



# STRONG NEIGHBOURHOODS AND COMPLETE COMMUNITIES: A NEW APPROACH TO ZONING FOR APARTMENT NEIGHBOURHOODS

Prepared by  
The Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal (CUG+R)

For  
United Way Toronto

MAY 2012





## PART 3

# DYNAMICS, TRENDS AND EMERGING CHALLENGES OF APARTMENT NEIGHBOURHOODS

### Growing Challenges

The Toronto area's apartment neighbourhoods are home to more than one million people and are a vital housing resource. They are also a fundamental feature of the urban make-up of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton region. In the City of Toronto alone they represent half of all apartment housing, including the bulk of the city's larger family sized rentals units (Stewart and Thorne, 2010). Apartment neighbourhoods and their communities are a significant component of our dynamic region.

However, these neighbourhoods are falling behind.

A number of recently published studies documenting the dynamics of apartment neighbourhoods, including the United Way Toronto's *Vertical Poverty* (2010), have identified a series of key challenges facing these communities. These include:

- Increasing poverty.
- A lack of neighbourhood services and amenities.
- Increased isolation from Toronto's social and economic life.
- General neighbourhood decline due to lagging investment.

Apartment neighbourhoods are also confronting the process of aging, both in respect to their half-century-old building stock and a growing population of elderly.

A summary list of findings for various studies can be found below.

#### Specific Indicators:

##### Regional Inequity

There is a growing economic disparity between wealthy areas, primarily located in the city's core and along the Yonge Street corridor and Toronto's inner suburbs, where the bulk of apartment neighbourhoods are found (Hulchanski, 2010). A map of growing poverty and apartment towers can be found in Appendix A.

#### Images:

Opposite: Typical condition in apartment neighbourhoods: underutilized spaces with lack of community activity (top), and challenging walkability due to fencing (Farrow, 2009).

### **Growing Share Of Region's Impoverished Population**

Poverty is becoming increasingly concentrated in tower neighbourhoods. United Way Toronto found the proportion of Toronto's low-income families residing in apartment towers has increased from 34% in 1981 to 43% (United Way, 2011, p. 34) Likewise, the median income (based on 2006 dollars) among renter households declined in Toronto by \$6,396 from 1981 to 2006, a decline double that of the median of all Toronto's households (United Way, 2011, p. 31).

### **Apartment Neighbourhoods And Social Need**

The Tower Neighbourhood Renewal in the Greater Golden Horseshoe study found that 77% of apartment neighbourhoods are located in areas of high or very high social need (Stewart and Thorne, 2010). However, as indicated in the City of Toronto's Priority Neighbourhood index, many of these communities lack the services and supports to properly address these growing challenges (City of Toronto, 2008).

## **Changing Demographics, Changing Needs**

These challenges are all taking place within the context of remarkable demographic changes. In the past several decades, apartment neighbourhoods have emerged as key landing pads for new Canadians. Much of Toronto's reputation for incredible diversity and for being a welcoming home for newcomers from across the globe is a result of the residents of these communities. They are places where Toronto's cosmopolitan society establishes local social, cultural and economic connections.

Specifically, it has been found that (Stewart and Thorne, 2010):

- Half of all apartment towers contain 50% or more residents born outside of Canada.
- Half of all apartment towers contain 20% or more children and youth under 19.
- In some cases, the percentage of children and youth under 19 is as high as 40%.

Despite this shift in demographics, the physical form of apartment neighbourhoods has remained largely unchanged from the time of their original construction half a century ago. There are few shops, restaurants, community services and other enterprises that reflect the ingenuity, aspirations and needs of their resident communities.

### Limited Uses – Preventing Neighbourhood Change

Throughout the region, the majority of apartment neighbourhoods consist of “single-use residential zones,” where a limited number of uses are permitted. For example, these areas often permit residences, parkland, indoor and outdoor amenity areas and schools, yet many institutional and all commercial activities are often not permitted. Of the region’s 2,000 apartment towers, only 17% contain residential uses mixed with commercial uses (Stewart and Thorne, 2010). While a handful of these, such as Main Square and Crescent Town, contain integrated shops and services, the overwhelming majority are limited to a single small tuck shop. These small tuck shops are themselves strictly controlled with respect to their size and their ability to reach a market beyond the building’s residents. For example, restrictions exist on outdoor signage, the outdoor display of goods, outdoor entry and the expansion of store size. These shops were planned as a local convenience for building residents in the 1960s. New types of retail and amenities appropriate to today’s context that deviate from the form anticipated in the 1960s are prohibited.

