

PART 2

A PROGRESSIVE LEGACY | LEGACY BARRIERS

“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 U.S.”

Richard Buckminster Fuller, 1968

A Region of Apartment Towers

The Toronto area’s apartment neighbourhoods are a remarkable and distinguishing feature of the region. Consisting of 2,000 high-rise towers developed in the post-war boom, this concentration and organization of high-rise housing is unique to the continent (Stewart and Thorne, 2010).

They were a key aspect of the explosive urban growth of the 1950s to 1970s and are unique for their central role in suburban planning in Toronto. Whereas high-rise housing was nearly always excluded in suburbs in the US, these towers were key to community planning during the expansion of Metropolitan (Metro) Toronto and are present in nearly every neighbourhood from that time period.

The result is nearly half a million apartment units developed in the region (Stewart and Thorne, 2010) with high-rise apartment units outpacing the development of single-family homes by a ratio of 2:1 inside Metro Toronto (Metropolitan Planning Board, 1966, p. 10). The majority of these towers were privately developed and financed for young couples, empty nesters and newcomers to the region. There are hundreds of apartment neighbourhoods located in every corner of the City, from Etobicoke to Scarborough, North York, to Mississauga and beyond.

Apartment neighbourhoods help give the Toronto area a relatively high regional density – nearly twice that of Greater Chicago – a good start in achieving a well-planned and sustainable region (Neptus Foundation, 2007).

Apartment Neighbourhoods and Metro Planning:

Unlike the majority of cities in the United States, Toronto’s post-war growth took place within the context of an integrated regional administration, Metropolitan Toronto. At Metro’s formation in the 1950s, the majority of the land within its borders was agricultural (Metropolitan Planning Board, 1959). By the end of the 1970s, this entire area had been developed. Modern apartment neighbourhoods were a key feature of this growth (Metropolitan Planning Board, 1966).

Images:

Opposite, Masterplans for Toronto apartment neighbourhoods Thorncliffe Park (Top), and planning district 12, Don Valley Village or the “Peanut” (Bottom). (North York, 1965).

APARTMENT NEIGHBOURHOODS, PLANNING AND THE SMART GROWTH OF THE 1960s:

The District Scale:

Apartment neighbourhoods were developed in the post-war period in response to regional growth and at their best contained aspirations of what we today term “complete communities.” In part, they were encouraged as an alternative to the uncoordinated sprawl that typified the immediate post war years. Planned as a key component of new neighbourhoods, apartment towers helped manage growth, provide housing options and create higher density areas to support transit and retail in new communities at the city’s urban fringe (Metropolitan Planning Board, 1966).

The original neighbourhoods were the master planned communities of Thorncliffe and Flemingdon Park (Sewell, 1993). Conceived in 1955 and 1958 respectively, they were highly ambitious zones incorporating the latest in modern planning and design. Influenced by neighbourhoods in Scandinavia and the UK, they were the first of their kind in North America.

Both Thorncliffe and Flemingdon were initiated by private developers and designed by leading Canadian modernists including Macklin Hancock, the designer of Don Mills, and Irving Grossman.

They were devised to create modern self-sufficient “satellite” towns at the city’s edge, easily accessible to the downtown core via the new Don Valley Parkway. These communities were developed to provide retail, employment in the form of service jobs and light industry, schools, community centres, large parks and large apartment suites geared towards families. In some instances, community facilities were planned at the base of new apartment towers (Kolenc, c.1966).

Major cultural amenities were planned for some of these communities, with Flemingdon home to the new Ontario Science and Technology Museum (The Ontario Science Centre). For a time, the new headquarters of the CBC were also to be located there. These neighbourhoods were developed as significant new districts of a modern and growing city.

Apartment Towers as Metro Policy:

By the 1960s, the creation of higher density-apartment neighbourhoods had become integrated into Metro’s planning policy for new suburban areas (North York, 1965). These apartments were encouraged as they provided a housing mix, the density to support public transit and local amenities and also to optimize municipal services such as water and sewer systems.

By the 1960s, minimum density requirements were established by Metro for new suburban areas north of Highway 401 and apartment neighbourhoods were the key to achieving them. The use of the tower in the park created open space and a garden setting, while providing the density to keep the population within Metro's borders. This was an area of key concern, as development was discouraged north of Steeles Avenue due to the cost of providing municipal services, specifically water, north of the city. As a result, pockets of higher density apartment neighbourhoods became a regular feature of new developments as the city expanded.

