



# DOCUMENTATION

1- INTERNATIONAL SURVEY

# The Suburban Tower

## and Toronto's Legacy of Modern Housing

■ GRAEME STEWART

*"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. . ."* Richard Buckminster Fuller, 1968<sup>1</sup>

MUCH OF the mythology surrounding Toronto is focused on the image of a "city of neighborhoods," 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.

Contrary to the common notion of the North American City, the legacy of outward expansion in Toronto was, for the most part, multiple dwellings of high density. Organized by a regional planning body during the period of explosive postwar growth, the area contains many experiments in modern planning, most significantly, nearly one thousand high-rise "tower in the park" apartment buildings spread throughout the region. A result of influences including the US and Welfare State Europe, Toronto's postwar communities represents a hybrid form shaped by top-down regulation implemented through the private market and financed by the boom of the 1960s and 1970s.

TODAY, inside the boundaries of the City of Toronto, the prewar typology popularized by the late Jane Jacobs represents a minority within a city of predominantly

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modern conception. The influence of Metropolitan 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 Toronto's future?

### METROPOLITANIZATION AND A MODERN PLANNED REGION

Although apartments were considered by local administration as a detriment to society prior to the Second World War,<sup>2</sup> the modern high-rise became a significant feature in the postwar urbanization of Metropolitan Toronto. This typology was first introduced to the city through City Park apartments in 1954. Built downtown in response to density allowances as a result



Fig. 1. Metro 1954: The borders of Metropolitan Toronto at the time of its formation in 1954, with urbanized area (light grey), agricultural areas (dark grey), subway (white line) and Don Mills Satellite community (white central oval)

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for the region. Regional administrative consolidation officially took place on 1 January 1954, when Metropolitan Toronto was established. This was the first regional government of its type in North America since New York City.<sup>5</sup>

METRO'S mandate 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."<sup>6</sup> It was felt the unification of services and planning was a key process in fostering new development and economic growth.

The borders of Metro contained Toronto, as well as several adjacent townships and villages, allowing for coordinated planning of the urban center, suburban periphery and agricultural hinterland under one administration. Targeted for substantial economic and population growth, the form of development within its extensive yet finite boundary lead to several experiments in modern planning during the following decades, the modern apartment tower playing a prominent role.

**THE INVERTED METROPOLIS:  
PROMOTING THE SUBURBAN TOWER**

In the wake of the formation of Metro, Toronto became an attractor for international, particularly European trained, modern planners. In conjunction with professional imports, a significant number of local planners and designers received modern training internationally, while at the University of Toronto, faculty successfully pushed for a modern curriculum within the design schools. The resulting combination of an eclectic mix of eager professionals, as well as a regulatory framework enabling the implementation of large-scale planning, set the stage for urban growth that was highly influenced by modern ideas.

of the subway, it was heralded as a modern "European" approach to city building.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by English-Canadian architect Peter Dickenson's award-winning Governor General Regent Park, a social housing and urban renewal project in the downtown East side. Yet it would be in the expanding postwar communities that the modern tower would gain its prominence.

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT feature that shaped postwar Toronto was the establishment of the Metropolitan Government. 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.<sup>4</sup> These agencies quickly developed a series of plans

Fig. 2. Sheppard and Finch Landscape: Typical view from apartment within Toronto's vast postwar communities



Courtesy of Graeme Stewart

AMONG the leaders of international planners at work in Toronto were Englishman Gordon Stevenson and German émigré and card-carrying Communist Hans Blumenfeld, both of whom left the US for Canada during the turbulent years of McCarthy politics.<sup>7</sup> Coming to Toronto perhaps out of necessity, they were pleased to find a strong planning body with a mandate of regional management.<sup>8</sup> Once in Toronto, they advocated for comprehensive planning which would enable fully functional communities in the periphery. Sceptical of unregulated free market development, as well as the commuter towns which developed in the interwar and immediate postwar periods, they promoted guidelines which equitably distributed employment, transportation and housing throughout expanding regions, as well as accommodated all classes of workers.<sup>9</sup>

STEVENSON was a leader in the welfare-state planning involved in establishing the UK's New Towns Act. In Toronto, along with work in the City, he saw a brief tenure at the University of Toronto's nascent planning department, working with fellow British expatriate and CIAM member Jacqueline Tyrwhitt. Tyrwhitt, who was in Toronto working with Marshall McLuhan, had a direct link to the British Modern Architectural Research group (MARS),<sup>10</sup> and with Stevenson was partly responsible for bringing ideas of modern planning to Canada.<sup>11</sup> He encouraged "mixed development," promoting varied housing typologies and densities in Toronto's outward growth.

