

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 7: Food Security

How does food security affect health?

A nutritious diet and adequate food supply are central for good health. Food security means having the physical, social and economic ability to access sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and food preferences that allow for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2003).

In Canada, food insecurity is more prevalent in urban areas compared to rural areas (Health Canada, 2011). In Toronto, 10.8% of households reported moderate or severe food insecurity (TPH, 2011). Poor access to healthy foods has been associated with:

- **The Design of the Built Environment** - Many people living in Toronto's inner suburbs find it difficult to access healthy foods because of distance, physical barriers such as highways, lack of access to public transit, as well as poverty (Martin Prosperity Institute, 2010). Many of the apartment neighbourhoods in Toronto are located in areas considered "food deserts" with little options for healthy and affordable food within walking distance.
- **Poor Physical and Mental Health** – Individuals who experience food insecurity have a greater chance of developing multiple chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, food allergies, and major depression and distress (Vozoris & Tarasuk, 2003). Poor nutrition in childhood has also been associated with a range of behavioural, emotional and academic problems (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010).
- **Increased Use of Health Services** - Food insecurity has a negative impact on health services because individuals with nutritional deficiencies tend to be less resistant to infections, recover more slowly, have more diseases, longer hospital stays, and incur higher health care costs (Che & Chen, 2001).
- **Vulnerable Populations** – Food insecurity is higher in households: with children led by female lone parents; with lower incomes; receiving social assistance, worker's compensation, or employment insurance; with low levels of education; of Aboriginals and recent immigrants; and in which the dwelling was not owned (Health Canada, 2011).

The Opportunity in Apartment Neighbourhoods

Apartment neighbourhoods have the potential to provide opportunities to foster a healthy food culture. Communities in apartment neighbourhoods, much like other well established city neighbourhoods, have the potential for creating a healthy food culture through informal gatherings, community kitchens, community gardens, fresh food shops, cafes and restaurants and local knowledge transfer. These activities can produce a variety of health and social benefits:

- They can make fresh and healthy foods more accessible to people in apartment neighbourhoods;
- They provide jobs and economic opportunities for members of the community;
- They can make culturally appropriate foods more readily accessible; and
- They can build social cohesion by giving people places to interact socially.

However, at present, there are a number of challenges that are preventing these opportunities and limiting these activities:

- There are few places set aside for outdoor events and community gatherings despite the substantial amount of open space that is typical of apartment neighbourhoods. The current zoning by-laws do not permit the sale of food in apartment neighbourhoods with the exception of small convenience stores.
- While a small percentage of Apartment Towers contain tuck shops, these stores, like convenience stores elsewhere, do not sell the volume of produce needed to maintain affordable prices, or are not well equipped to carry fresh food items. As a result less healthy pre-packaged food is a more affordable, accessible, option.

The following solutions examine options in fostering healthy food culture in apartment neighbourhoods throughout Toronto.

7.1 Provide facilities for collective cooking

7.2 Introduce Outdoor Fresh Food Markets

7.3 Expand or Introduce Green Grocers

7.4 Introduce Community Gardens / Urban Agriculture

7.1 Provide facilities for collective cooking

Context

The social networks of apartment neighbourhood communities can be a source of mutual support, and an aid in developing a healthy food culture. Living in close proximity, food preparation (and enjoyment) can be shared among neighbours. While opportunities for collective cooking, such as barbeques, picnics, and backyard dinner parties, exist elsewhere in the city, they are generally rare in apartment neighbourhoods.

Solution

The large outdoor grounds of apartment neighbourhoods provide several opportunities for collective cooking, including barbeques, pizza ovens and tandoori ovens. Paired with banquet tables and other seating, these outdoor features could facilitate regular community events and meals.

The provision of an indoor community kitchen could accommodate year round collective cooking, facilitating cooking groups and cooking classes. A commercial grade kitchen could allow residents to run catering companies and other food-related commercial enterprises.

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

Minor modifications to landscaping to allow outdoor cooking would generally be permitted. Current zoning by-laws would likely prohibit construction of larger structures, such as covered cooking areas or ovens, especially if the structure is enclosed.

Other considerations

Business licensing and health and safety regulations would have to be addressed for food preparation and storage if food was being prepared for sale.





Image:

Opposite: Community kitchen, Toronto, courtesy of Recipe for Community

Top: New Community Kitchen, public cooking demonstration and community festival, East Scarborough Storefront, 2012. Courtesy of Paul Dowsett, Sustainable T.O.

7.2 Introduce Outdoor Fresh Food Markets

Context

Local outdoor markets, specializing in fresh food, are common features of many local communities, villages and neighbourhoods throughout Toronto. Furthermore, a resurgence of fresh food trucks and delivery, such as those by Toronto's Food Share organization, provides home delivered seasonal local fresh food. Today these activities are largely absent from apartment neighbourhoods.

