

Current Challenges



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Images

Top: Thorncliffe Park. Courtesy of Brendan Martin. Opposite: St. Jamestown. Courtesy of Brendan Martin. Section Cover: Flemingdon Park.

Growing Challenges

The development of high-rise housing in Toronto's post-war communities has left the city with a unique inheritance. Built in an era of growth and optimism, they were developed under the premise of high-quality housing, and vibrant modern communities.

Today however, as these communities approach their fifth decade, many are showing signs of disrepair, neglect and decline. Through a complex combination of factors, Toronto's post-war communities have become its most impoverished. As a result of poor servicing, and in many cases a lack of access of basic amenities, the neighbourhoods are unable to meet the needs and expectations of an increasingly diverse resident community. The quality of housing is in decline, and furthermore, these apartments have become among Toronto's most wasteful and ecologically irresponsible building types. As a result, aging Apartment Neighbourhoods sit at the centre of two of the greatest challenges facing Toronto: environmental sustainability, and social inequity

As the central city and outer suburbs gain increasing investment, attention and support, modern Apartment Neighbourhoods located in what are now called the "inner suburbs" are not. They require our focused attention.



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Growing Inequity, the Three Cities Within Toronto

City #1 is generally located in historic neighbourhoods near the core, close to the best social, cultural and physical infrastructure, including rapid transit, and is the target of significant new private and public investment. In contrast, City #3 represents a growing number of neighbourhoods located in the “inner suburbs”, which currently are under-served by transit, have fewer social and community services, and little new investment. City #2 represents the average city, the shrinking middle-income group predicted to further transform into either City #1 or City #3.

For more information on the “Three Cities Within Toronto, Income Polarization 1970 – 2000” by David Hulchanski at the Cities Centre at the University of Toronto, visit www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca

Images

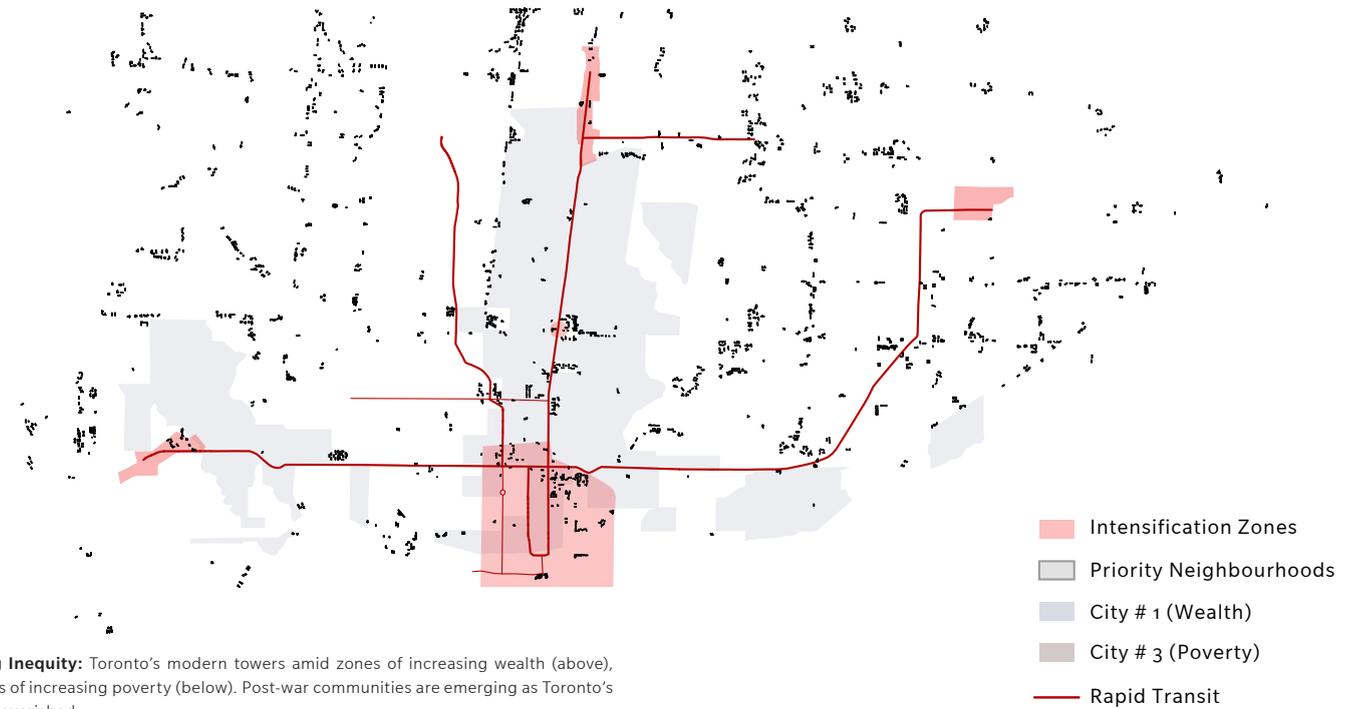
Top: Neglected spaces at Kipling and Steeles in North Etobicoke. Opposite: Comparative mapping of Toronto's zones of increasing wealth and increasing poverty with its aging modern towers.