District 12 - Planning a Neighbourhood:

An example of a typical district plan that combines density requirements with holistic community planning is that for District 12, a then green-field area in the suburban fringe, today known as the Peanut. The District 12 plan, developed in 1965, was based on the following principles:

- A balanced housing stock with a mix of rental and ownership, providing family housing in low, medium and high densities.
- Self-sufficiency in terms of the provision of the full range of facilities and services, with the goal of optimum convenience for residents.
- A minimum net density for the area of 75 people per hectare to avoid the under-utilization of municipal infrastructure.
- Municipal land use policies allowing a range of major commercial, institutional and recreational uses to serve the district as a substantial sector of Metropolitan Toronto.
- Provide rapid transport to the city centre.

Districts such as the Peanut were planned as multi-functional, well-serviced communities as part of a growing, and multi-nodal region. They were an attempt at "smart-growth" in the context of the 1960s. Examples of these planned districts can be found from North Scarborough to Erin Mills, Bathurst and Steeles to Bramelea.

This legacy district planning forms a sound foundation, which we can build on in the years to come.



Legacy Barriers

The Local Scale:

Toronto's post-war planning has left a remarkable legacy of apartment neighbourhoods throughout the region. The policies that led to the development of these areas were based on sound planning principles and echo many of today's ideas on how to build new communities with transit supportive densities in response to regional growth.

However, while planning during this era promoted self-sufficiency at the district scale, planning at the local scale reflected post-war ideas of the strict segregation of these uses through single-use zoning.

The relationship between planned commercial, employment, and residential areas was designed at the scale of the car. Though considered a convenient drive away, neighbourhood amenities were largely absent within areas that contained the residential apartment towers themselves. As a result, apartment neighbourhoods, housing thousands, were often designed without easy access to types of amenities that were promoted at the scale of the district.

Zoning by-laws significantly limiting use and form within apartment neighbourhoods were a key legacy of these land-use restrictions. The by-laws remain in effect today.

Section 3 of this report will discuss how the lack of local shops, amenities and services is creating liveability challenges as a result of changing demographics in apartment neighbourhoods. Car ownership has fallen and there are more children, elderly and new Canadians (Statistics Canada 2006).

Images:

Top: Unavailing of apartment project, (City of Toronto Archives, 1962).

Opposite: Unrealized plan for Thorncliffe Park Community Centre at base of apartment tower (City of Toronto Archives, 1966).

Separated Uses, Green Space and the Conception of the Suburban City:

Zoning codes, established at the time apartment neighbourhoods were built, reflect the expectations and values of their era and outline how these communities were intended to function. A key aspect of the new suburbia, these neighbourhoods were designed as an alternative to the historic city. In their low-rise and high-rise form, the design and planning of new communities reflected attempts to create distinct residential districts, with the provision of ample open space, while responding to the setting of newly developed natural areas.

These sites were often in rural or lightly developed regions at the edge of the city. The zoning of the period reflected a strong awareness of the geographic conditions where apartments were built. The semi-urban context of apartments presented challenges (such as providing services and transportation) yet in general, these conditions resonated with a vision of living beyond the noise, pollution and congestion of the city core.

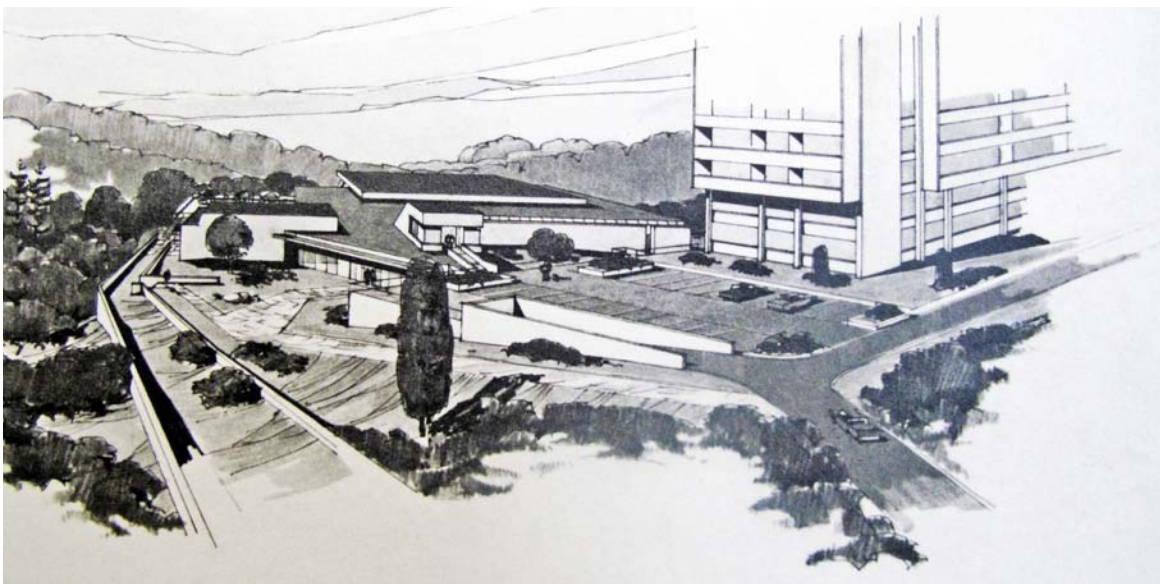
In a 1970 study of Thorncliffe Park, York University researcher D.H. Cox emphasized this perceived value in describing how Thorncliffe Park overlooks downtown with a view of the lake in the background:

