

Section 2: Themes and Strategies for Healthy Apartment Neighbourhoods By Design

Themes and Strategies

Theme 1: Natural Environment

Theme 2: Built Environment

Theme 3: Transportation

Theme 4: Housing

Theme 5: Employment, Income and Opportunities

Theme 6: Education and Learning

Theme 7: Food Security

Theme 8: Community Health

Health Strategies Summary Chart



Theme 4: Housing

How does housing affect health?

Housing and homelessness are important determinants of health. Housing is more than just shelter. It is based on multi-dimensional factors that include: the physical structure, design and characteristics of the home; the social and psychological aspects; the immediate physical area around the building; and the social characteristics and range of services in a neighbourhood (Moloughney, 2004).

The United Way's *Vertical Poverty* report documented the geographic concentration of poverty in high rise buildings in poorer neighbourhoods of Toronto (United Way, 2011). A report from the Canadian Council on Social Development found that low-income children in Canada are more than twice as likely to live in substandard housing as children in higher-income families. Stable, safe and secure housing is associated with positive child outcomes in areas of health, development and well-being (Cooper, 2001).

Housing can affect health by:

- **Limiting Financial Resources for other Necessities** – Housing affordability is closely linked to poverty and income insecurity. People who spend a significant amount of their income on housing have little money available for healthy foods, child care, educational opportunities, and other health promoting opportunities (TPH, 2011).
- **Presenting Biological and Chemical Hazards** – Poor housing conditions are associated with a wide range of health conditions, including respiratory infections, asthma, lead poisoning, injuries, and mental health (Krieger & Higgins, 2002; Bashir, 2002). A United Way study found that nearly 60% of the tenants in high-poverty clusters have vermin, such as

cockroaches, bedbugs and/or mice, in their buildings, compared with 42.4% of tenants in neighbourhoods with a low rate of poverty (United Way, 2011). Indoor air quality can also be a problem in high-rise buildings due to issues such as poor air flow in dwellings and improper ventilation of vehicle exhaust from underground parking (HIP, 2005).

- **Presenting Access Issues** – Tenants in low income apartment neighbourhoods have identified frequent elevator break-downs as a source of stress, isolation and physical strain. With unreliable elevator services, routine and recreational activities can become a struggle and a source of anxiety (United Way, 2011).
- **Placing Residents in Poor Built Environments** – People who have inadequate income are often forced to live in neighbourhoods that can expose them to higher levels of air pollution, heavier traffic and greater safety hazards. These neighbourhoods can also be lacking in services and amenities such as stores that sell fresh foods, recreational facilities, and health and social services (TPH, 2011; United Way, 2011).
- **Placing Residents in Neighbourhoods with Social Problems** – Concerns about violence can increase stress, restrict social interaction, and prevent health-promoting activities such as walking, cycling and playing in parks (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2011).

The Opportunity in Apartment Neighbourhoods

The modern apartment tower block is in large part the outcome of public health concerns about the state of housing in cities. Originally developed in the context of the housing crisis of inter-war Europe, modern European apartment blocks were designed to be an efficient way to provide mass housing that had access to fresh air, sunlight, and modern conveniences. In the 1960s modern urban planners in Toronto adopted this approach and advocated this form of apartment tower housing as a responsible way to meet demands of housing during Toronto's post-war economic boom (Faludi 1963).

Today, apartment towers house over one million people in the Toronto region. Having experienced a remarkable demographic shift in the past several decades, apartment neighbourhoods now include wide range of households made up of children and young families, elderly, singles, and both established and new Canadians. The mix of households in apartment neighbourhoods is a reflection of how the city grows and changes. As such, apartment neighbourhoods provide a form of housing that has generally performed well over the past half century.

Aging apartment towers can certainly have identifiable deficiencies, such as inefficient heating systems or elevators in need of upgrading (United Way 2011). However these buildings were robustly constructed and have structures that will continue to be sound even as other components degenerate and age. These towers also sit on large areas of open space, which, as noted elsewhere in this report, can be adapted to meet future community needs. They are also homes of communities that are youthful, dynamic and growing. For these reasons, Toronto's apartment towers are well positioned to be re-conditioned and modernized to meet housing needs for the decades to come.

The following solutions would help apartment towers better respond to current housing needs in a way that better supports public health.