A Polarized City

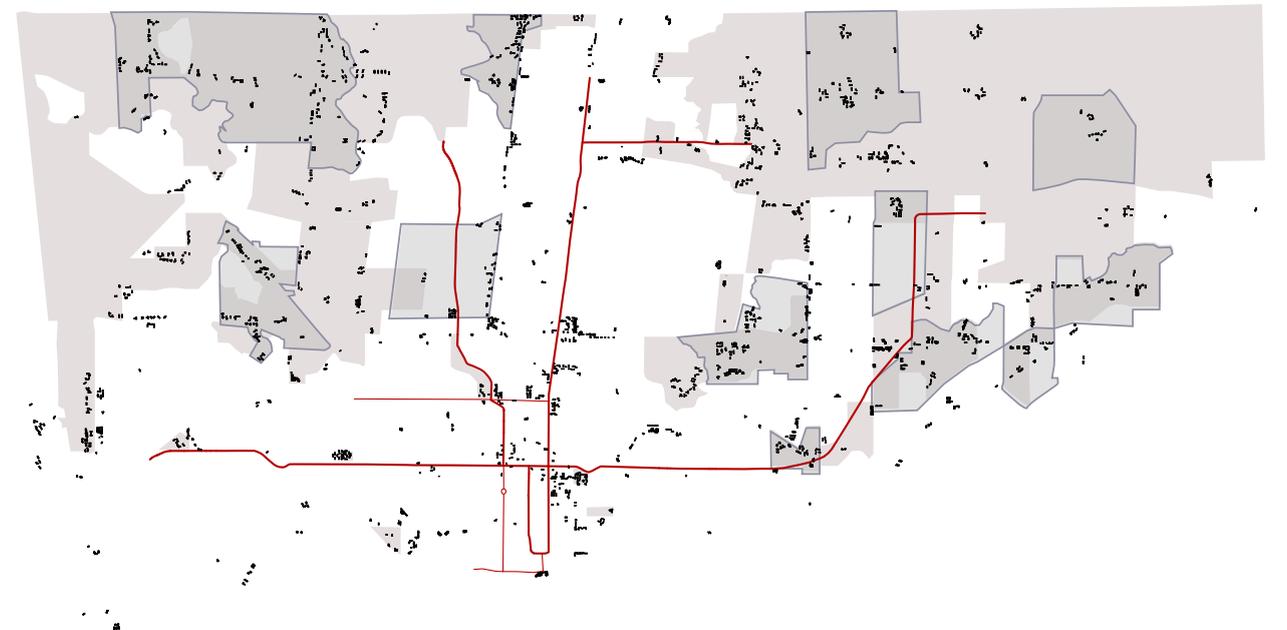
While Toronto of the 1960s was predominantly a middle income city with only a few pockets of overt wealth or poverty, today Toronto is increasingly polarized. Much of the poverty in Toronto coincides with its aging modern communities, specifically the Tower Blocks in question.

New Research from the University of Toronto's Cities Centre suggests that over the past twenty years the middle income group has fallen from two-thirds to one-third of the city, creating a geographically divided, “3 cities” within Toronto. These can be loosely characterized as City #1, an area of concentrated wealth and gentrification (about 20 percent of Toronto); City #2, an in-between average city, likely in the process of transition, and City #3, areas of concentrated poverty. City #2 and #3 each comprise about 40 percent of Toronto (as of 2001).

While Toronto's mid-century towers are located throughout all three cities within Toronto and represent a diversity of communities, the majority are facing the challenges of increased poverty and inadequate services found in City #3.



Mapping Inequity: Toronto's modern towers amid zones of increasing wealth (above), and zones of increasing poverty (below). Post-war communities are emerging as Toronto's most impoverished.



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Services and Food Deserts

As a result of single use zoning and neighbourhood planning based on the car, many large Apartment Neighbourhoods are without the local services and amenities necessary for functional neighbourhoods. In these neighbourhoods residents do not have ready access to fresh food, health services, child care facilities, communal gathering spaces, community centres, cafés, pubs, or shops. Many Apartment Neighbourhoods contain tens of thousands of inhabitants that could support these local amenities, who instead must travel elsewhere for their daily needs, a vast percentage relying exclusively on public transit.

Deteriorating Open Space

The public realm in Apartment Neighbourhoods is increasingly impoverished. Areas envisioned as communal recreation space around buildings have become fragmented and inaccessible. Lacking true gathering spaces or amenities, Apartment Neighbourhoods, home to many thousands, typically appear deserted.

Priority Neighbourhoods

The City of Toronto has created a series of programs to encourage investment and increased social services in "Priority Neighbourhoods". Moving forward, how might the inherited high-densities and underutilized open spaces found in Apartment Neighbourhoods aid in fostering thriving and equitable neighbourhoods?

