bousfield and Bacon Consulting Engineers and Town Planners, *Mount Dennis development study* (Toronto: Proctor, 1964)

³⁶ Faludi and Associates, "Report on Building development in the East Annex Planning District" (Toronto, 1963).

³⁷ Faludi and Associates, "Report on Apartments in South Parkdale", (Toronto, 1961).

fig. 7 Aerial view of Flemingdon park and Don Valley Parkway.

ACTIVISM AND NEGLECT

The legacy of large-scale corporate development, which began with Don Mills, has left Toronto with a markedly different landscape than is usually associated with typical suburbia (figs. 10–16). The planning polices of the 1960’s provided Metro’s suburbs with nodes of high density situated along existing transit corridors. Though of a currently unpopular aesthetic, these areas exhibit many of the characteristics heralded as the ‘solution’ to suburbia in other districts. Yet presently, development in these regions is largely discouraged.

Of the many healthy benefits of modernism’s critique, one problematic manifestation was the loss of the notion of regional planning. Neighbourhood autonomy and a freeze on developments within them has become the prevailing mode of operation. Echoes of this thinking are evident in Toronto’s latest official plan, which places most of the City under the blanket zoning of “stable neighbourhoods”, free from large scale development. This approach protects established areas from “renewal” intervention, and funnels major development into key areas adjacent to existing infrastructure.

This is intended to allow for densification while maintaining the “stability” and support of Toronto’s residential fabric. Yet what is lost in this approach is the equity inherent in Metro’s original attempts to create desirable neighbourhoods throughout.

The emphasis on historic fabric implicit in the reform movement also acted to instigate a widespread rejection of the projects from the modern period. As a result, vast areas of the city were deemed unworthy of civic attention. Many of the modern suburban neighbourhoods once deemed as the city’s most progressive are now off the radar and are falling into decline.

Once again we are witnessing a convergence of official policy and development interests. Toronto is currently experiencing the largest condo boom in North America³⁹. Areas identified for development in the official plan and the Provincial “Places to Grow” report are being inundated with new construction. Yet while the last half decade has seen nearly all investment and growth within the city focused in “intensification” zones⁴⁰, the majority of the city remains outside of the scope of new architecture and urban design considerations.

38 Faludi and Associates, “Report on Building development in the East Annex Planning District” (Toronto, 1963).

39 Theresa Boyle, “Toronto condo market still rolling”, *The Toronto Star*, April. 29, 2006.

40 AdrianBlackwell and Kanishka Goonewardena. “Poverty of Planning: Tent City and the New Official Plan”, *INURA: The Contested Metropolis*. (Berlin: Birkhaeuser, 2004) 224.

fig. 8 Apartments on Kipling Avenue. Higher densities were granted if balanced with large areas of open space.

fig. 9 Open space around apartment complexes are often separated from adjacent ravines and parks.





fig. 10 Apartments and properties in West Toronto showing interrelationship of apartment clusters, open space and natural systems.

