

Redefining “Renewal” in Toronto’s High-Rise Suburbs

Douglas Young¹

Introduction

In the 1950s and 60s, municipal planners in Toronto set out a clear modern vision of a more urban type of suburb to be developed at higher densities and with more variation in built form than earlier suburbs in the region. A key element in their vision was the high-rise residential building. The planners’ ideas were enthusiastically embraced by public and private sector city-builders with the result that more than 1,100 high-rise apartment buildings were built in the City of Toronto by the early 1980s. Many of them are located in what were once geographically peripheral locations but are now widely referred to as the “inner” or “older” suburbs, descriptive terminology that distinguishes them from newer suburban developments that extend many kilometres beyond them.

Most of the high-rise buildings have long since lost the glamour they derived from their newness (a new way of living in a new type of building in a new kind of suburb). Indeed, today they represent an aging housing stock with extensive building maintenance backlogs and increasingly racialized and low income tenant populations. The neighbourhoods they are situated in are seen to be lacking in the necessities of everyday life: adequate community and social services, good public transport connections, and access to healthy food. The Toronto “inner suburb,” and especially its high-rise rental buildings, is widely perceived to be in decline, but there are very different perceptions of the nature and cause of suburban decline as well as ideas about what

¹ Douglas Young is an Associate Professor in the Urban Studies program, Department of Social Science, at York University. Email: dogoyo@yorku.ca. This article is based on research that was supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada through funding from the Major Collaborative Research Initiative “Global Suburbanisms: Governance, Land and Infrastructure in the 21st Century” (2010-2017). The author would like to acknowledge the research assistance of Will Poppe.

would constitute suburban renewal. Perceptions of suburban decline and renewal in Toronto provide a clear case of the ways in which austerity as common sense shapes local urban policy and impacts everyday life. In this article I consider two different approaches to defining “renewal” in Toronto’s high-rise suburbs, approaches that directly reflect the implications of suburbanizing austerity and alternatives to it.

Neoliberal Governance of the In-Between City

Toronto’s high-rise suburbs are the direct result of planning policy that called for a substantial number of dwelling units to be provided in high-rise buildings. For example, in the 1960s planners in what was then the Borough of North York (now the north-central part of the City of Toronto) prepared District Plans for as yet to be developed areas and stipulated housing targets. In North York’s District 10, of the total 50,000 dwellings to be built, 27,000 (or 54% of the total) were to be in the form of high-rise buildings (North York Planning Board 1967; North York Planning Board 1985). The result is a remarkable landscape with high-rise rental apartment buildings lining arterial roads and grouped into clusters of tall buildings (See Figure 1). Drawing on the work of German urbanist, Thomas Sieverts (Sieverts 2003; 2006), I conceptualize this landscape as an in-between city: a landscape that possesses some elements of “typical” North American suburbia (wide roads, shopping centres, expansive parking lots, neighbourhoods of detached bungalows), but also some elements generally associated with “typical” central city areas (high-rise buildings, concentrations of public housing, high proportion of recent immigrants). This is not, according to Edward Relph, “a suburban anti-city” but rather “a different type of city that has to be assessed on its own terms, an extended city of diverse landscapes and land uses” (Relph 2014: 104).

Figure 1: The Landscape of Toronto’s In-between City: Strip Retail and High-rise Rental Apartment Building. Photo by Douglas Young



The 1,189 high-rise residential buildings built across the city in the four decades following WW2 comprise about 300,000 dwellings (or just under 1/3 of the total number of dwellings in the City of Toronto) and are home to at least 500,000 people (almost 1/5 of the City’s total population). Two-thirds of the towers are privately owned; one-third are in the non-profit sector (City of Toronto 2008; 2011). While the suburban towers were initially conceived of as settings for a new and desirable kind of everyday life, they are generally no longer seen in that light but rather as physically worn out and socially stressed. Several recent reports, notably *Vertical Poverty. Declining Income, Housing Quality and Community Life in Toronto’s Inner Suburban High-Rise Apartments* (United Way 2011), have documented the deteriorating

conditions of the buildings, and the increasing racialization and impoverishment of their residents (United Way Toronto 2004; 2011). In a way, the very essence of their in-betweenness shapes negative perceptions of Toronto's high-rise suburbs. They are neither glamorous or new (like central city condos), "close to nature" (like exurban communities), or dense enough to be considered truly "urban" (like pre-war central city neighbourhoods). Instead, Toronto's in-between cities seem to lie in a grey zone somewhere between suburban and urban (Young 2011). Suburban tower neighbourhoods are widely perceived today to be a problem in need of a solution and everyday life in the in-between city's hundreds of high-rises is thought to be in need of a governance fix. In twenty-first century neoliberal Toronto, what shape will that governance fix take?