- 4.1 Provide Amenities to Support Diverse Households in High-rise Living**
- 4.2 Adapt units for Growing Families and Changing Households**
- 4.3 Build Resident Social Capital through Organizations and Associations**
- 4.4 Expand Housing Choice, New Tenure Options**
- 4.5 Expand Housing Choice, Infill Housing**

4.1 Building Amenities for High-Rise Living

Context

Apartment towers were originally designed for the lifestyles of small households who were enjoying the growing affluence of the late 1960s. To attract tenants, towers were built with amenities such as pools, saunas and tennis courts, which appealed to the sensibility and interests of the target demographic.

The priorities and interests of today's apartment neighbourhood residents do not match the interests of tenants in the 1960s and early 1970s. New Canadians, multi-generational households, or seniors who make a home in apartment towers seek amenities that were not considered when the towers were originally designed and constructed.

The extensive amenities originally built into many apartment towers are in a wide range of conditions. In a few buildings, amenities have been well-maintained and well-used. In most, some or all of the original amenities have been closed, are in disrepair or have been decommissioned.

Solution

A variety of new amenities for apartment neighbourhoods are discussed throughout this report, such as fresh food and shops and community kitchens (see Food Security), daycare services (see Education and Learning) and health services (see Health Services). In the context of this chapter, the following scenarios relate to the physical infrastructure in apartment towers in addition to these uses:

Children's Play Area

A common feature of Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods is an ample open space surrounding tower blocks. However, these open spaces rarely include places designed for children's play. Such amenities could serve a variety of age groups, including play areas for toddlers, play equipment for children, or courts and sports fields for teenagers and youth. These areas could also include seating and shelter for adults supervising their children.

Concierge Service

Concierge or doorman services have become common elements in newly built high-rise housing in Toronto. However, among the city's older apartment complexes, this service is rare. A concierge or doorman working in an apartment tower could help enhance the community's social capital by providing a common and routine point of contact for residents, enhancing the sense of security by providing 'eyes on the street', and providing a direct contact to emergency services. [Church 2005]

Multi-Purpose Rooms and Community Programs

Community groups and organizations are a critical component of Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods. They reflect and support the wide array of affiliations, backgrounds, and interests of residents. However, the lack of access to meeting rooms and community spaces in apartment neighbourhoods presents a barrier to the functioning of these vital agents of enhanced social capital. Providing more space for gathering could help sustain and foster group affiliations. Flexible space suitable for meetings, activities or classes could help groups to build social capital, foster community organization, and reinforce social bonds within apartment communities. Programs operating from such spaces could include yoga, dance classes, cultural practices, homework groups or community meetings.

Furthermore, flexible spaces could accommodate a rotating series of programs from partners outside the building, offering services for residents of the wider community, such as a local service agency office, language training classes (See Education and Learning), public health education (See Health Services), and cooking classes (See Food Security).

Images:

Opposite, top: Community centre addition to apartment block, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2009

Opposite, middle: Community meeting and activity room, Delft, Netherlands, 2009

Opposite, bottom left: Upgraded lobbies and concierge service in older apartment, Berlin, Germany, 2009

Opposite, bottom right: New children's play area under construction, Etobicoke, Toronto, 2011, courtesy of HIGHRISE.nfb.ca at The National Film Board of Canada



Making it Happen

The following describes the extent to which the current planning framework in apartment neighbourhoods would be supportive, limiting, or neutral, should a community or building owner propose solutions such as these at a particular site.

Official Plan: Supportive

These solutions would generally be supported by current Official Plan policies.

Zoning by-laws: Limiting

Interior alterations to buildings to accommodate new amenities are unaffected by the zoning by-law. However, the running of programs such as a cooking class or homework group, may be permitted. However, replacing space for commercial or institutional purposes are in some cases prohibited and would require a zoning by-law amendment.

Other considerations

Interior alterations to buildings to accommodate new amenities are unaffected by the zoning by-law. Furthermore, the running of programs such as a cooking class or homework group, may be permitted. However, replacing space for commercial or institutional purposes are in some cases prohibited and would require a zoning by-law amendment.

Site plan approval may be required under certain conditions depending on the type and size of the amenity proposed.



4.2 Adapt Units for Growing Families and Changing Households

Context

Many older apartment towers in Toronto provide an important supply of affordable rental housing for families, containing relatively large units of two, three and four bedrooms. These buildings have the flexibility to adapt new internal and external arrangements in response to changing needs. However, the floor plans of apartment buildings have generally remained unchanged since they were constructed.

The following solutions explore options for adapting units to provide more usable space to better accommodate families.