IT WAS believed that significant apartment housing was needed in peripheral regions in order to facilitate employment, transit and social objectives.<sup>12</sup> In England these ideals manifested themselves in projects such as Roehampton. They soon entered the Canadian consciousness through early publications of *Community Planning Review*<sup>13</sup> and *Canadian Housing Design Council*,<sup>14</sup> as well as a large number of British trained design professionals working in Canada. 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 by Blumenfeld, Stevenson and their contemporaries helped push these ideas into policy.

#### THE FORM OF THE REGION: SATELLITE, EXPANSION AND HIGH-RISE

One of the key missions of Metro was the use of government intervention to ensure the "continued climate of economic expansion."<sup>15</sup> Planners would determine the overall framework and private developers would be the instrument of execution. In planning housing, industry and natural zones, two competing, yet complementary ideas emerged; what could be described as the "satellite" and "expansion" models.

THE SATELLITE MODEL, derivative of the *garden city*, was originally proposed in the Toronto Metropolitan master plan of 1943. The plan called for the creation of a definitive greenbelt around the historic city and populating the periphery with self-contained, "complete communities" physically separated by green space.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, alternative plans argued for complete "expansion," dividing existing agricultural concessions into zones of industry or residence and conceptualizing the entire Metro area as "developable."

This approach was first proposed in the 1946 plan for the Metro Borough of Etobicoke, developed by Roman-trained Hungarian architect and planner E. G. Faludi.<sup>17</sup> Faludi was a key figure in bringing the principles of modernism to mainstream Toronto planning circles and development industry.<sup>18</sup> Faludi's plan articulates land use planning and neighborhood unit development using the principles close to those elaborated by the CIAMs. Most strikingly, it extended Toronto's macro grid into the countryside, outlining a framework for new low and high

Fig. 3. Slab Farm: Tower development in rural areas, early 1960s



Courtesy of the archives of Canadian Architect Magazine

density projects. After a handful of experimental satellites to be discussed below, "expansion" became the primary operating model of Metropolitan Toronto.

GAINING early traction as a counter to unregulated sprawl, the satellite model first emerged in practice with the development of Don Mills in the early 1950s; designed by Harvard graduate Macklin Hancock, the project was 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 "the most attractive (new) town that I have ever seen."<sup>19</sup> The satellite town, bounded by forks of the Don Valley Ravine system at the edge of Toronto, provided industry, shopping, mixed-housing types, and ample natural open space. Insisting that all structures be modern in character, Don Mills quickly became a showpiece of high design and an attractive alternative to living downtown. Yet, though containing substantial apartment housing, these were of the mid-rise type.



Fig. 4. Flemingdon Master Plan: The initial master plan in 1958 by Macklin Hancock

Courtesy of the City of Toronto, Flemingdon Park Master Plan, 1958

IT WAS NOT until the Metro borough of North York removed its height restrictions that suburban apartments reached their full potential in the housing mix. The two projects which fully catalyzed the use of the suburban apartment tower were Thorncliffe and Flemingdon Park, planned in 1955 and 1958, respectively, and offering high-rise towers and slabs “in the park” as the dominant housing type, within master planned and contained communities. With groundbreaking in the late 1950s, they were the first privately developed, suburban apartment neighborhoods in North America.

PLANNED as a “complete community,” they were to offer all of the amenities necessary for community living. Macklin Hancock, planner of Flemingdon Park, describes the project’s intent as: “. . . to create a new community of urban character—to correct the formless sprawled peripheral sectors of Metro Toronto.”<sup>20</sup> English planners, influenced themselves by Scandinavian projects, saw the modern “tower in the park” as key to providing equitable and healthy housing at high densities. British advocates working for the London County Council, such as Frederick Gibberd, saw towers as the model that combined the best housing standard possible with the responsible use of

land.<sup>21</sup> Many of these same arguments were used in the creation of these projects. In fact, tours of modern tower communities such as England’s Roehampton and Stockholm’s Vällingby by members of Toronto’s City Council granted final planning approvals.<sup>22</sup>

Upon completion, Flemingdon featured innovative and internationally published housing and cultural institutions by Toronto architects Irving Grossman and Raymond Moriyama. It also became the home of Toronto’s new Science and Technology Museum (Ontario Science Centre), as well as temporarily proposed as the site of the new headquarters of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Highly ambitious, it was a project of national significance.

THESE INNOVATIVE master planned communities set the precedent for high-density development throughout the expanding Metro area, yet today remain anomalies within development which primarily took place along a grid of expanding arterial roads. The expansion model ultimately became favored, (paradoxically) as it was argued to lead to a more compact region. Planners were sceptical of the satellite model’s ability to contain new populations within servicing limits, as well as the

challenges it posed for private development.”<sup>23</sup> Gradual growth by accretion” was felt to bring desired social and economic benefit<sup>24</sup> in a manner satisfactory to the objectives of planners, municipalities and private developers, alike.<sup>25</sup> For the most part, subsequent communities followed flexible district guidelines rather than comprehensive master plans.