Neoliberal Governance

My approach to governance questions is guided in part by the work of Theodore and Peck who tell us to challenge an understanding of neoliberalism as "an authorless, omnipresent, and monolithic phenomenon" and to see it, instead, as "a *constructed* project" (Theodore and Peck 2012: 21, emphasis in original). We should "denaturalize neoliberal urbanism as a policy paradigm by exploring its origins, its evolution, and its variegated form" (Theodore and Peck 2011: 21). In a similar vein, Patrick Le Galès and Olivier Borraz advise us to look closely, within a general terrain of neo-liberalizing urban governance, at just what is governed and just who is governed. "What part, sector, group of the city is really governed? What is weakly governed? What is left out? What is escaping government?" (Borraz and Le Galès 2010: 139). Thus the shape of neoliberal governance in Toronto in the first two decades of the twenty-first century reflects a path dependence specific to this particular city region (Boudreau et al 2009).

In the province of Ontario (of which Toronto is the capital), radical neoliberalism under the rubric of a "Common Sense Revolution" was implemented by a Progressive Conservative government in power

from 1995-2003. Within days of their election in June 1995, the new provincial government announced the cancellation of all commitments to build social housing (it should be noted that the federal government had cancelled funding of new social housing construction a few years earlier). That was but the first in an aggressive program of roll-back and roll-out neoliberalization that included deep cuts to welfare payments, equally deep cuts to income tax, the elimination of provincial funding of capital and operating costs of local transit systems, a weakening of rent control (to allow vacancy decontrol and the exemption of newly built units from the legislation), a loosening of planning legislation, the downloading of responsibility for social housing operations to municipalities (with no additional funding provided to support them in doing that), the reorganization of public school board funding, and the forced amalgamation of many municipalities in the supposed interest of efficiency in operations. The implications of the Common Sense Revolution were particularly severe in Toronto, the city with the largest number of social housing units, the most developed transit system, the largest number of welfare recipients, and the best funded education system in Ontario. The amalgamation of seven municipal governments that created a new City of Toronto on January 1, 1998 was considered by many as an attack on the pre-amalgamation City of Toronto Council which had been a vocal opponent of the provincial government’s neoliberal “revolution” and a champion of social democratic urban policy.

Radical neoliberalization led to new crises of governance in Toronto, especially related to housing. The cancellation of new social housing construction has generated a waiting list for subsidized rent-geared-to-income housing that grew to 82,414 households in 2015 in the City of Toronto (ONPHA 2016: 27). The property development industry has largely abandoned building private sector rental housing with the result being an extremely low vacancy rate of 1.6% in 2015 (CMHC 2015). In a city region that experiences annual population growth in the order of 100,000 people, tremendous pressure is brought to bear on all

types of housing but most especially on existing non-profit housing and private sector housing at the more affordable end of the market.

These governance crises are met by new modes of neoliberal governance that Keil calls “roll-with-it” neoliberalism (Keil 2009) and I call, in certain instances, “progressive neoliberalism” (explained below). In Ontario the Common Sense Revolution government was replaced in 2003 by a Liberal government that promised to address the social and environmental crises triggered by the roll-back and roll-out policies implemented by its predecessor. And in Toronto, the progressive candidate for Mayor, David Miller, was elected in 2003. Thus, in the very early twenty-first century, new regimes at provincial and municipal level appeared poised to undo some of the previous regimes’ actions. But as Keil predicted, any new mode of regulation would still be “thoroughly bounded by the limits set through normalized neoliberal governmentalities” (Keil 2009: 238). This follows from Harvey’s description of neoliberalism as a hegemonic “mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 2005: 3).