Solutions

Balcony Enclosures:

Nearly all apartment tower units have balconies. While balconies can provide important outdoor space, their use fluctuates with the seasons. To increase the usability of these spaces, balconies may be converted to solariums with operable enclosures to accommodate year round use. If greater indoor space is desired, balconies could be fully enclosed and converted into interior space.

Ground Floor Terraces:

Many units are located on the ground floor. As demand for family housing grows, these units may be provided with outdoor private space in the form of enclosed gardens suited for children's play.

Larger Units

A way to address demand for family housing and the formation of multi-generation households is to combine smaller units to form larger family flats. The form of combination may include units that are side-by-side or units overtop one another. Ground floor units, for example, could be combined vertically and include a ground floor entrance in the form of a townhouse.

Making it Happen

The following describes the extent to which the current planning framework in apartment neighbourhoods would be supportive, limiting, or neutral, should a community or building owner propose solutions such as these at a particular site.

Official Plan: Supportive

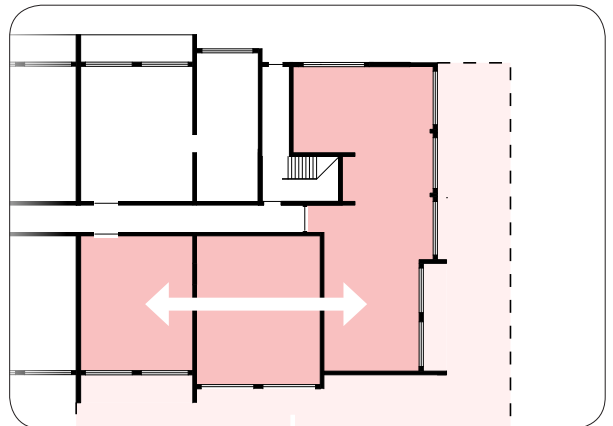
The Toronto Official Plan supports flexibility of housing to accommodate current and future needs of the community. Reconfiguring housing is common practice in areas that the Official Plan identifies as residential.

Zoning by-laws: Limiting

Creating larger suites through the combination of units would change the number of units within a building. This may be contrary to site specific zoning by-laws. As such, it would require a minor variance or zoning by-law amendment. Similarly, enclosing balconies would increase gross floor areas of buildings beyond the limits set by the site's zoning by-law.

Other considerations

A loss of affordable rental units is contrary to affordable housing policies of the City. Reconfiguration of units may be more appropriate in combination with infill housing development to ensure the net number of affordable units is maintained or increased.



Images:

Top, left: Newly enclosed balconies for more living space, Göteborg, Sweden, 2009

Top, right: Private outdoor space on ground floor unit facing common area, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2009

Middle, left: Diagram, creation of larger units for growing families through vertical expansion

Middle, right: Private outdoor space on ground floor unit facing common area, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2009

Bottom, left: Greenhouse addition at base of apartment block, Göteborg, Sweden, 2009

Bottom, right: Diagram, creation of larger units for growing families through horizontal expansion

4.3 Build Resident Social Capital

Context

Studies have found that security of housing is highly linked to a sense of connectedness and social capital in a neighbourhood. (United Way 2011)

Across Toronto, many neighbourhoods have residents' groups that represent the needs and interest of local communities. They can promote community events, community identity, and engagement in local planning issues. Yet, while apartment neighbourhoods are well-established communities that include hundreds of people, with a few exceptions, these neighbourhoods rarely form residents' groups and social capital is often weak.

Solution

Establishing tenant and resident associations could provide a forum for discussion, create a sense of belonging and accountability, promote improvement projects and enhance neighbourhood stewardship.

Robust community organizations have been found to reduce turnover in buildings, attract residents to neighbourhoods, increase a sense of safety, and foster pride in place.

At the scale of apartment neighbourhoods, organizations can be formed that include residents, buildings owners, local business owners, and institutions to engage in long term planning and investment in the neighbourhood. Similar to Business Improvements Area (BIA) groups found elsewhere in the city, these organizations may facilitate capital projects and negotiate cost sharing and implementation.

Such organizations are common throughout Europe in high-rise housing where they have been instrumental in facilitating positive transformation of neighbourhoods.

Making it Happen

The following describes the extent to which the current planning framework in apartment neighbourhoods would be supportive, limiting, or neutral, should a community or building owner propose solutions such as these at a particular site.

Official Plan: Supportive

The functioning of community organizations is beyond the purview of the Official Plan.

Zoning by-laws: Supportive

Organizing a community group would not be affected by zoning by-laws. In limited cases, use of a multi-purpose room is restricted to residents of the building. Also, there may be restrictions providing meeting space in an apartment building for a fee.

