

FORUM

Fear of high buildings
groundless

Tall structures can curb urban sprawl



(top) The design of the Ideal building on College Street blends nicely with the neighbouring property. (right) This billboard illustrates what the Ideal building will look like when it's complete



Howard Cohen and I have lunch together sometimes. He's the only developer I can talk to — he "gets" the city, rides the streetcars, passes me clippings from the New York Times and, like a journalist, thinks he can earn his living and make the town a better place at the same time.

Cohen is a former City of Toronto planner who now builds condominiums. Many are in or near Gleaner territory, among them 20 Niagara St., the nearly-completed District Lofts near Richmond St. W. and Spadina Ave., and the Ideal, now under construction on College St., just west of Bathurst.

Without exception the buildings, which have been designed by a team headed by architect Peter Clewes, are

clean and contemporary — boldly, bravely so, when you consider how most developers seem to think the public only wants "wedding cake" condos: buildings dripping curlicues and baroque ornament.

The Ideal is in a better class. It has potential to live up to its name, as good design in and of itself — there's lots of glass, and glass is great — and it is a nicely-fitted addition to the bustling streetcar strip it will be part of.

On College St. the Ideal's front — clean and square like old factories nearby — rises right from the sidewalk, continuing the shop facades. Up a few floors the Ideal steps back and then back again, yielding open terraces for residents and angles that let more sun down to the street.

At the back, the building's nine or

so storeys step down until the Ideal blends at roof-level with the single-family homes to the south on Markham St.

It was a nice enough meeting that nary a word of opposition was heard from those neighbours by the time the plans were made final.

Ideal, eh? By all rights, Howard Cohen should be the hero of neighbourhood groups.

But at the moment he is not.

Cohen's firm, Context Development Inc., is the one that's butting heads with various groups over plans for a condominium on the grounds of St. James Cathedral, east of Yonge St. at Adelaide and Church streets.

It's all a bit ironic: Context was chosen by the church's board, from a number of potential developers, because of the higher-grade city-building that the company has been doing. Now they're in the hot seat.

Complicating factors, hugely, is the historic nature of the site, including the proposed demolition of the attractive parish hall there, and the presence of an old burial ground.

There is no easy way to resolve these matters.

But a key anxiety here is a deep-rooted bias against tall buildings. The original proposal for the site called for a 34-storey tower.

Enough said. You can hear the anger and catcalls rising — the arguments about increased traffic; the angst about "crowding" in the city; the fury over the sacred god — the church — under siege by the secular one, money.

Yet time and experience and change are telling us our fear is unjustified, and ultimately harmful to the city.

Building up, not out, is the solution to a range of issues related to sprawl, transportation, pollution, long-term stewardship of land and, closer to our streets, improved quality of urban and community life.

The Ideal shows how it can be done — what a long way Toronto's planners, architects, and better developers have come since the 1960s and '70s, when angst about tall buildings reached its apex in an emergency height limit slapped on the city's downtown development.

At that time the norm, indeed the requirement, was to blockbust — buy up the houses, shops, everything on entire blocks, bulldoze them and erect the era's famous "towers in the park."

"Open spaces" were somehow to redeem the buildings' height. But at places like St. Jamestown near Parliament and Wellesley streets, the "parks" became empty, windswept, and ugly. All the demolition and destruction, and the disappointing city spaces that resulted, earned tall buildings a bad rap.

Fast-forward to 2001. Design principles have changed, but the terror over tall remains. Witness public upset over plans for two tower condominiums at Yonge St. and Eglinton Ave.

Here too is interesting irony.

The progressive left that once decried development and opposed towers now supports greater urban density — "Mainstreeting," or building more compactly, building up not across, infilling, not sprawling.

The right-wing now owns the kind of properties it once blockbusted and has embraced NIMBY — not in my back yard. The headline on a *National*

Post story about Minto's Yonge-Eglinton point-tower project said simply, "Up is Down."

Yet neighbourhoods are not threatened; those battles are still won. The need to weigh scale and context is embedded — as Howard Cohen has demonstrated. "You don't want point towers at College and Bathurst," he told me over coffee in his office in the Ryrie Building on Yonge St.

Some problems, like shadows, that have scendipitous solutions. A tall

thin tower, for instance, may yield a twenty-minute shadow; a lower, long slab-building can cast darkness that lasts all day.

Some issues, such as traffic and parking, are proved moot with high buildings. Witness the mid- and high-rise Spadina Rd.

and St. George St. apartment houses, where garage space can be rented by the public because many tenants living close to the subway, or who walk, don't have cars.

Finally, at another level, the architectural opportunities created by tall buildings — for grandness, for innovation, for buildings that support modern life and embrace urbanity — are many, and not always predictable.

One of New York's best-known images is of the 1846 Trinity Church at Wall St. and Broadway, with its spire nestled among the skyscrapers.

In Toronto, "I walk under these buildings, and it's freedom," Inez Zanger, a guest from Switzerland, told me last month while we walked through Commerce Court, where Toronto skyscrapers reach their peak. "Looking up, you see that anything is possible."

Yet fear of heights persists in Toronto's heart. "Sometimes," Cohen tells me, "it seems like people (downtown) want Mississauga in the city."

It's time we grew up.

CITYBUILDING



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