

# Community involvement can strengthen a development

Tone of ARA AGM more lawyerly than militant

By ALFRED HOLDEN

Fear is an impediment to redevelopment in the city, and yet also a useful catalyst. What are people afraid of? Height and shadows, traffic, ugliness, privacy loss, other things real and imagined—impact and change in the neighbourhood.

"NIMBY"—for Not In My Back Yard—describes when anxiety and resistance tip beyond good sense, and amount to selfishness. As in, "We have enough, how to do you say it, low-income, we have enough of them."

At least Colleen Miller, the Scarborough woman who said that, was being honest, speaking to a *Toronto Star* reporter last month. Her neighbours invoked the more polite, less truthful "we demand a park"

mantra, as they all fought against letting Habitat for Humanity build affordable housing on a city-owned piece of land.

Shame on their NIMBYism.

Still, it's easy to forget that much opposition to redevelopment of land in the city is rooted in hard experience and vivid memory, and nowhere more than in our own midtown Toronto neighbourhoods.

Thirty-three years ago, the battle to stop the Spadina Expressway epitomized citizen rejection of planning policy that obliterated fine-grained city districts.

The halting of Spadina was memorable enough for its drama, though its true significance was how it tipped Toronto away from the abyss and instead toward greatness and prosperity.

How so?

Stopping Spadina left intact what freeways, in most big American cities, were destroying—valuable neighbourhoods and vital downtowns, and associated patterns of living where people liked to walk and use public transit.

Less remembered are other clashes over how the city was to be built, notably developers' hunger, for a time also encouraged by public policy, to "blockbust"—buy up entire blocks, demolish everything, and build a tall tower or wide slab in the middle.

"It was still the era of massive destruction of neighbourhoods—all the downtown neighbourhoods were under threat," remembers Howard Cohen, now a developer building in the Annex, but who was on the city's planning staff in 1970, and would head up neighbourhood planning during the reformist mid-1970s.

Given this history, it's not surprising there was a measure of unease in the air at the annual general meeting (AGM) of the Annex Residents Association (ARA) on Mar. 30.

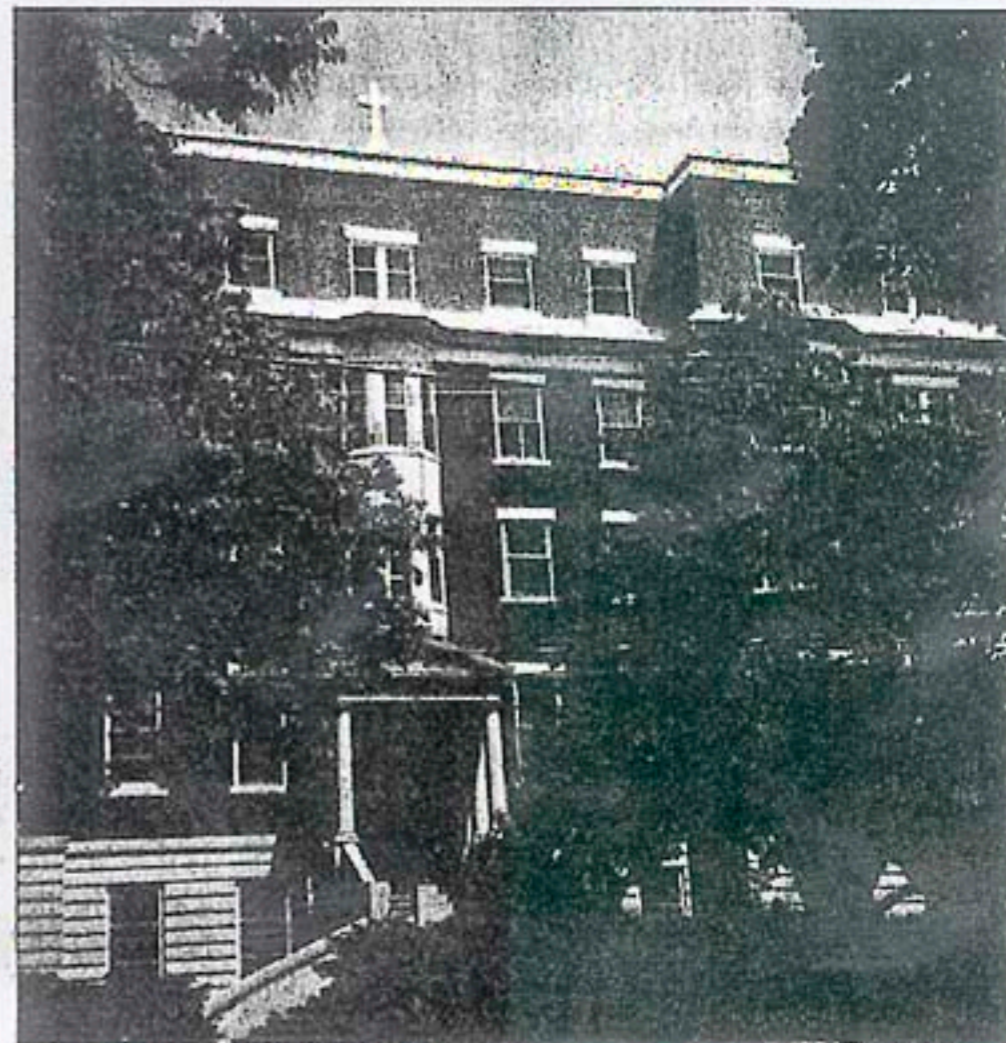
For a long time the word "intensification" seemed only wishful planning jargon, denoting a vague hope the city's vitality, and public transit's appeal and efficiency, could be boosted by filling in urban parking lots and underused corners.

In March, with the arrival of the ARA's newsletter in many of our mailboxes, the reality of intensification hit home. It listed a dozen major development projects, at various stages in the approvals process, in our neighbourhoods on Howland, Madison, and Brunswick avenues, Bloor Street, Walmer Road behind 100 Spadina Rd. (a complex project, may it improve—fingers crossed), and Avenue Road. The midtown area seemed to have quietly slipped into a new era of development.

But telling was the character of dissent in the meeting room at Royal St. George's College at 120 Howland Ave., one of the very addresses slated for change. It was more lawyerly than militant; more concerned with attaining quality than upset over quantity; seemingly wise to the ways citizens could—and people seemed confident would—help shape these developments.

A case in point was Cohen's own project, Context Development's plans to transform the former Loretto Abbey building on Brunswick Avenue into a condominium, with additional infill.

At the ARA meeting, it was pre-



The former Loretto Abbey building (shown above), now being converted into condos, is one of the many local housing developments being watched closely by Annex residents.

sented in some detail, but garnered few negative comments; previous meetings seemed to have produced consensus between developer and neighbourhood; we heard how a mature tree was saved and plans altered to preserve more privacy for longtime neighbours.

These points are a comment on a number of things, perhaps the company's skill at negotiating with residents earlier (and I see by last month's *Gleaner* they bought a full-page ad, hoping some of us will like

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it enough to buy in, literally). But also the vastly higher quality of the developments now, compared to during the blockbusting era (the Loretto buildings are being preserved. The ad showed detail from the historic main building's cornice, marching history with the brave, if vague, statement, "Nothing endures but change").