

Section 2: Themes and Strategies for Healthy Apartment Neighbourhoods By Design

Themes and Strategies

Theme 1: Natural Environment

Theme 2: Built Environment

Theme 3: Transportation

Theme 4: Housing

Theme 5: Employment, Income and Opportunities

Theme 6: Education and Learning

Theme 7: Food Security

Theme 8: Community Health

Health Strategies Summary Chart



Theme 2: Built Environment

How does the built environment affect health?

A growing body of evidence indicates that the built environment affects the health of the community by influencing factors such as levels of physical activity, nutrition, risk of vehicle-related collisions and social cohesion (CDC, 2011). Development patterns that favour low-density populations and a narrow range of land uses, where residential land uses are separated from commercial services and employment areas, have increased reliance on automobiles for transportation to work, shops and other daily needs. This pattern, has in turn had a substantial impact on factors that affect health.

The built environment can affect health by influencing:

- **Levels of Physical Activity** - The health-related costs associated with physical inactivity in Canada have been estimated to be \$5.3 billion per year (Katzmarzyk & Janssen, 2004). Studies have found that individuals who live in more walkable areas, with a greater mix of land uses, higher population densities, and greater street connectivity, are more likely to be physically active than those who live in less walkable neighbourhoods (Dunn et al., 2009; Saelen et al., 2003; TPH, 2012a). Studies have also shown that people are more likely to walk when streetscapes and walking routes are safe, appealing and welcoming (HSF, 2010).
- **Social Cohesion** - Walkable neighbourhoods have also been associated with higher levels of social interaction and community engagement, factors which have been associated with an increase in positive health outcomes (Leyden, 2003).
- **Access to Services** - For many people living in apartment neighbourhoods in Toronto, there is poor access to jobs, services and recreational facilities because their neighbourhoods have generally been designed to support a narrow range of land uses. And yet studies have shown that residents living in these neighbourhoods are also less likely to own automobiles, which means that they will have a difficult time accessing jobs, healthy foods, services and recreational facilities (Hess, 2011).
- **Safety** - A greater percentage of collisions with vehicles occur among cyclists and pedestrians in the suburbs in Toronto, predominantly in low-income areas (TPH, 2012b). In a Toronto study, 28% of residents in high-rise neighbourhoods indicated that they don't feel safe from traffic when walking; 29% feel they don't have safe places to cross streets (Hess & Farrow, 2010).

The Opportunity in Apartment Neighbourhoods

While the built environment of some apartment neighbourhoods include attractive areas that are well used and maintained, many include large areas of open spaces that are vacant, unappealing, and unused by local residents or the larger community.

These under-used open spaces are well suited to interventions such as landscaping, walking paths, and pedestrian facilities such as benches. They could also be used for other activities that could enhance the built environment around the apartment towers and improve the neighbourhood as a whole.

The strategies below consider ways of adding to or modifying the existing built environment with the aim of improving public health.

While these strategies overlap those found in other chapters of this report, the focus here is optimizing spaces between apartment towers to give residents a sense of convenience, usability and security when engaging in these spaces.

2.1 Improve Opportunities for Gathering

2.2 Improve Sense of Security

2.3 Reduce Hazards such as Traffic Blind Spots

2.4 Animate Spaces

2.1 Improved Opportunities for Gathering

Context

Apartment neighbourhoods are home to thousands of people of all ages and diverse ethnic origins. Each tower commonly houses several hundred people, with some having over one-thousand residents (TNRGGH 2010). However, residents are rarely seen making use of the open spaces around their buildings. Spacing around buildings seem to be poorly suited to the incidental meeting, playing, and casual gatherings that animate successful neighbourhood spaces.

Animated and well-used neighbourhood spaces are those that have a diversity of meeting spaces, characterized by a hierarchy of perceived exposure. These can range from clearly delimited spaces for intimate conversations or small groups, to open fields suited for large group gatherings.

