

The People Make The Place

BY SHIREEN SENO

A DUNDAS-SHERBOURNE INFILL HOUSING PROJECT IN TORONTO'S GIVES THE CLICHÉD PHRASE SOME MUCH-NEEDED MEANING

Heading east, away from the downtown Toronto core, I begin to see more of the sky. The houses look older, humbler, homier. Across the street from the house numbered 285 Sherbourne, I survey the street for some sign of A.J. Diamond and Barton Myers' concrete block. Then, as I walk south, a tan-coloured concrete building peaks at me from between the houses. How could anyone tear apart this neighbourhood's tight-knit fabric?

Permit Le Corbusier, if you will, to make the introductions: "The harmonious city must first be planned by experts who understand the science of urbanism. They must work out their plans in total freedom from partisan pressures and special interests; once their plans are formulated, they must be implemented without opposition."

That being said, Toronto was to become no stranger to the elaborate plans of urban "experts". In Regent Park, St. James Town, Moss Park, it was as if Le Corbusier's 1925 Voisin Plan came to life in Toronto, not Paris. Ironically, such tall towers standing free on green lawns with streets designed to heal life, seemed to take it.

Urban planners were ever on about "blight", speaking of it as a disease, old buildings its worst symptom. They held firmly to the Modernist movement's Utopian decree, convinced that Toronto's "slums" could be cleaned up by wiping them out entirely. Toronto's Eugene Faludi wrote in 1947, "the sources of the disease will remain to infect these areas. ... Rehabilitation can be accomplished only by the wholesale attack on the problem involving replanning and rebuilding on a large scale." Houses, streets, whole neighbourhoods were demolished in the name of "urban renewal". Planners seemed to ignore that these were not merely buildings, but people's homes.



April 5, 1973 Protesters halted demolition of the old houses and forced the City to offer alternatives to eviction for construction of high-rise housing.

“The key is to make the environment of greater significance rather than replacing it.”



1
Le Corbusier he hated its complex multiplicity and what seemed to him its mess and confinement.

2
His 1925 Voisin Plan for Paris

3
Aerial view of the whole Dundas-Sherbourne complex; the new, low-rise high-density apartment building with soaring downtown towers in the backdrop.

4
Civic activist John Sewell in 1973.

For the residents of the Dundas-Sherbourne area in which sixteen houses were slated for demolition, the only experts on their neighbourhood, they decided, were the people themselves.

Sherbourne Lanes was the result of one of the most collaborative housing projects in Toronto. Hailed as a fresh approach to urban planning and densification, it was the first project by the City’s new non-profit housing company, CityHome, and the first infill project to be constructed in the city. It received a Heritage Canada National Honour Award, a City of Toronto Non-Profit Housing Corporation Award, and an Ontario Association of Architects Award of Excellence. But don’t think it was always as pretty as it sounds.

In early 1971, the block of aging houses on Sherbourne, dating from 1840 to 1930, were due to fall for two 28-story apartment towers. Area residents became involved in formulating alternative plans when it became apparent that the houses could be renovated, and were of value as part of a larger complex as well as in themselves. The following spring, The Time and Place Group, dedicated to the preservation of old dwellings and named after John Sewell’s book with the same aim, challenged the application for a zoning change at the Ontario

Municipal Board. The application was refused, but the developers drew up a plan for a single tower that conformed to existing bylaws. Again, the Time and Place Group, along with the Seaton Area Residents’ Association, objected, claiming it was yet another instance of thoughtless, and apparently unnecessary destruction of the city’s architectural heritage. Public pressure to save the neighbourhood mounted.

The people pressed City Council to buy the houses. In January 1973, Major David Crombie hired the firm of Diamond and Myers to survey the existing site and design an alternative low-rise scheme by February 15, the date Mr. Braidia promised to hold demolition off until. With the help of financial consultants and discussion with neighbourhood residents, the architects responded with a proposal for renovation of existing housing and a six-story “infill scheme” of high density but low-rise in form, with accommodation equal to that of the towers. “We can maintain the neighbourhood, preserve the streetscape as important social facts, and we won’t traumatize surrounding blocks as high-rise would,” Diamond maintained. “The key is to make the environment of greater significance rather than replacing it.” The innovative “infill” concept had only recently been proposed by his firm for a similar site on Beverley Street.

5
Rear view, between the renovated houses, right, and infill housing at left.

6
Existing houses, and the infill housing exposed in between.

7
Aerial view of the whole Dundas-Sherbourne complex; the new, low-rise high-density apartment building with soaring downtown towers in the backdrop.