“Mixed-use” areas are generally absent from apartment neighbourhoods. These areas of varying configurations form the backbone of Toronto’s successful communities, such as its celebrated 19th century neighbourhoods, which include local shops and services along main streets adjacent to residential neighbourhoods; within the ground floors of mixed-use buildings and occasionally even successfully tucked into the middle of quiet residential streets and neighbourhoods.

Likewise in newly constructed tower neighbourhoods, such as City Place, Liberty Village and Regent Park, grocery stores, shops, pubs and restaurants, services and live-work units, have been integrated into the bases of modern apartment towers.

In both 19th century neighbourhoods and new tower districts, there is a close spatial relationship between the residential component and complementary activities that support daily neighbourhood-focused living.

As discussed in Section 2, apartment neighbourhoods were planned within the 1960s framework of separation of uses. This policy was adopted to create safe and well-designed residential areas in new parts of the City. These ideas were promoted with the assumption that all residents would own cars and that daily conveniences would be provided in shopping centres within easy driving distances.

However, in the time since these neighbourhoods were planned, the rate of car ownership among residents of apartment neighbourhoods has dropped to well below municipal averages across the region (Stewart and Thorne, 2010). Likewise, the rate of walking and transit use has climbed dramatically. In addition, the rate of congestion on local roads continues to increase. For newly arrived families living in apartment

neighbourhood units, car ownership may not yet be an option. Lastly, the overall population of many apartment neighbourhoods is now larger than originally planned. The United Way (2012) has found for example that between 1981 and 2006 the percentage of units housing more than one person per room doubled in Toronto apartment towers (page vi). As a result of these factors, an exclusive reliance on shopping centres to serve daily community needs is no longer a viable option. This distance to shopping amenities has an impact on the quality of life of residents without cars and is counter to Official Plan and Growth Plan goals of creating more walkable and less auto-dependent neighbourhoods.

“The whole community’s not [designed] for walking, and all immigrants, they don’t have cars.” - Scarborough Village Resident (Hess and Farrow, 2010)

These distances are creating challenges for residents. As described in the Tower Walkability Studies conducted by the University of Toronto and Jane’s Walk, people living in apartment neighbourhoods routinely walk and take public transport long distances for work, shopping and daily needs (Hess and Farrow, 2010). Issues of community safety have also been identified in the largely empty areas within apartment neighbourhoods, particularly at night.

Though originally well intended, policies for the separation of uses have led to the creation of communities of tens of thousands living in apartment neighbourhoods without convenient access to food, childcare, shops, vibrant and safe meeting spaces or employment. There is great opportunity for change.

### **Opportunity: Neighbourhood Business And Social Enterprise**

Apartment neighbourhoods can be described as “Arrival Cities .” This term, developed by writer Doug Saunders, describes neighbourhoods where newcomers first settle, establish roots, and develop the social and financial capital needed to assume a role in the wider urban community.

Saunders identifies three elements that functional Arrival Cities offer to new residents moving to a city (Saunders, 2010, p 21):

1. A “network” of social relationships for support, opportunities, cultural identity and political representation.
2. “Entry mechanisms” easing settlement, such as affordable housing, employment and opportunities to prepare for second-wave arrivals, such as family members or friends from home.
3. An “urban establishment platform” for building up wealth and the cultural and social status needed to engage in the city’s mainstream.

### **Findings Of Walkability Studies:**

Although many people walk, apartment neighbourhoods are often not friendly to pedestrians, with significant barriers, such as chain-linked fences, making it difficult to access retail, schools and neighbouring apartments, particularly during winter. Large-scale open spaces must be traversed on the way to grocery stores, daycares and other neighbourhood amenities, while arterial roads present inhospitable walking conditions, with few lights, long cross-walks and traffic hazards (Hess and Farrow, 2010).