THE TOWERS, themselves, were often marketed for their sophistication; promoted for their “Jetsons” aesthetic and especially in the playful work of Estonian/Canadian architect Uno Prii becoming an attractive and modern alternative to the aging downtown. For many, high-rise apartments symbolized a new world and a nation confident after the war. They also represented a highly profitable real estate venture fuelled by a robust economy.

The encouragement of density offered profit margins for both speculative developers and municipalities looking for tax revenues. This generated fierce competition among municipalities for new projects.<sup>26</sup> 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. 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.<sup>27</sup> Guided by the official plan, and supported by Faludi’s critical review of mid-rise apartment clusters emerging in Toronto’s inner city neighborhoods, maximizing open space became a key concern.<sup>28</sup> The sixty to seventy percent 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.

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.<sup>29</sup> Eager to make up for tax assessments and status lost to the suburbs, Toronto forged ahead with towers of this type in its historic districts. The contentious situation, which resulted in heightened criticality of modern planning, and the innovative response of the architectural community, citizen groups and the Reform council—most famous for height restrictions, development freezes and the cancellation of Toronto’s urban highway program—need not be reiterated here.

#### REJECTION AND LEGACY: THE MODERN TOWER IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

By the end of this period of postwar growth, “multiples” outpaced single detached and “semis” by a ratio of 2:1. By 1966, at the peak of Toronto’s first mass housing boom, nearly forty percent of the city’s housing stock and

seventy-seven percent of housing starts were apartments of this type.<sup>30</sup> Nearly thirty thousand high-rise units were built in 1968 alone. Seas of bungalows were privately developed in concert with hundreds of tower blocks throughout the sprawling Metro area. Clusters of residential high-rises as far as twenty kilometers from downtown contained densities as high as 350 people per hectare,<sup>31</sup> resulting in a region with nearly twice the density of Greater Chicago.<sup>32</sup> The regional urban form of Toronto planned under Metro gives it opportunities and challenges unique to North America.

Fig. 5. *Thorncliffe Construction*: Thorncliffe Park under construction with accompanying advertisement



Courtesy of the archives of Canadian Architect Magazine



Courtesy of the archives of Lockwood Survey Corporation Limited

Fig. 5. *Thorncliffe Downtown*: View of the Thorncliffe Park master planned community, with downtown Toronto in the distance, early 1970s.

However, during the subsequent decades following the success of Toronto’s “Reform” movement, these communities have fallen out of the general urban discourse. As an unintended corollary of the criticism of modern regional planning and the emphasis on historic fabric implicit in the “Reform” movement, projects from the modern period experienced widespread rejection; casting areas of the City housing millions of residents as undesirable. Products of neglect, several of these neighborhoods have fallen into significant disrepair.

NEW RESEARCH from the University of Toronto<sup>33</sup> outlines that Toronto is currently suffering from startling and increasing income polarization. While the historic center



Courtesy of the archives of Uno and Sylvia Piri

Fig. 7. *Uno Piri*: Five Towers by Estonian/Canadian architect Uno Piri in a postwar community in Northwest Toronto

is becoming increasingly wealthy, areas of the city considered "Priority Neighborhoods" of acute poverty and lacking services are all examples of the postwar communities in question. The recent Paris riots reinforce the inequity and social tensions that may arise if this trend is to continue.

Another unexpected outcome is the high energy usage associated with these buildings. Predating building science, they require up to twenty-five percent more energy per square meter than a typical single family home,<sup>34</sup> responsible for a significant percentage of the region's greenhouse gas production. As issues of climate change and social inequity become central political concerns, reengaging this aging and significant housing stock is becoming a key priority.

Following the lead of experiments in tower neighborhood refurbishment in the EU, Toronto is beginning to consider the opportunities of a "Tower Renewal" program within the Canadian context.

REENGAGEMENT calls into question issues of "appropriateness" related to the needs of resident communities and modern heritage. However, that these buildings are once again beginning to be understood as an asset is an important shift. To reiterate Buckminster Fuller's musing of some forty years ago, these towers were created with the intentions of a progressive and well-planned city. With care, perhaps they may indeed meet these aspirations.

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Fig. 8. Bathurst Green Belt: Tower cluster at Metro's Northern border, with untouched farmland beyond

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Fig. 9. Density in the Peanut. The "peanut" neighborhood in Northeast Toronto, which boasts densities greater than many neighborhoods in the central city

Fig. 10. Slab Landscape: Photo of typical apartment cluster as they exist today