Other considerations

The establishment of effective resident or neighbourhood associations requires carefully planning and organization. Outside partners, such as the United Way and other agencies may play a crucial role in facilitating organization as associations are established.

At both the building and neighbourhood scale the City of Toronto may provide tools in the establishing such organizations.



Image:

Community neighbourhood visioning meeting in apartment neighbourhood, Toronto, 2008, courtesy of Jane Farrow

4.4 Expanding Housing Choice, New Tenure Options

Context

The inclusion of Apartment Towers in Toronto's suburban neighbourhoods was originally intended to help provide a mix of housing tenure. Towers provided affordable housing options to residents of various income levels and at different stages in life.

However, in apartment neighbourhoods themselves, there are few options except renting. It has been found that residents of apartment neighbourhoods wish for options to establish equity in their housing (United Way 2011).

With very few ownership options in these neighbourhoods, and with single family home ownership often beyond financial reach, residents face the choice of either forgoing an expectation to build equity or leaving the neighbourhood to seek affordable home ownership elsewhere in the region. This leads to neighbourhood turnover, the loss of established community members, a sense of temporariness, and a lack of long-term investment.

Equity share in housing can also improve community social capital, housing security and long-term commitment to the neighbourhood.

Realizing the benefits of other tenure options would have to be considered in ways that also maintains or expands affordable rental housing. As first homes for many people who move to Canada, expanding Toronto's affordable rental housing stock is important not only for existing tenants but also for future residents to the city.

Solution

Expanding affordable tenure options in Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods may provide opportunities for residents to develop an equity stake in their housing. Tenure options could include collective models such as co-operative housing and co-housing, as well as models for affordable ownership.

Other jurisdictions, such as the UK, provide alternative tenure options in apartment neighbourhoods such as partial ownership models. An example of partial ownership is the 'rent-to-own' model, in which a portion of monthly rent is allocated to an equity stake in the property, which gradually builds over time.

Making it Happen

The following describes the extent to which the current planning framework in apartment neighbourhoods would be supportive, limiting, or neutral, should a community or building owner propose solutions such as these at a particular site.

Official Plan: Limiting

The Toronto Official Plan would be generally supportive of housing which supports people at all stages of life. The Official Plan identifies small-scale retail, service and office uses and compatible infill development as appropriate for apartment neighbourhoods. However, it does not identify these areas as places for population growth. This could deter support for a project that would add more people to the neighbourhood.

Zoning by-laws: Supportive

There would not be an impact on zoning if a change in tenure is not accompanied by a change in building form or new buildings.

Other considerations

As stated in the Toronto Official Plan, the preservation of affordable housing is of primary importance to the City of Toronto. The introduction of alternative tenure models may strengthen neighbourhoods by expanding affordable housing choice. However, models would need to be developed to protect overall affordability and ensure that current tenants directly benefited from such changes. This requires further study.

4.5 Expanding Housing Choice, Infill Housing

Context

Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods are home to increasingly diverse households, including growing families, multi-generational households and the elderly. Despite this diversity, high-rise apartment towers are the dominant, if not the only type of housing available in many of these neighbourhoods.

An opportunity exists to diversify the housing mix in apartment neighbourhoods with the significant areas of open space that surround most apartment towers. In many apartment neighbourhoods, properties are larger than one hectare and more than 80% of the site is unoccupied. Groupings of towers create even larger parcels of several hectares. Introducing infill housing in these spaces could add choices for residents while still leaving an appropriate amount of air and light between buildings.

Solution

The open space within apartment neighbourhoods is able to accommodate a variety of housing alternatives to high-rise living. Mid-rise and grade-related housing, for example, could be designed to meet the needs of two key groups within apartment neighbourhoods – families with young children and the elderly. If carefully positioned using thoughtful urban design, infill buildings could improve the outdoor amenities and built environment (See Built Environment) of apartment neighbourhoods. They could also accommodate new activities, such as shops and services that support an active and thriving neighbourhood.



Making it Happen

The following describes the extent to which the current planning framework in apartment neighbourhoods would be supportive, limiting, or neutral, should a community or building owner propose solutions such as these at a particular site.

Official Plan: Neutral

The Toronto Official Plan would be generally supportive of housing which supports people at all stages of life. The Official Plan identifies small-scale retail, service and office uses and compatible infill development as appropriate for apartment neighbourhoods. However, it does not identify these areas as places for population growth. This could deter support for a project that would add more people to the neighbourhood.