Successful Arrival Cities provide effective landing pads for the prosperity and wellbeing of newcomers, offering avenues for the talents, ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit of the resident community. Areas of arrival that lack these qualities can become places of multi-generational poverty, whereas successful “Arrival Cities” can become thriving communities, as well as springboards for the economic and social life of the City at large.

The key attribute of a successful Arrival City is the ability to support and nurture small enterprises that directly service the community, a characteristic that the majority of the region’s apartment neighbourhoods are currently lacking.

Studies have shown that the diverse communities of apartment neighbourhoods have great potential for entrepreneurialism, social enterprise and for attracting residents interested in establishing and strengthening social connections. The United Way’s recent survey of apartment residents as part of the report Vertical Poverty found “extensive bonds of friendship, mutual support and reciprocity and considerable social cohesion among many tenants living in the high-rise buildings.” (United Way, 2011). The study further noted how “a vast majority of tenants say they are willing to work together with other tenants to improve their community.” (United Way, 2011, p. 179).

Social connections were found to be the leading reason why residents choose their specific apartment neighbourhoods (United Way, 2011, p. 105). They are considered places to form social bonds that foster trust, familiarity, and mutual support, an environment that is highly amenable to local business and social enterprise.

As stated in a recent study by Thorncliffe Park Neighbourhood Office, there is a “widespread interest in various aspects of self-employment – small business development, social enterprise, training for home workers etc.” Further, there is recognition that there are opportunities

**Image:**

The Thousandth Tower web documentary, (HIGHRISE.nfb.ca at The National Film Board of Canada, 2009).





to form stronger relationships with local businesses to support local hiring and other collaborative initiatives, business development, social enterprise, training for home workers, etc.” (Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, 2009, p. 24)

This approach to neighbourhoods is echoed in Toronto’s Official Plan, which also anticipates local retail and services becoming more prevalent in neighbourhoods as “increasingly, people work in their communities, both in home offices and in local stores and services” (City of Toronto, 2006, 2010, p. 2-21).

Despite current challenges, residents of apartment neighbourhoods like their homes and communities and are advocates for their improvement. The United Way found three quarters of apartment residents surveyed agreed their buildings were a good place to live and nearly two thirds agreed they were a good place to raise children. (United Way, 2010, p. 103). Through an extensive process of interviews, community design charrettes and demonstration projects, residents are increasingly pushing for the introduction of a mix of uses, community enterprise, local shops, new housing and most of all vibrant meeting spaces. (see for example Hess and Farrow, 2010, Heath and Swerhun 2011, and Cizak 2010 and 2011)

“When it is all ugly around you and nowhere nice to walk it makes you feel bad and unappreciated. We live here and want to make it beautiful.” - St James Town Resident (Hess and Farrow, 2010)

“We really need some place to sell stuff, to get together, to really, really build a community.” -Kipling Towers Resident, quoted in 1 Millionth Tower documentary, National Film Board (Cizak 2010)

There is a growing desire for apartment neighbourhoods to become complete communities.

**Image:**

Community workshop and visioning session in North Kipling, Toronto (HIGHRISE.nfb.ca at The National Film Board of Canada, 2010)

### Conclusion

Allowing trends of concentrated poverty, stagnant investment and increased isolation to continue presents a bleak picture for Toronto's future, as by David Hulchanski's report *Three Cities Within Toronto* (Hulchanski, 2010). However, there is strong evidence that Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods are well suited to positive change and revitalization.

Achieving this potential will require a thoughtful combination of removing barriers to positive neighbourhood change and providing the backing to enable such a transformation. A key aspect of the support needed is ensuring ease of enterprise for private, public and non-profit sectors, from a user-friendly approvals process and licensing, to enabling greater access to financing for large and small-scale initiatives.

The primary focus of this study is related to land-use policy, flagging current barriers and suggesting policy alternatives for positive neighbourhood change. Section 5 will explore the current state of land-use planning as it relates to apartment neighbourhoods, with a specific focus on zoning.

May, 2012

CENTRE FOR  
URBAN GROWTH  
AND RENEWAL



[www.cugr.ca](http://www.cugr.ca) CUG+R