Typical apartment neighbourhoods offer very little definition to spaces around tower blocks. Rather, towers are often surrounded by continuous open space of undefined lawn and paved surfaces.

Solution

A variety of intimate to community-scaled gathering spaces, connected by well-defined path systems, could help build a robust and functional open space framework within clusters of apartment towers.

A well planned open space framework could be animated by new features; children's play spaces, gardens, markets or new buildings, that would generate a vibrant public realm and foster social capital, engagement and a sense of belonging.

Making it Happen

The following describes the extent to which the current planning framework in apartment neighbourhoods would be supportive, limiting, or neutral, should a community or building owner propose solutions such as these at a particular site.

Official Plan: Supportive

These solutions would generally be supported by current Official Plan policies.

Zoning by-laws: Neutral

A landscape intervention not involving a structure or hard surfaces would likely not be affected by zoning. If a structure – such as a pavilion or an outbuilding – was proposed, the project would likely require a minor variance from the zoning by-law or a zoning by-law amendment if it was deemed to add gross floor area to the site.

Other considerations

A change to the landscape could be subject to site plan review if it involved, for example, grading or changes to drainage, or if driveway circulation and parking was affected.





Images:

Opposite: New public space and commercial area, Halle, Neustadt, Germany, 2006

Top left: Gathering spaces, shops and walking paths, Crescent Town, Toronto, 2006

Top right: Public space and shopping area, near transit hub within Vallingby apartment district, Stockholm, Sweden, 2009

Middle, left: Community barbecue, North Etobicoke, Toronto, courtesy of TRO

Middle right: New public gathering space and commercial area, Brunswick House, London, UK, 2006

Bottom left: New public gathering area and commercial district, Markisches Viertel, Berlin, Germany, 2006

Bottom right: Meeting area, Barbican, London, UK, 2006

2.2 Improved Sense of Security and Lighting

Context

The largely undefined open spaces surrounding apartment neighbourhoods can be associated with a sense of alienation and insecurity, particularly at night. Poor lighting, lack of activity and ‘dead end’ areas are frequently identified as factors affecting the sense of security. As apartment neighbourhoods tend to have an abundance of open space, much of it ill-suited to neighbourhood needs, residents perceive some parts of the neighbourhood as being unwelcoming or unsafe because they are isolated, and vacant (United Way 2011).

Solution

Several solutions are available to improve areas around towers perceived to be unsafe or uninviting. Among these are solutions discussed in other chapters of this report, such as creating walking paths, at-grade housing, and shops and services to maintain what Jane Jacobs calls ‘eyes on the street’. An improved sense of safety could also be accommodated through the provision of a concierge, as discussed elsewhere in this report (see Housing).

One solution with widespread possibilities is to improve lighting. Well-designed lighting not only helps surveillance, but can also define safe comfortable spaces and make a positive aesthetic contribution to neighbourhood identity (Kvarterløft 2007). Lighting can also create a sense of bounded spaces by illuminating paths, open space networks and plantings. The night-time environment in the apartment neighbourhood then becomes coherent, occupied and visible rather than simply an area lit for security purposes.

Making it Happen

The following describes the extent to which the current planning framework in apartment neighbourhoods would be supportive, limiting, or neutral, should a community or building owner propose solutions such as these at a particular site.

Official Plan: Supportive

These solutions would generally be supported by current Official Plan policies.

Zoning by-laws: Supportive

A neighbourhood lighting program would not be limited by current zoning.

Other considerations

Property owners would have to understand the value of investing in lighting beyond minimal requirements. A neighbourhood lighting program may be developed with other partners, including the City, and in coordination with neighbouring property owners. Neighbourhood lighting programs would also require ongoing maintenance and stewardship planning. Property standards for lighting across property lines could be addressed to allow light sources from one property to provide needed lighting on a neighbouring lot.