Indeed, neoliberalism in Toronto and Ontario has successfully constructed a new notion of common sense with austerity at its core. Budgetary problems at the City are conceived of as spending problems, not revenue problems. Council is reluctant to implement any new taxes or revenue tools that are available for fear of breaching the common sense notion of austerity. Current mayor John Tory promotes a budget freeze which, due to annual inflation, would in fact represent a budget cut (Rider 2016). In a City where the radical Common Sense Revolution was rolled out more than 20 years ago, austerity has become so common sense that alternatives are, for many people, simply unimaginable.

These two theoretical components (neoliberal urban governance and the in-between city) combine to guide my research as a consideration of how to live today with the legacies of a previous era’s urbanism. In other words, how will the legacies of 1960s urban design,

urban planning and housing policy in Toronto’s high-rise suburbs be governed in the context of present-day neoliberalism and its foundation on austerity as common sense?

Two Approaches to the “Renewal” of Inner Suburbs Considered to be in Decline

Approach 1: Tower Renewal and Progressive Neoliberalism. In Toronto austerity as common sense shapes one approach to conceptualizing decline in high-rise suburbs and a very particular approach to their renewal. One of the City’s responses to the problem of the inner suburb and its residential towers is the Tower Renewal Program. It originated in a building science class taught at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Toronto in 2000 that examined the case of Toronto’s post-war concrete apartment towers. The students determined that the buildings have a structural lifespan of 300 to 400 years, having been over-designed by engineers for whom they were, in the 1950s, a new building type. But while the structures will last into the twenty-fourth century, every 50 years or so they will require a complete retrofit of all other building components: exterior cladding, windows, roofs, mechanical systems, kitchens and bathrooms will all need replacement. Many of the buildings are now at the stage of needing their first total retrofit. The ideas explored in the building science class were further developed by a student in his Master’s thesis, picked up by a local architectural firm which hired him upon graduation, and championed by then Mayor, David Miller. In 2008, the City established a Tower Renewal office with a handful of staff reporting to the City Manager.

The initial goal of the program was to create supply side conditions that would entice building owners to rehabilitate their properties: it was argued that building retrofits would reduce energy consumption, improve the quality of life for tenants, and enhance the exchange value of the buildings. Subsequently, the goals of the program have expanded to think beyond the scale of individual buildings to consider the revitalization of Tower neighbourhoods that would include

improved social and community services. To that end, the City established a Tower & Neighbourhood Revitalization Unit in 2015 (Toronto 2015).

The fundamental policy tool that the program hoped to initiate was for the City to establish a financial institution that would make low interest loans to tower owners in order to fund improvements to their buildings. The city would use its good credit rating to borrow large amounts of capital at very favourable rates. In cases of non-repayment of loans, it would use its taxing powers to add the outstanding balance to the property tax bill. But, setting up this institution requires provincial approval which has not been forthcoming to date.

Eight years into the Tower Renewal program we can ask to what extent it has been a success and to what extent it has been a failure. In terms of material improvements to everyday life of suburban tower residents, it has had extremely limited success. The funding that the program has managed to cobble together to date has been minimal. For example, Hi-RIS (High-rise Retrofit Improvement Support Program) is a three-year City of Toronto pilot project for energy conservation upgrades. A total of \$10 million is intended to fund improvements in 10 buildings (Toronto Tower & Neighbourhood Revitalization Unit). Hi-RIS may prove to be a successful demonstration project and inspire other building owners take on energy retrofits of their properties, but what is actually needed, if the goal is to address the entire rental tower housing stock of more than 300,000 apartment units, is funding in the range of several billion dollars. It is clear that it will take more than the power of suasion to kick start tower building upgrades across the entire tower housing stock in the city.

What is distinctive about Tower Renewal as an approach to suburban renewal is that it weaves a progressive strand through what is otherwise a clearly neoliberal project. It acknowledges the importance of retaining the suburban towers as an important stock of relatively affordable housing, and it seeks to improve the material well-being of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people living in the in-between city.

But at the same time it indirectly contributes to the overall shrinking of ambition around affordable housing, and around the capacity of the state to act directly on the crisis of housing affordability. Instead of creating new non-profit units, the focus is on rehabilitating existing affordable stock, most of which is privately owned and all of which will be at risk of higher rents post-renewal. Retention of existing rental housing becomes the defacto affordable housing policy of the city, while creating new non-profit housing quietly disappears from the policy agenda. Tower Renewal is a clear case of “roll-with-it” modes of neoliberal urban governance, modes “that normalize market strategies and emphasize new partnerships of private and non-profit actors” (Abbruzzese forthcoming). It represents a newly constructed articulation of state, market and civil society shaped by austerity as common sense. But the strategic inclusion of a progressive thread makes it all but impossible to oppose this form of progressive neoliberalism even while acknowledging its severe shortcomings.

