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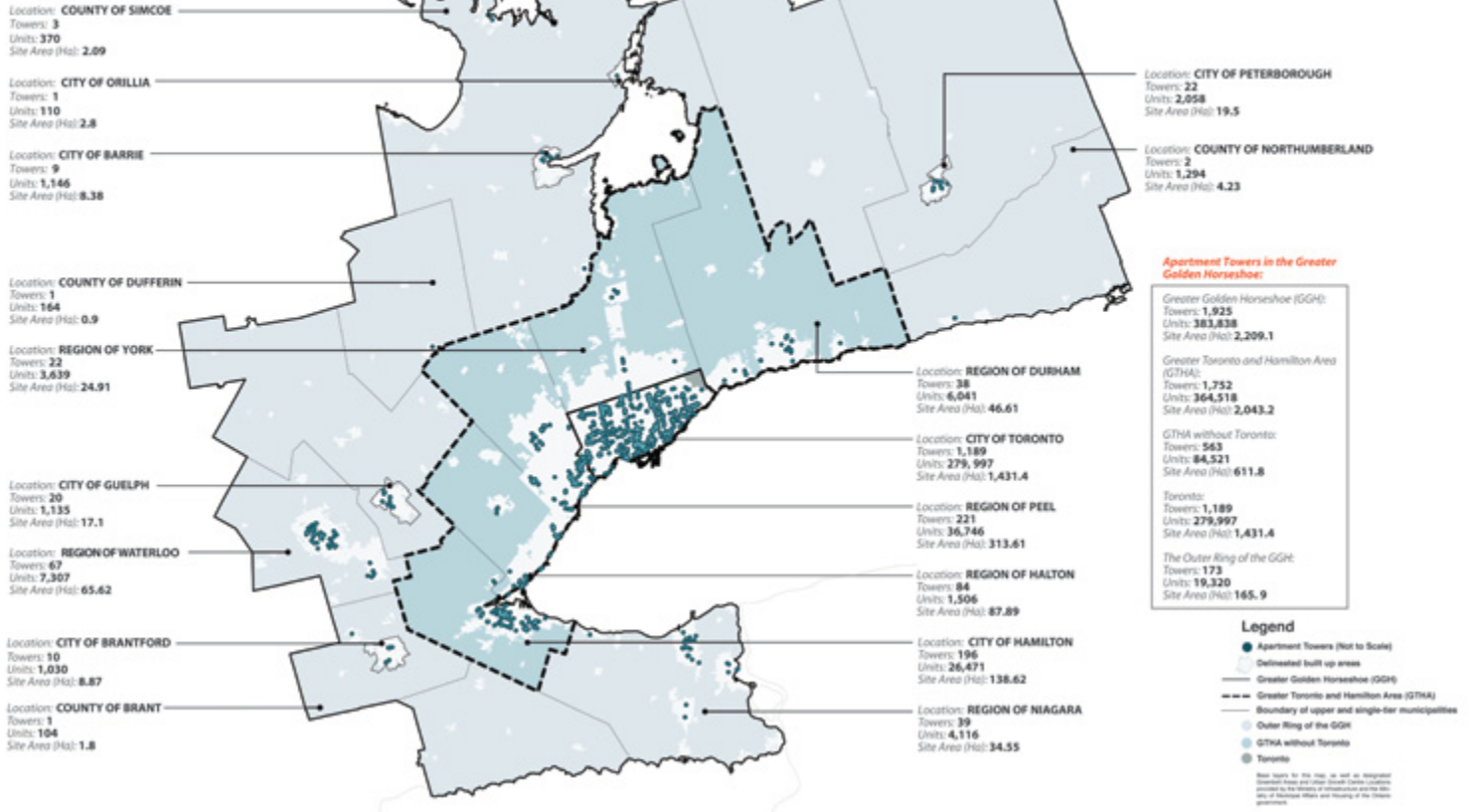
ONTARIO PLANNERS: VISION · LEADERSHIP · GREAT COMMUNITIES

Tower Neighbourhood Renewal in the Greater Golden Horseshoe

An Analysis of High-Rise Apartment Tower Neighbourhoods, Developed Between 1945 and 1984

## Inventory

### Location of Apartment Towers in the GGH



Location of apartment towers in the GGH

# RENEWING APARTMENT TOWER NEIGHBOURHOODS

Evolving a new planning framework



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# BILLBOARD

## Conference 2013

The 2013 OPPI Conference will feature interactive sessions designed around three themes:

- Healthy and Sustainable Community Design (What should it be)
- Community Engagement (How should it happen)
- Making It Work (Implementation).