Images:

Top: Community lighting safety and public art, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2009

Opposite: Drive ramps in area where children often play, typical apartment, Toronto, 2011

2.3 Reduced Hazards

Context

The site design of apartment neighbourhoods has led to several unintentionally unsafe conditions, particularly for children. Two particularly unsafe conditions include the location of waste bins in unprotected open areas, and lack of pedestrian walkways in drive areas, creating areas dangerous for pedestrians. An additional hazard involves debris falling from balconies to areas at the base of building.

Solution

Unsafe Drive Areas:

The provision of pedestrian zones within drive areas can reduce the potential for collisions, particularly in blind areas, such as at the base of ramps and at corners. The largest concern in this case is the use of drive areas by children for recreation. This danger can be limited by the addition of recreation, seating and children's play areas elsewhere on apartment properties (See Natural Environment and Housing).

Waste Storage

As regulations and procedures for waste storage and collection, and the amount of household waste has changed in the decades since their construction, older apartment properties are now unable to accommodate waste within existing spaces in their buildings. As a result, waste bins are often found in driveways and parking areas, open and accessible to children.

Waste can be accommodated in enclosed and separated outdoor areas, in purpose built waste storage buildings and sorting structures, and even, as in the case of Sweden, channelled through underground systems to central storage and sorting areas.

Falling debris:

Covered awnings, planted buffers, and podium additions are all possible solutions to providing increased safety at the base of buildings. A solution unrelated to the built environment may include an awareness campaign of the dangers of storing loose items on balcony areas.



Making it Happen

The following describes the extent to which the current planning framework in apartment neighbourhoods would be supportive, limiting, or neutral, should a community or building owner propose solutions such as these at a particular site.

Official Plan: Supportive

These solutions would generally be supported by current Official Plan policies.

Zoning by-laws: Limiting

Reductions of parking areas could require a variance from current zoning standards. New structures or building additions for garbage and recycling would likely require a minor variance.

Other considerations

Cost, stewardship and design issues would be among the other considerations for projects to reduce hazards. The reduction of hazards may support or be driven by an interest in reducing exposure to insurance liabilities. Site Plan approval may be required.

2.4 Animate Spaces

Context

Apartment neighbourhoods are often characterized by single-use zoning, which allows for residential uses with few exceptions for a narrow range of commercial and community uses. The introduction of new uses has been advocated to improve access to essential services and to provide an ability to engage in community and social enterprise and entrepreneurial endeavours.

The introduction of new uses can animate neighbourhoods by providing cultural and commercial uses relevant to local residents and the larger community. The careful placement of these uses can greatly contribute to the definition of open space, facilitating gathering and an improved sense of security.

Solution

The flexibility of apartment properties lends themselves to a variety of interventions to accommodate new uses, including temporary structures, conversion of spaces in the base of existing apartment towers, and the introduction of new infill buildings.

Making it Happen

The following describes the extent to which the current planning framework in apartment neighbourhoods would be supportive, limiting, or neutral, should a community or building owner propose solutions such as these at a particular site.

Official Plan: Supportive

The Toronto Official Plan states that small-scale retail, service and office uses that serve the needs of area residents and infill projects are permitted within apartment neighbourhoods. The Official Plan also promotes a broader mix of uses along the animation of major avenues where many apartment neighbourhoods are located. However, if the project is deemed to be beyond the scale envisioned by the Official Plans' apartment neighbourhood land use designation, the Official Plan would need to be amended by City Council to permit the project.

Zoning by-laws: Limiting

Zoning Bylaws for apartment buildings, with few exceptions, allow for no commercial activity or at most a small tuck shop. The addition of floor area to the building, and/or any impacts on setbacks, would also likely conflict with the zoning by-law and require an amendment.



Images:

Top, left: Market area within apartment neighbourhood, Tower Hamlets, London, UK, 2006

Top, right: Public square near older and newer apartment housing, Port Credit, Mississauga, 2010

Middle: Public space, with shops and seating at base of tower block, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2009

Bottom left: Community festival, North Etobicoke, Toronto, courtesy of TRO

Bottom right: Community movie night, Scarborough, Toronto, 2012, courtesy of Paul Dowsett, Sustainable T.O.

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