Approach 2: The Story of W6CAT and the Power of Saying No. The Ward 6 Community Action Team (W6CAT) was established in 2010 to represent the interests of low to moderate income tenants living in rental housing on Lakeshore Blvd. West in Mimico, a neighbourhood in south Etobicoke (itself a district that forms the western part of the City of Toronto). In 2006, the local City Councillor had prompted City Planning staff to embark on a planning exercise called *Vision20/20: a Revitalization Action Plan for Mimico*. This exercise was premised on the idea of renewal through private sector redevelopment. The Mimico lakefront, in the eyes of the Councillor, was a neighbourhood in decline that could be revitalized through what was presented as the natural and inevitable process of hyper intensification in the form of new high-rise high density condominium development. Tenants in 1950s-60s era rental buildings that currently line the lakefront feared they would be uprooted and forced out of the community.

W6CAT was one of several community based organizations that countered that view of renewal. What was distinctive about W6CAT was

its focus on protecting affordable housing and in promoting tenants' rights. Key figures in W6CAT were Sandra Van, the Health Promotion Program Coordinator from the local community health centre LAMP (Lakeshore Area Multi-Service Project) who saw housing as crucial to health, and Brenda Bloore, the President of the non-profit Norris Crescent Housing Co-operative who was committed to the principle of housing as a right. I came into contact with W6CAT through my involvement in the "Global Suburbanisms" Major Collaborative Research Initiative (MCRI) based at York University (http://city.apps01.yorku.ca/?page_id=222) and saw an opportunity for active research in which I could contribute something to the group's project. When W6CAT members expressed frustration at the limited public consultation the city was prepared to undertake as part of its planning work in Mimico, I suggested that they undertake their own parallel planning exercise and call it a Peoples' Plan for Mimico that would force the City planners to at least acknowledge their presence and their ideas. One striking event W6CAT organized was an all-day Peoples' visioning exercise that drew 30 residents to the local library where they spent a Saturday afternoon talking about their neighbourhood and its future (See Figure 2).

In effect, what W6CAT did was attempt to shape a counter-hegemonic discourse around planning and neighbourhood renewal. Their goal was to challenge the fundamental assumptions underlying the Mimico 20/20 process: the equation of community renewal with market-led property intensification; the limitation of affordable housing policy to retention of existing rental stock; the unspoken assumption that neighbourhood gentrification is a positive outcome; and the superficiality of most public planning consultation processes. Eventually City Council approved the "Mimico-by-the-lake Secondary Plan" (a neighbourhood scale Official plan) which clearly bears the imprint of citizen activism in that the Councilor and major property owners are unhappy with the restrictions it imposes on any new developments.

Figure 2: Poster Advertising the Peoples Plan Vision Workshop That Was Held on Saturday March 26, 2011. Reproduced by permission of W6CAT.

Join us for a free Lunch at 12:30 pm

Vision

You talk, we listen!
We need your help!
Tell us how you
want to see
Mimico by the Lake
revitalized.

If we all put our heads together
there's no telling what we can do!

Peoples Plan Vision Workshop

Saturday, March 26
12:30 pm to 4 pm

MIMICO CENTENIAL LIBRARY
47 STATION ROAD, ETOBICOKE

For more information
call: 416-252-9701
ext. 405
Email or check out
our website.

Childcare (Junior CATs Club)
and tokens provided.

Brought to you by:
Ward 6 Community Action Team
<http://ward6cat.wordpress.com> | ward6cat@gmail.com

W6
SOUTH ETOBICOKE
Community Legal Services
W6
United Way
Greater Toronto

Conclusions

Tower Renewal and W6CAT represent two different approaches to suburban decline and renewal in an age of austerity. Tower Renewal is an example of what I call progressive neoliberalism, a fundamentally neoliberal project that includes a thread of progressivism that serves to

make it very difficult, if not impossible, to oppose it. In contrast, W6CAT is a counter-hegemonic attempt to unseat the austerity-based new common sense. I present it as a success story but caution that its achievements may not be widely reproducible. W6CAT's success is linked to the combination of a number of specific factors: the two community leaders (Sandra Van and Brenda Bloore), a tradition of community activism in the neighbourhood; widespread organic long term knowledge of the district and relevant planning reports and policies stretching back several decades; the fact that Mimico was a separate municipality until 1967 (at which time it was absorbed by Etobicoke which, in turn, was merged into the new City of Toronto in 1998) which fostered a strong sense of a community identity and culture. Nevertheless, W6CAT's success does suggest at least the potential power of saying no to austerity.