Conference sessions are being designed to address what members told us in the recent survey. Sessions are being crafted to deliver new and innovate ways to inspire members and share new ideas.

**Hold September 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013.  
 See you there!**

Further information is available on the OPPI website at [www.ontarioplanners.ca](http://www.ontarioplanners.ca)

# Enabling Positive Change

By Elise Hug, Graeme Stewart, Jason Thorne



**W**hen we talk about planning in Toronto, we normally talk about the parts of the city where there is a lot of growth, and updating the local planning framework is necessary to accommodate that. But in Toronto, like in most places, development and change are not distributed evenly. Some areas of the city have changed very little—physically, at least—in 40 years. In some cases that is desirable, and in others, less so.

This article is about Toronto's post-war tower neighbourhoods and how the City of Toronto and its partners are seeking to change the planning framework to allow those neighbourhoods to evolve alongside the rest of the city.

## Toronto's tower neighbourhoods

According to a 2010 study for the Ontario Growth Secretariat conducted by planningAlliance, ERA Architects and the University of Toronto Cities Centre, across Toronto there were well over 1,000 high-rise apartment buildings constructed between 1945 and 1984. These buildings supply housing, primarily rental housing, for approximately 500,000 Torontonians—about 20 per cent of the city's population and 50 per cent of Toronto's rental units.

Toronto's post-war apartment towers are unique in North

America because they are distributed across the city. In U.S. cities, these buildings are mostly found in urban cores and downtowns, where they were primarily intended as public housing. But in Toronto, they are found everywhere, including the post-war suburbs of the former Metro Toronto municipalities, and the vast majority are in the private rental market. This phenomenon extends beyond Toronto as well. According to the 2010 report "Tower Neighbourhood Renewal in the Greater Golden Horseshoe," nearly 1,000 more of these buildings can be found across the Greater Golden Horseshoe outside of Toronto.

## Planning legacy

The initial planning for post-war tower neighbourhoods was, in many cases, an early version of what planners today call "complete communities." It was intended that each neighbourhood would have access to parks, schools, places of worship, shopping centres, and so on. However, the scale of these "complete communities" was that of the car. Planning was based on an assumption that all adult residents would have access to a car. This reflected the belief that

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Above: Typical post-war towers  
(Photos courtesy Graeme Stewart)

**Table 1**

Zone Standard	Apartment Tower 'Legacy' Zoning	The King's Reinvestment Areas	Avenues
Density: GFA	Total GFA; dis-aggregated GFA per land use	None	None
Density: units	Maximum restricted to original unit count	None	None
Height	Maximum restricted to original approved height	Uniform height limit reinforces existing built character	Associated with ROW width; angular planes enforce setbacks to achieve good transition
Coverage	Typically less than 40%	None	None
Land use	Highly restrictive	Broadly permissive	Retail required at grade

Toronto Public Health released a report prepared by the Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal in September 2012 entitled "Toward Healthier Apartment Neighbourhoods." The report tracks and maps the linkages among apartment tower neighbourhoods, growing incidence of poor health such as diabetes, and strategies for achieving the city's Healthy Toronto by Design objectives by improving access to fresh food, active transportation, health services, employment and other strategies. The report shows how Toronto's official plan policies are generally supportive of the kinds of changes needed to improve the quality of life and health of residents in post-war tower neighbourhoods. However, current zoning regulations often act as a

these buildings would attract young professionals and even young families. While that may have been the case in the beginning, today these buildings are primarily home to new Canadians and low-income residents. Car ownership in many apartment neighbourhoods is below average, with higher dependency on transit and walking for daily trips according to both the Ontario Growth Secretariat's report as well as the "Walkability in Toronto's High-Rise Neighbourhoods" study by Paul Hess of the University of Toronto's Faculty of Geography and Jane Farrow of Jane's Walk. The Ontario Growth Secretariat study also found that 77 per cent of apartment neighbourhoods are found in areas of high or very high social need.

These findings clearly demonstrate that the market demographic that was originally imagined for these buildings, and that informed the original planning for these neighbourhoods, is no longer the case. While the demographics and needs of apartment tower residents have changed in the past several decades, the planning framework that guides the growth and development of these neighbourhoods has not. This disconnect has been the focus of various initiatives in Toronto over the past several months.

**Priority neighbourhoods**

A number of groups have identified concerns about Toronto's post-war apartment neighbourhoods, and this has resulted in a series of studies and reports in 2012.