“...old buildings, mixed uses, busy sidewalks, and dense communities were people’s places. Places that planners called slums. Some citizens called them home.”

Complaints by the tenants and roomers in the houses put the tower project temporarily on hold; the developers, Fred Braid and Nu-Style Construction Ltd., ordered wreckers in anyway. At 7 A.M. on the morning of April 5, 1973, some 80 protesters got there first, among them Aldermen John Sewell and Karl Jaffary and urbanologist Jane Jacobs. Jacobs told picketers of a by-law by which demolition could go on only behind a safety fence. One was up. “They can’t do this if the hoardings are down. Here, give me a hand,” she said, and they ripped it down while A.J. Diamond and Major Crombie tried to work out a deal with the developer—buying enough time to save those houses.

For Sherbourne Lanes, it was truly the people who made the place. The tenacious efforts of local residents and concerned groups and individuals in the conception, realization, and operation of the project, preserved not only the houses themselves, but the lives of the people who lived there. Tearing down those very houses would have disrupted the lives of the people and very intimate, homey nature of the neighbourhood. High-rise developments took the people off the street, as urban planners firmly believed that the street was the cause of all the city’s ills. To Jane Jacobs, old buildings, mixed uses, busy sidewalks, and dense communities were people’s places. Places that planners called slums. Some citizens called them home.

“I was amazed and shocked when the City didn’t listen to the people’s arguments, when it said that no matter what the evidence, no matter what the people say about how much they’re going to be hurt, the urban renewal plan was going ahead and the area was going to be wiped out. I had no idea that governments ever did things like that. But I did have the idea that they should not,” wrote John Sewell in his book, *Up Against City Hall* (1972). Civic activists like Jacobs and Sewell encouraged people to keep their homes, shape their city, care for it, and make it a place fit for rich human lives: their own, and lives to come.



They got the City involved and concerned about housing in Toronto. The 1973 “Living Room” study proposed that the City become involved in construction and land banking for low income housing, and that this housing should be integrated with the existing fabric of neighbourhoods. A specific agency—Cityhome—was set up to develop affordable housing, and the policies were established to encourage non-profit housing cooperatives, to coordinate all forms of housing development, and to find ways of maintaining a residential mix in the city.

The block of houses from 241 to 285 Sherbourne Street were not only important to the Toronto Historical Board and the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario for representing every decade of Toronto’s growth from 1840 to 1930. The original proposal for two 24-story Y-shaped towers would have overlooked and overshadowed everything for blocks to either side. Such scale would simply disrupt the city’s traditional Victorian fabric of the neighbourhood. And above all, the social fabric.

The completed project ended up housing more people more affordably, and with more civic sense, than the towers would have. Such an innovative way of providing high density housing in downtown Toronto proved that development was not bound with demolition. This scheme proved that a high density residential project could be carefully inserted without disrupting the scale, material qualities, and urban virtues of the existing fabric. These were renovated to accommodate multiple units, and a six-storey apartment block was discreetly inserted at the rear of the houses’ original deep lots, preserving Sherbourne Street’s historic character.

The Dundas-Sherbourne project also showed that all buildings, in this instance, could be retained, infill added, and the cost would be no greater. In fact, the greater the degree of conservation of existing structures, the cheaper the anticipated costs. \$200,000 in production costs separated the most conservative from the most



March 5, 1973 Views of the original Sherbourne streetscape, right, and the narrow lane behind the infill housing, above.

destructive scheme. It was also the most financially friendly for tenants. With “a good social mix” as the first priority, the project was designed to house low-income families, senior citizens, and the existing roomer population of the neighbourhood. The architects proved that moderate income levels could be kept low because operating costs for new construction and renovation could be held under that of high-rises.

Dundas-Sherbourne was spared from destruction under the urban experiment in social hygiene, advocated by “master” planners and architects, which resulted in precisely that sterility associated with disinfection. The project makes an effective point about the social and economic values of working with the existing fabric of the inner city. While preserving the scale, material qualities, and urban values of the neighbourhood, it allowed those very residents of the area, income aside, to live, work, and grow in the dense urban environment.

Sherbourne Lanes was the first of many truly “city” housing projects: public, most modestly scaled, set into the existing urban fabric. Reinforcing architecture’s primary aim in providing people with homes, the project is a testament to the feasibility of the high density, human scale residential community. @

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Credits + Photography

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Toronto Reference Library Picture Collection (Le Corbusier; John Sewell, 1973)

All other photographs are from the above sources.

