



“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

The Development of the Toronto Area's 'Towers in the Park': Modern Heritage for a Sustainable Future:

The Toronto area has the second highest number of high rise buildings in North America (buildings 12 stories and above) with over 2000 buildings. First place is New York with over 5000, third place Chicago at just over 1000, and fourth Vancouver with over 600.

Unlike most North American cities, the majority of Toronto's high rises are concrete apartment towers built in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. There are over 1000 of these buildings in the GTA. Most are located in the inner suburbs of North York, Etobicoke and Scarborough, with large concentrations in Mississauga, Brampton and other GTA municipalities.

While last year the production of roughly 16 000 condo units made Toronto the largest condominium market in North America, in 1968, nearly 30 000 apartment units were built. In an 'apartment boom' which lasted roughly twenty years, Toronto produced over 200 000 units.

Most of these towers were built on former farmers pastures. They were a result of planning policies promoting high density clusters throughout the expanding suburbs.

These clusters of high rises give some suburban areas densities as high as 350 people per hectare, three times higher than that of a typical downtown neighbourhoods like the Annex.

Whereas in the US and Europe, modern apartment towers were social projects, the vast majority of Toronto's apartment buildings were privately developed and marketed to a wide spectrum of incomes.

Toronto's first suburban apartment neighbourhoods, Thornecliffe and Flemingdon Park, began in the 1950s. They were North America's first privately developed modern apartment 'new towns'.

CMHC and the Planners of Metro Toronto promoted large open space around these towers for 'health and recreation'. A typical tower complex contains over 90% open space, mostly consisting of lawn and parking. Today, most of this space is blocked off with chain link fence and is an underutilized resource.

Most of the GTA's concrete suburban towers have required substantial upgrades for 15 or more years, and many exist in substandard condition.

Per square meter, these apartments require as much as 20% more energy than a typical single family home. Most lack insulation, have leaky windows and exposed slab edges which provide no thermal protection. However, these buildings are extremely well suited for environmental upgrade. The application of over-cladding, district geothermal installations, solar water heating and other 'off the grid' energy initiatives can cut energy use and carbon output by well over 50%.

Allowing for mixed use zoning around these suburban towers, such as services, markets and retail could drastically reduce auto trips and create self sustaining 'centres' throughout the region.

These apartments are often the first home for new Canadians. Creating opportunities for retail, entrepreneurship and community involvement could help strengthen already vibrant communities.

Community gardening and urban agriculture around these buildings could encourage locally grown food, training and education.

Appropriate new development in tower districts could allow for a variety in housing types, a diversified population, an improved public realm and help fund needed retrofits and community upgrades.

Globally, the carbon cutting and community building potential of these districts has been realized, particularly in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

The Mayor's Office of the City of Toronto, along with a growing list of partners including the Clinton Foundation, E.R.A. Architects, CMHC and the University of Toronto have initiated the **Tower Renewal Project**—a building upgrade, community reinvestment and greening incentives programme which aims to significantly improving the social, economic and environmental sustainability of our city and region.