'This plateau [location] is surrounded on three sides by the Don River Valley, which provides protection from any future encroachment by the burgeoning city, and...provides a spaciousness of vista, almost unique in a metropolitan area. It is probably not putting it too highly to say that this river valley is the property's crowing glory...and undoubtedly was a prime reason behind the planner's thinking to make this plateau a high-density living area.' (Cox, 1970, p. 2)

Additional Challenges, Incomplete Plans:

Many of the amenities planned in the original master plans of apartment neighbourhoods, such as Thorncliffe Park, (see image below) never materialized. These include community and commercial amenities at the base of towers. The current zoning by-laws present barriers to reintroducing these original design features today.

A further challenge is the original quality of neighbourhood planning. As the apartment boom progressed, many of the integrated planning ideas found in neighbourhoods such as Thorncliffe Park were replaced with a more clear division of land use and strict segregation of apartment clusters within neighbourhoods from retail and community amenities. This separation is reinforced in legacy zoning today.





Zoning was also used to set out the amenities and desired character of these communities. For example, by-laws often enforced the inclusion of swimming pools, tennis courts and other leisure facilities felt to be in keeping with the vision of these neighbourhoods. Other examples codified aesthetic values. In 1964, Etobicoke amended its comprehensive zoning to prohibit residents of apartment buildings from drying laundry outdoors.

Images:

Typical apartment property in Etobicoke, with 80% open space, of which over 50% is surface parking, 2010.

As discussed above, a new aspect of the new suburbia was the desire to separate private and domestic life from commercial, civic or institutional activities and was a theme commonly found in apartment zoning by-laws of the 1960s and 70s. Despite initial ambitions for more integrated apartment districts, the separation of uses emerged as a distinctive characteristic of tower estates in Metropolitan Toronto. This was noted by the East York Commissioner of Planning in 1966 when discussing Thorncliffe Park. The Commissioner had explained that while Thorncliffe “appears to have been [originally] based on the English New Towns theory that residents of the area would also work [locally]...as it is now known this is not the case in a Metropolitan Area. The commuting of workers to employment in the area, and of residents of the area to employment outside, creates large amounts of travel.” (McWilliam, 1966)

This approach to planning helped create the desired (Faludi and Associates, 1961) tower in the park districts, forming the apartment neighbourhoods with large land buffers between community and commercial space that permeate the urban landscape of Greater Toronto today. While there are many benefits to this form of planning, these neighbourhoods, in many regards, are frozen in time.

Conclusion

Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods were planned as a progressive response to a rapidly urbanizing region during the post-war boom. At their best they were designed to create complete and self-sufficient communities at the district scale. At the local scale, these apartment clusters were considered as residential zones within the new planned district. As such, planning policies limiting the range of permitted uses have created vast higher density areas that lack general community amenities, such as retail, food, employment, community supports such as child care, or even simple community meeting spaces.

The zoning codes setting out these conditions remain largely in place. As a result, while neighbourhood demographics are continually changing with evolving needs and aspirations, the physical form of neighbourhoods and the amenities they provide has remained unchanged. These zoning barriers present significant obstacles in developing the wide range of local uses that encompass today's concept of Strong Neighbourhoods and Complete Communities.

The following sections will examine the current state of apartment neighbourhoods; their demographic transformation; their current built form and the desires expressed by their current residents for positive neighbourhood change.

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