Putting Toronto's Best Self Forward

A good basic precept is be yourself. Another good precept is become your best self. That isn’t quite as basic, because if you don’t accept and have some understanding of yourself, and some self-esteem, you can’t become your best self.

It is the same with cities. That’s what the Housing on Main Streets competition was about—Toronto being itself and becoming its best self, instead of working at cross purposes to its nature.

It wasn’t many years ago that Toronto, like other cities, was in a kind of delayed adolescent dither about its identity, in which it asked, “What’s my type? Am I the homey kind or the suave sophisticated type?”

You can still see results of the planning fashions the city tried on. Among the more unfortunate are relics of attempts to expunge linear main streets in favor of commercial nodes. You can see here and there these sad little places, dreary corner parking lots with dismal little sprawls behind them—so different from streets with vitality and dignity.
Toronto's main streets are more than commercial centers for
the neighborhoods through
which they pass—they are a
framework that holds the city
together. The darkened seg-
ments represent areas in which
the potential for more housing
has been studied.

A few years ago this attitude changed; planners began to
observe, acknowledge and admire Toronto's main streets and
to consider the advantages of adding housing to them.

Toronto is not different from other cities in having main
streets, but those streets are especially important here, being
part of the most basic "self" of the city. The city has many
selves, as we acknowledge when we speak of the neigh-
borhoods, the downtown and the waterfront. But what holds
them together is the structure of the city, the grid upon
which the city is built, with the main streets occurring every
so often in both directions.

There are historical reasons why Toronto was laid out as a
grid and why particular streets on this grid became main
streets. But it isn't for historical reasons that these main streets
retain their importance and vitality. They provide a congenial
form for the city; if they hadn't, they would have disinte-
grated. They would have blurred. But they remain the bones
of the city and have much to do with its personality.

One reason the main streets are so congenial and resilient
is their easy adaptability, not only over time but also place.
You can board a main street's streetcar or bus and pass
through an encyclopedia of neighborhoods. The street takes
on different mances as it passes through different places,
adjusting to what is around it. This is a large part of the secret
of these streets' vitality.

Another asset is their enduring hospitality to small land
owners and small enterprises, important to the success that so
many immigrants have attained after arriving in Toronto.
These streets have been vital in giving commercial opportuni-
ties to immigrants and also giving to others the opportunity to
share in what immigrants bring.

Another characteristic is that they are predominantly low-
rise. I think how different they would be if they had walls
of skyscrapers throwing great shadows on the neighborhoods
behind them. But as it is, they don't blot their neighbor-
hoods either with gracious shadows or with impersonal
scale. They fit very well. It's surprising how you can turn the
corner from a more serene residential street to a main street
and be at ease with the change to commerce and bustle.

The main streets are also very democratic places. Every-
body uses them. All kinds of activities take place along them.
At their best they contain no end of conveniences and sur-
prises in compact, short spaces.

Another virtue is their long continuity, which makes differ-
ent parts of the city so accessible to all. There is a romantic
notion that a city ought to be a series of insular villages. You
don't really have a village if you attempt that, and you lose
the advantages of being in a city. One can so easily share in
the whole life of the city by traveling these streets.
Late nineteenth century.

Early twentieth century.

1930s

1960s
For these streets to be at their best, they clearly need help in places; they need intensification, in particular. While they should be kept low-rise because that has so much to do with their human scale, hospitality to small enterprises, convenience and other characteristics, they are too low-scale and thin in many instances. A single story is not high enough. And a gap in which nothing is built is too low-scale, even if it has some automobiles on it. If you look, you see many stretches of continuous four- and five-story buildings, and in some cases six-story buildings, that retain excellent human scale, work well and express all the other assets of these streets.

We should begin filling in the missing teeth with four- or five-story buildings, with retail on the first floor and housing up above, because that is the nature of our main streets.

People who have never lived on busy streets seem to be frightened of two things: noise and parking. Let me try to lay those fears to rest. I lived in a three-story house on a street in New York, with more noise, more traffic and more dirt than anything you can imagine in Toronto. I can vouch that this house was not noisy, (the street was terribly noisy) because the building itself, as long as the front windows were closed, was a buffer against the noise. This is why the gardens and courtyards behind buildings on main streets are typically so serene, surprising and delightful.

The other bugaboo is parking. It has become the practice, when a city falls into a dither about what kind of city it will be, to decide that, "I will be a city that solves the automobile problem." Well, solving the parking problem, I assure you, is never going to solve the automobile problem. There is no way that parking can deal with the many issues and difficulties of automobiles in the city. If we try to put the burden of solving the whole business of transport on providing parking places, we are going to be lost.

One of the many good decisions the organizers of this competition made was not mandating numbers of parking spaces per units of housing. One of their objectives, instead, was to explore new the changes in zoning and other laws that may be advisable, including those respecting parking.

It is difficult, when regulations are already in place, to know what better solutions they may be blocking, hence, to know which are worth keeping and which are in our way. One of the advantages of this competition can be the guidance it affords toward re-evaluating, re-assessing and remaking zoning laws and other regulations so the main streets can be helped, not hampered, in fulfilling their best potential. In the process, can provide very much needed housing in a form that saves energy, farmlands and long commuting times.