References

- Abbruzzese, T. (forthcoming). "Build Toronto" (Not Social Housing): Neglecting the Social Housing Question in the Competitive City Region. In R. Keil, S. Kipfer, J.-A. Boudreau, and P. Hamel, eds, *Governing Cities Through Regions: Transatlantic Perspectives*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Borraz, O. and LeGalès, P. (2010). Urban Governance in Europe: The Government of What? *Pôle Sud*, 1(32), 137-151.
- Boudreau, J.-A.; Keil, R.; and Young, D. (2009). *Changing Toronto: Governing Urban Neoliberalism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- City of Toronto. (2011). *Tower Renewal Implementation Book*. https://www1.toronto.ca/city_of_toronto/social_development_finance_administration/files/pdf/tr_implementation_book.pdf
- City of Toronto. (2008). *Mayor's Tower Renewal: Opportunities Book*. Prepared for the City of Toronto by E.R.A. Architects and the University of Toronto.

- CMHC. (2015, November 2). Canada's Purpose-Built Vacancy Rate Increases. <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/corp/nero/nere/2015/2015-11-02-0815.cfm>
- City of Toronto. (2015). Toronto Tower & Neighbourhood Revitalization Unit. <http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vnextoid=7fe8f40f9aae0410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>
- City of Toronto. (2015). High-rise Retrofit Improvement Support Program (Hi-RIS) <http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vnextoid=ab3147e94c5b3410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>
- City Institute. (n.d.). Global Suburbanisms: Governance, Land and Infrastructure in the 21st Century. http://city.apps01.yorku.ca/?page_id=222
- Keil, R. (2009). The Urban Politics of Roll-with-it Neoliberalization. *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 13 (2-3), 230-245.
- North York Planning Board. (1967, May). *Draft District 10 Plan*.
- North York Planning Board. (1985, March). *The Consolidated City of North York District 10 Plan*.
- ONPHA. (2016). *2016 Waiting Lists Survey Report*. Ontario Nonprofit Housing Association (ONPHA). http://www.onpha.on.ca/onpha/web/Policyandresearch/2016_Waiting_List_Survey/Content/PolicyAndResearch/Waiting_Lists_2016/2016_Waiting_Lists_Survey.aspx?hkey=08cff4ce-7f97-4af4-910c-c64954d28a4a
- Relph, E. (2014). *Toronto: Transformations in a City and its Region*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Rider, D. (2016, June 20). Cut Costs, Build City, Toronto Mayor Tory Tells Staff. *Toronto Star*. (https://www.thestar.com/news/city_hall/2016/06/20/cut-costs-build-city-toronto-mayor-tory-tells-staff.html).

- Sieverts, T. (2003). *Cities Without Cities: An Interpretation of the Zwischenstadt*. London: Spon Press.
- Sieverts, T. (2006). Die Geschichtlichkeit der Großsiedlungen. *Informationen zur Raumentwicklung: Stadtumbau in Großsiedlungen*. Bonn: Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung. 3 / 4, 163-167.
- Theodore, N. and Peck, J. (2012). Framing Neoliberal Urbanism: Translating 'Commonsense' Urban Policy Across the OECD Zone. *European Urban and Regional Studies* 19 (1), 20-41.
- United Way Toronto. (2011). *Poverty by Postal Code 2: Vertical Poverty. Declining Income, Housing Quality and Community Life in Toronto's Inner Suburban High-Rise Apartments*. Toronto: United Way.
- United Way Toronto. (2004). *Poverty by Postal Code*. Toronto: United Way.
- Young, D. (2011). Hyper-development or Nothing to Do: Urban Planning in Toronto's In-between City. *Public: Art/Culture/Ideas*. 43, 76-85.