

Looking Internationally:
Aging Tower Blocks in the 21st Century



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Toronto, Moscow

Though unique in North America, Toronto's post-war apartment neighbourhoods are similar to those found the world over; particularly to those in Europe and the former Soviet Union. Though created under different contexts and economies, Moscow (top), and Toronto (bottom), share remarkably similar towers, as well as related opportunities and challenges.

Images

Top: Tower blocks in outer Moscow. Bottom: Tower blocks at Finch and Keele.

Opposite: The comprehensive renewal of a tower block community in Halle Neustadt, Germany, including infill, building upgrade and new public spaces.

Section Cover: New commercial infill and building renewal, Marzahn, Berlin.

A Global Challenge and Opportunity

The challenges of aging tower blocks are not unique to Toronto; it is an issue found the world over.

From the former Soviet Union to Western Europe, the Americas to East Asia, the modern tower block is truly part of the global landscape. A defining housing type of the 20th Century, it has largely filled its mandate of providing well serviced and equitable housing for tens of millions of people. Today, many of these buildings are reaching the end of their first life cycle.

There have been a variety of responses in updating this housing stock for the 21st Century. In Europe in particular, the community-building and carbon-cutting potential of aging towers has resulted in a several innovative projects in building and neighbourhood renewal. Mixed ownership, massive scale redevelopment and liberalization of land use restrictions to encourage entrepreneurship are some of the strategies that have enabled apartment districts to evolve to meet today's housing and community needs.

The most exemplary and comprehensive of these rejuvenation projects have transformed once forlorn districts into popular neighbourhoods, that include cultural facilities, markets and, in the case of central London, even successful urban agriculture, while maintaining affordable housing. Of particular note are Bijlmermeer (Amsterdam), Marzahn (Berlin) and Topli Stan (Moscow). Many of these examples are relevant to Toronto.



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Varying Tenure and Continued Investment

In Europe, apartment towers make up a considerable share of the housing market, and in many post-Soviet areas they make up the majority. In Western Europe this housing stock is predominantly used by the economically disadvantaged, while in Eastern Europe and Russia it continues to contain an incredibly mixed tenure and is home to a large percentage of the middle class. Addressing tower blocks has been key to the housing policy of most European countries.

Images

Top: Retail infill at base of tower blocks at Maerisches Viertel, Berlin.
Bottom: Outdoor farmer's Market, Halle Neustadt, Germany.
Opposite, Top Left: Renewed towers and new public pace in the Marzahn, Berlin.
Opposite, Bottom Left: Renewed public space, the Barbican, London.
Opposite, Right: Outdoor market in Tower Hamlets, London.

Looking Internationally

The world over, reinvestment has transformed tower block neighbourhoods into models for vibrant communities and urban sustainability. In Toronto, we have an opportunity to learn from the best international examples, while developing cutting edge solutions best suited to the Canadian urban context and climate. There exists a great opportunity.

Notable International Strategies Include:

- Environmental upgrade
- Building renovation and housing upgrade
- Urban design and enhanced public realm
- New permanent retail and outdoor markets
- Urban agriculture and enhanced green spaces
- Introduction of new housing and infill
- New housing ownership models (inclusive zoning)
- New investments in transit and other infrastructure



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International Building Renewal

Internationally, over-cladding aging high-rises has been a key strategy for carbon reduction, especially in the European Union (EU). A leader in the field has been Germany, where the tower blocks of post-wall Berlin have been significantly upgraded as part of both environmental policy and unification.

In Bratislava (pictured left), the entire district of the Petržalka, consisting of hundreds of tower blocks, is in the process of being over-clad as part of Slovakia's environmental agreement in joining the EU. Paid for in part by the EU Commission of the Environment, the municipality and private investors (who gain development rights on adjacent properties), the project is not only making buildings more efficient, but also breathing new life into this aging district through new mixed use and improved public space.

Images

Top: Building renewal and over-cladding in Berlin. Opposite: Building renewal in the Petržalka, Bratislava.



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Images

Top: Infill and commercial space in tower communities in Berlin, Amsterdam, London. Bottom: Idea Store in Tower Hamlets, London. Opposite, Top: Moscow's Novi Arbat, featuring retail podiums at the base of tower blocks. Opposite, Bottom Left: Podium infill and kiosk market at base of tower block in Moscow's Palyanka. Opposite, Bottom Right: Renewal and retail addition in London's Brunswick Centre.

Services and a Mix of Uses

While many Apartment Neighbourhoods in Toronto suffer from a lack of services and amenities, many in Europe are thriving. These European tower neighbourhoods were originally planned with retail, cafés and services, augmented by a recent effort to renew these neighbourhoods through both public and private investment.

In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, markets, kiosks and retail podiums offering every type of goods and services have emerged within tower districts since the end of the Cold War. In Western Europe, publicly sponsored neighbourhood renewals have introduced a variety of housing types, as well as renewing community facilities, public spaces and infrastructure.

The Idea Store in the London borough of Tower Hamlets, is a remarkable example of integrating needed services, improving urban design, and helping transform neighbourhood image.

Commissioned by the borough and designed by architect David Adjaye, the Idea Store consolidates a remarkable set of services, from language training to community meeting rooms, to a public library, into one structure located directly in the centre of a dense apartment community. Targeted specifically at the area's wealth of newcomers, its mission is "Welcome to London, how may we help you?" The Idea Store also contains a series of shops rented to local merchants. Helping to promote entrepreneurs, this also makes the neighbourhood vibrant and active. The Idea Store is a remarkable project highly applicable in Toronto.



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Landscape and the Urban Farm

In many European cities, the 'park' around these towers has been maintained, resulting in outdoor areas of high quality. Roehampton, (top centre), provides unobstructed access to London's Richmond Park; truly a building in the landscape. In Germany, in neighbourhoods such as Berlin's Gropiusstadt, tower blocks sit within well-used parks and next to beirgartens. Properly maintained, the "tower in the park" can offer a high-quality environment.

Many cities have cultivated the areas around towers as urban farms. In cities such as London, urban farming has had a strong presence since the 1970s. Many of the sites in the Farm Garden UK Network (www.farmgarden.org.uk) are integrated into tower blocks and council housing. Complete with livestock, these farms provide training for children as part of local school curricula, as well as community kitchens and seasonal markets. In China urban agriculture now feeds one third of the population.

Images

Left: Park landscape, St. Denis, Paris. Top, Centre: Roehampton, London.
Middle, Centre: Park path, Gropiusstadt, Berlin. Opposite: Urban Farm, Camden, London.