Images

Top: Apartment grounds dominated by parking and unused open space, North York. Courtesy of Brendan Martin. Opposite, left: Open space of apartment properties, Kipling and Steeles, Kipling and Eglinton and Marlee and Roselawn. Opposite Right: Figure ground of Apartment Neighbourhood at Kipling and Steeles showing property lines and chain-link fences.

Under-Serviced Communities

Though experiencing large changes in terms of social geography, these areas have changed remarkably little in terms of built form. The form of these neighbourhoods reflects a 1960s approach of scale, largely based on the car as well as large areas of single use zoning. These vast areas have become increasingly fragmented and disconnected from the city at large.

Many of these areas, such as the concentration of towers in North Etobicoke's Kipling and Steeles (opposite), contain roughly the same population (13,000 people) as a central city neighbourhood such as the Annex, (or even an Ontario municipality such as Port Hope). Yet what is lacking is the main street, services, shops or any place that could be considered active or public. Grounds originally envisioned for communal gathering are now neglected and off limits.

This presents the dilemma faced by most residents of these communities: though living in high density, they have to drive or wait for the bus for simple errands or social contact. Largely separated from amenities, commerce and jobs, these neighbourhoods have not adapted to meet changing needs and expectations.

Furthermore, the resident community has evolved. Many are reception points for New Canadians, as well as hubs for diverse communities. However, the lack of mixed-use and infrastructure has denied many members of these communities needed access to services, and made entrepreneurship and investment directly within neighbourhoods difficult.



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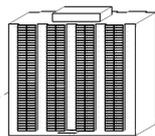
Far More Greenhouse Gas Production than Necessary

Lacking insulation, Toronto's aging apartments require upwards of 20 percent more energy per square metre than a typical single-family home. Current data suggests that a typical 200 unit building is responsible for as much as 1,200 tonnes of greenhouse gases a year. With over 1,000 aging apartments of this type in the Toronto area, these buildings contribute significantly to greenhouse gas production.

Energy Consumption per M²

Bungalow: 1 GJ 38KG CO₂

Apartment: 1.25 GJ 47KG CO₂



AVE. PER UNIT 95GJ 4.4 Tonnes CO₂

Images: Toronto's modern towers are the most wasteful housing type in the city. Top: Large apartment at Bathurst and Steeles. Opposite: Preliminary carbon analysis of Apartment Neighbourhood at Bathurst and Steeles. Source data: Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Toronto Community Housing Corporation.

Aging, Inefficient Buildings

These buildings are extremely wasteful. With much of this high-rise housing stock now passing some 40 years of service, deterioration of the building envelope is widely evident as is these building's increasing environmental impact on the region.

Although density is generally thought to aid sustainability, this stock of slab apartments demands more energy per square metre than any other housing type – current data suggests up to 20 per cent more than a contemporary single detached house. Though certain efficiencies are gained from reduced land coverage, and transit use, the buildings themselves perform poorly (see sidebar).

Why are these buildings so wasteful?

The towers were built in an era of cheap energy, when 'conservation' was not yet a consideration, and the principles of building science were not widely applied. Specifically, exposed slab edges (seen on walls and protruding balconies), minimal insulation, single-glazed windows and aging mechanical systems give these buildings an enormous environmental impact. Like leaky sieves, they require far more energy than necessary.

Soaring Costs

As a result of building inefficiencies compounded with the rising costs of energy, these buildings are significantly more expensive to operate than necessary. Strategies to radically improve building performance, cut greenhouse gas production and dramatically reduce operating costs will be discussed in the 'Opportunities' section of this document.

Note: Estimated carbon counts are conservative, and based on currently available data.



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A Neglected Resource

Beyond the environment concerns, poor site planning and lack of upkeep are preventing these buildings from working as they could. In many cases buildings are years overdue for significant upgrade and repair, with aging sealants, windows and mechanical systems well behind regular maintenance schedules.

The quality of public space in these neighbourhoods is often in decline. The hectares of land surrounding these towers are largely relegated to surface parking, and for the most part, are currently surrounded by chain-link fence. The 'park' of the worst of these buildings are abandoned spaces; they feature abandoned swimming pools and clusters of disorganized dumpsters rather than the communal green space that was envisioned.

These buildings are not providing the quality of life that was intended.

Culturally, we tend to ignore and dislike the recent past. Approaching their fifth decade, our post-war communities are a collective blind spot. However, they are currently facing some of Toronto's greatest challenges and require renewed and thorough attention.

Furthermore, they are a remarkable resource, containing several key advantages for fostering vibrant neighbourhoods and a sustainable region. Collectively, they are one of Toronto's greatest urban assets.

Images

Current conditions of Apartment Neighbourhoods in Toronto. Top: St. Jamestown. Opposite: Highway 401 and Don Mills Road. Courtesy of Brendan Martin.