Toronto's Tower Renewal Office, working with the City Planning Division, reviewed post-war residential tower sites where infill development has been approved, including locations in both the downtown and the inner suburbs. However, the study also highlighted generally low levels of growth and development in some parts of Toronto's inner suburbs. It appears that in these areas, infill projects on tower sites are contributing a significant share of what are otherwise relatively low levels of new development.

barrier to change. For instance, while official plan policies encourage small-scale retail and service uses and local institutional uses in apartment neighbourhoods, these uses are typically prohibited by current zoning.

United Way Toronto has also made apartment neighbourhoods a priority area for attention based on its Vertical Poverty report. Among the many actions being undertaken by the United Way is the September 2012 release of the report "Strong Neighbourhoods and Complete

**Table 2**

<b>Comparison of Activities allowed in Mixed Use Zone versus Residential Apartment Zone in the Current City of Toronto Zoning</b>		
Activity	Mixed	Apartment
Dwelling	YES	YES
Clothing Store	YES	NO
Bank	YES	NO
Coffee Shop	YES	NO
Accountant	YES	NO
Drug Store	YES	NO
Patio	YES	NO
Art Gallery	YES	NO
Place of Worship	YES	NO



Typical apartment tower neighbourhood in Toronto

Communities: A New Approach to Zoning for Apartment Neighbourhoods” by the Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal. This report outlines specific policy barriers for achieving more complete and well-served communities in apartment neighbourhoods, and outlines policy alternatives.

### Opening the door to change

One of the common themes that run through all of the recent reports and initiatives is the need to unlock apartment neighbourhoods from the planning rules that currently constrain them, and to open the door for change. In response, the City of Toronto Planning and Growth Management Committee requested City Planning to consider approaches for reforming the zoning in Toronto’s older apartment neighbourhoods and removing regulatory barriers to small-scale commercial and institutional uses. Given the imminent release of the city’s comprehensive zoning by-law, the timing was fortuitous.

City Planning, working with the city’s Tower Renewal Office, the United Way and the Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal, has brought forward a new land use category: the residential apartment commercial (RAC) zone. This new zone allows for a limited amount of retail, service and other non-residential uses on the ground floor of apartment towers with over 100 units. The regulations for the new RAC zone have been established and will be considered by council early in 2013 along with the comprehensive zoning by-law. Where the new zone should be applied will be determined through a subsequent process. The change in use permissions is summarized in table 2.

Creating a new land use category is a rare occurrence in Toronto, where most changes in permitted land uses are either the result of site-specific, owner-initiated, rezoning applications, or city-initiated, area-specific secondary plans. One previous example is the creation of the reinvestment zones in the King-Spadina and King-Parliament areas in the 1990s to encourage reinvestment in those areas and to remove barriers to residential development in formerly industrial areas. Another example is the rezoning of the avenues, which pre-zone the land for mixed use along key sections of major arterial roads. (See table 1.)

The excitement of the new approach being taken with the RAC zone is palpable. Toronto’s acting zoning by-law and environment director Joe D’Abramo was quoted in *Novae Res Urbis*: “We’re creating a whole new zoning category. We’re

going out to find sites with which to zone them. The last time that was done was when we were doing greenfield stuff... This is quite momentous.” (*NRU-City of Toronto Edition, October 19 2012.*)

### Next steps

The inclusion of the RAC zone will go before council for approval as part of the new comprehensive zoning by-law in early 2013. After that, the city will undertake consultations about where, specifically, the new RAC zone should be applied. Toronto’s Growth Management Committee has asked City Planning to begin this critical step immediately, and to report back to the committee with its findings.

Unlocking the zoning on apartment neighbourhoods is not the only step that is needed to help them evolve into the complete communities that they were always intended to be. A long list of issues and challenges remains, from how building owners can finance improvements, to restrictions on signage contained in the Toronto Sign By-law, to supporting micro-business development. But the new RAC zone represents a critically important first step. As with The Kings, this updated zoning is about removing barriers, allowing things to happen legally which are currently happening illegally—such as tuck shops with doors to the outside, home businesses, or outdoor markets—and removing the regulatory hurdles that are currently holding back reinvestment potential in these neighbourhoods.

The ground-breaking work being done in Toronto may also hold lessons for other communities in Ontario. After all, with nearly 1,000 of these buildings located elsewhere in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, how to re-think their permitted range of land uses is an issue that many more municipalities should be wrestling with in the years to come.

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Market in apartment tower neighbourhood in Stockholm