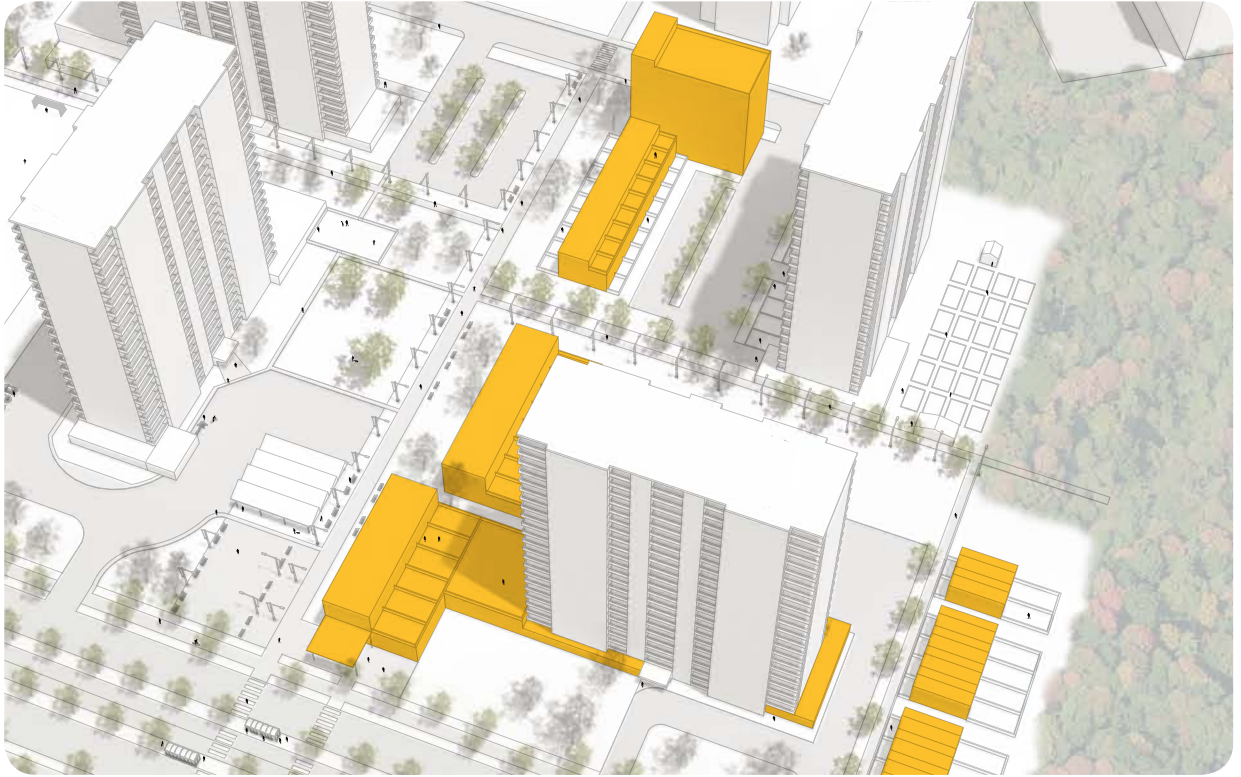
Zoning by-laws: Limiting

Current zoning by-laws would most likely prohibit infill housing. The addition of new housing to these neighbourhood would likely conflict with zoning by-law standards regarding building setbacks, total floor area, and provision of open space. Certain housing types, such as seniors housing, may not even be a permitted use under the zoning by-law, and the amount of parking proposed for new infill development would likely not meet standards set by the original zoning.

Other considerations

The provision of infill housing in Apartment Neighbourhoods requires the development of procedures to ensure maximum benefits accrue to existing residents, including:

- design guidelines to ensure the placement of buildings provides added value for overall neighbourhood design, such as creating usable community outdoor space, paths and connections;
- incentives for not-for-profit and affordable development models to provide needed affordable housing options;
- mechanisms to ensure that infill developments support community neighbourhood improvements projects; and
- provisions for long term neighbourhood planning so that infill housing and mixed-use developments contribute to the achievement of long term neighbourhood visions.



Images:

Opposite: New infill low-rise housing at base of apartment block, London, UK, 2009

Top, middle left: Diagram, infill housing of various types within typical apartment neighbourhood, Toronto

Middle right: Infill mid-rise mixed-use development, Parkway Forest, Toronto, 2010

Bottom right: Infill mid-rise housing and mixed-use development in apartment neighbourhood, London, UK, 2009

Bottom left: New mid-rise housing and commercial addition to apartment block, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2006

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