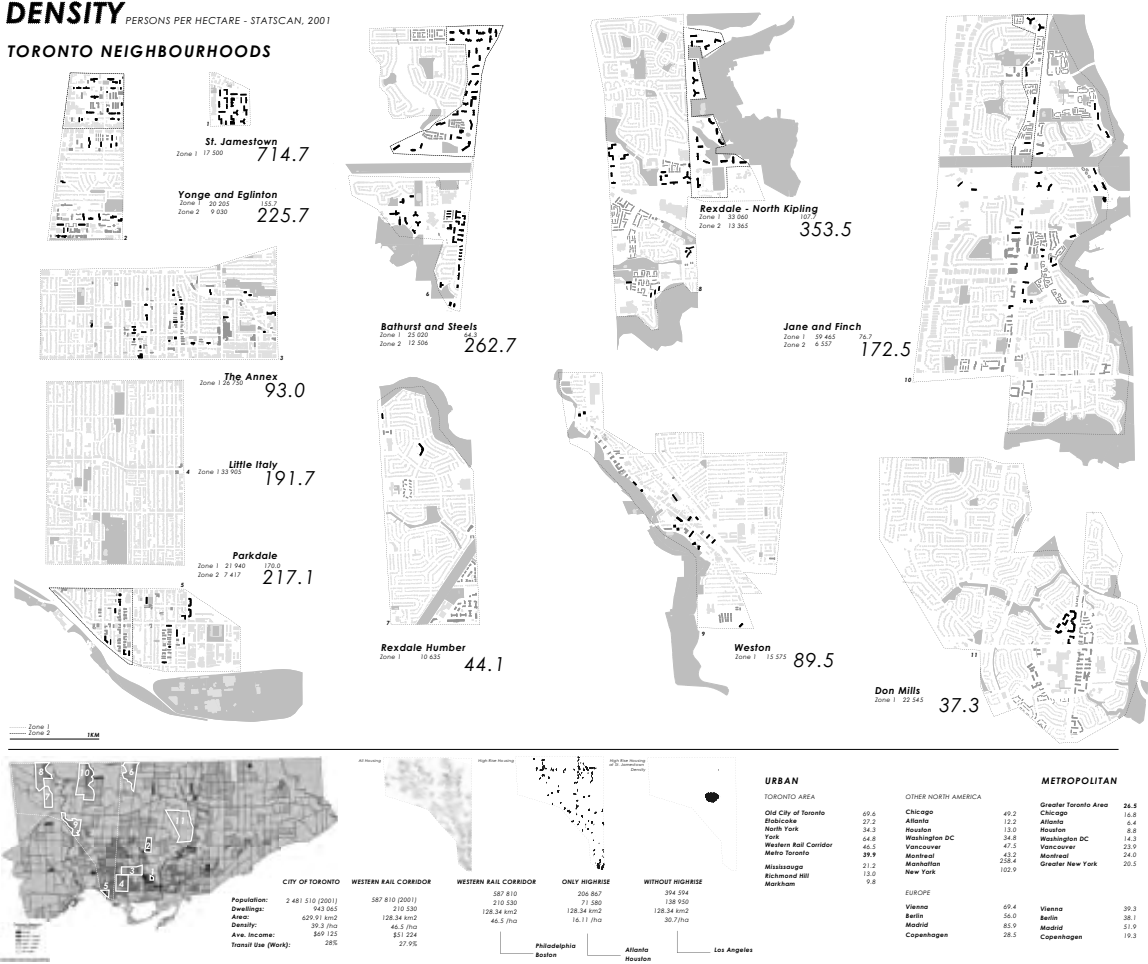


fig. 11 Density in Toronto neighbourhoods



fig. 12 The state of generous open space around apartment towers is often one of neglect and disrepair.

fig. 13 Apartment complexes at Kipling Street and Steeles Avenue.

fig. 14 Modern landscaping in tower complex near Allen Expressway.





fig. 15 Hydro corridor at Jane Street and Steeles Avenue.

fig. 16 Typical suburban strip plaza adjacent to apartment complex at Kipling Street and Dixon Avenue.

As a result, we are currently witnessing the “Europeanization” of Toronto’s socio-economic structure. The core is becoming increasingly wealthy while extensive regions in the “Metro” suburbs are becoming increasingly marginalized.⁴¹ The recent Paris riots reinforce the inequity and social tensions which may arise if this trend is to continue. Much of the growing poverty and neglect is focussed on Toronto’s portfolio of modern towers. Home to many new Canadians, these culturally unique neighbourhoods are suffering from extreme neglect. Paradoxically labelled as “stable” in the new Official plan, they are among the areas most suited for thoughtful reinvention.

TORONTO’S ASSET: HIGH DENSITY SUBURBS AS A PLACE TO GROW

The policies which shaped the creation of suburban high-density complexes in Toronto have left us with an interesting paradox: the densest suburban nodes contain the city’s largest continuous areas of open space. Underutilized, and for the most part untouched, there is no planned future use for this resource.

Always ahead of her time, Jane Jacobs speculated upon the incremental intensification of traditional suburban housing.⁴² Perhaps the same can

be true of apartment blocks. Do these complexes offer an opportunity for suburban intensification, commercialization and social programming? Furthermore, as many vast areas of green space associated with these towers are located adjacent to large natural systems, they may offer a launching pad for ecological and perhaps even “permacultural” alternatives to typical developments such as urban agriculture? New initiatives in Europe such as London’s ‘Sustaining Towers Project’ are working to this effect. What are the possibilities here?⁴³

There is much debate about the appropriate form of growth for the city. Missing from the discussion is the use of its aging high-rises and older Metro suburbs as centres for reinvestment and reinvention. With issues of regional sustainability an increasing concern, perhaps the existing density and land amenity places these areas in a superior position for green solutions than greenfields or traditional suburbia.

Careful reconsideration of our adopted urban structure of mixed density suburbs could act to recast these areas as one of the City’s most promising assets. Perhaps, once again, they could reflect Richard Buckminster Fuller’s complimentary vision of Toronto as a progressive and thoughtfully-planned urban region.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

figs. 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 courtesy Graeme Stewart
fig. 3 Photo of Toronto, 1954, University of Toronto Data map library
fig. 5 Data from; Toronto and Suburban Planning Board, *Report of the Toronto and Suburban Planning Board*, E.G. Faludi, *Etoibicoke: A Thirty Year Program for Development* (1946); Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board, *MetroPlan 66 – Amendments* (Toronto, 1970); City of Toronto, *Official Plan* (2002)
fig. 7 University of Toronto Data Map Library
fig. 9 Drawing Graeme Stewart using data from City of Toronto property data maps
fig. 10 Diagram Graeme Stewart, space data provided by Geoff Thun
fig. 11 Drawings Graeme Stewart. Maps courtesy City of Toronto property data maps.

⁴¹ “Flemington Park” *City of Toronto*. <http://www.toronto.ca/demographics/pdf3/cpa44.pdf>

⁴² Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead*, (Toronto: Random House, 2004).

⁴³ Price and Myers Architects, “Sustaining Towers”, 2005. <http://www.sustainingtowers.org/>