Solution

Apartment neighbourhoods contain large surface parking lots which may be converted to accommodate fresh food markets on a monthly, weekly, or daily basis. Similarly, existing surface parking could accommodate food trucks for scheduled visits.

By providing seating, shade, and access to a ground floor washroom within the apartment building, food sales in parking lots could provide access to fresh food and create an enlivened market atmosphere at the base of existing towers. To further support the market, small auxiliary structures providing storage and additional infrastructures may be considered.



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

Current zoning would not permit commercial activities such as fresh outdoor food markets. If vendor stalls were limited in size (such as removable tables) they likely would not be subject to zoning. However any auxiliary building added to a parking lot to support food sales would likely violate provisions typical of apartment neighbourhood zoning.

Other considerations

A fresh food market would require business licenses and would be subject to other regulations, such as those as relating to health and safety.

Commercial waste collection would need to be accommodated.

The logistics of a market would need to be managed by property owners, particularly the temporary loss of parking spaces. Community partners could help in management planning and organization.



Images:

Opposite: Fresh food kiosk in apartment neighbourhood, Halle Neustadt, Germany, 2006

Top left: Fresh food market, Tower Hamlets, London, UK, 2006

Top left: Fresh food market, Stockholm, Sweden, 2011

Bottom left: Outdoor fresh food market, St. Jamestown, Toronto, courtesy of TRO

Bottom right: Swiss Cottage farmers' market in apartment neighbourhood, London, UK, 2009

7.3 Expand or Introduce Green Grocers

Context

Access to fresh produce through local green grocers or grocery stores as is common in Toronto's older neighbourhoods and newer tower communities such as City Place, Regent Park or Liberty Village.

In contrast, older tower apartment neighbourhoods lack convenient, walkable access to fresh food shops, largely due to current zoning by-laws prohibiting commercial activity in these neighbourhoods.

The bulk of apartment neighbourhoods are served by malls or plazas located beyond comfortable walking distance on roads that are often intimidating to pedestrians. [Hess 2011]. As many residents walk or take transit as their primary means of travel, this condition presents a daily barrier to accessing to healthy and fresh food.

Solution

A fresh food shop or grocer could be introduced in the base of existing buildings, an existing tuck shop could be expanded, or a new standalone building could be constructed as part of a new mixed-use housing development (See Housing).

Paired with outdoor food stands and seating, fresh food shops could also contribute to social exchange and community vibrancy.

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 support small-scale local services and commercial activity in apartment neighbourhoods. A larger scale store may not be supported.

Zoning by-laws: Limiting

Existing zoning by-laws would most likely not permit a proposal for a retail store such as a green grocer. A grocery store use may not be permitted in most apartment neighbourhood by-laws. The associated parking requirements and any new building footprint would also not be permitted currently.

Other considerations

A new green grocer would be subject to the building code, and other relevant health, business and safety regulations.

If a new structure is proposed, the project could be subject to site plan approval to address landscaping, access and specifics of the building.

Commercial waste collection would need to be accommodated.



Images:

Top and bottom left: New grocery store at base of apartment block with outdoor vending, Moscow, Russia, 2006
Bottom, right: Green grocer at base of tower block, London, UK, 2006

7.4 Introduce Community Gardens / Urban Agriculture

Context

Small-scale urban agriculture has been found to increase social capital as well as provide a yield of healthy food for the local community. Gardening, both for food and pleasure, is practiced in neighbourhoods throughout this city. However, apartment neighbourhoods provide few opportunities for gardening or allotments for planting vegetables.

Solution

The tower in the park format of apartment neighbourhoods provides opportunities for small-scale urban agriculture using small-scale community gardens and allotments.

Several apartment neighbourhoods in Toronto are already engaging in small-scale projects. These efforts could be expanded through the provision of auxiliary garden sheds to allow for tool storage, infrastructure for irrigation, local markets to sell yields, and a more robust network of community organizations to facilitate partnerships within the neighbourhood and beyond.

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 has little discussion on small scale local food production. It does recognize the importance of ensuring “adequate amounts of safe, nutritious, culturally acceptable food are available to all (page 1-4)”. It also recognizes the importance of preserving high quality farmland as part of re-urbanizing to accommodate regional growth, and addressing food scarcity when upgrading neighbourhoods (pages 2-2, 2-22).

Zoning by-laws: Limiting

While small scale food production would not be affected by zoning, the provision of new structures for food production and the sale of produce on site is likely be prohibited by current zoning bylaws.

Other considerations

Site plan approval may be needed to address issues such as drainage and grading. Community organization and neighbourhood partnerships would also be central to an agriculture program. Other considerations include security, waste, logistics and coordination with property owners, residents and partners



Images:

Top: Greenhouse addition at base of apartment block, Göteborg, Sweden (Gårdstens Bostäde 2007)

Bottom left: Community garden in apartment neighbourhood, London, UK, 2006

Bottom right: Community garden at East Scarborough Storefront, Toronto, 2012

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