

#### **14. Highrise, Lowrise: Reflections on Contemporary Architecture: April 24-28**

As the plane now descends into the Billy Bishop Airport on the far west end of the chain of the Toronto Islands, you have on the right side a full view of Toronto's dramatic skyline: an at least one-kilometre long tier of glass towers stretching east right along the shoreline—this did not even exist two decades ago—and a glance farther eastwards reveals the 550-plus metres tall CN Tower dating from the 70's, at that time the tallest self-standing structure in the world and behind this there is the city's downtown with its many dozens of other highrises, veritable skyscrapers many of them, some of them more than 300 metres tall, built from the mid-60's to the present. Massive sheets of glass in various configurations catch the dazzling sunlight at various angles during the day and at night the skyline is lit up thousands of illuminations. It is a skyline that dwarfs that of Canada's second largest city, Montreal, and even that of the third largest, Vancouver, and equals, in my opinion, those of Manhattan and downtown Chicago.

During the ten years I lived in Toronto what is now sometimes called the Manhattanization of the city was not as yet evident. When I arrived in Toronto in September 1968 to start on my PhD in Classical Studies at the University of Toronto, downtown sported the New City Hall with its elegant matching and curving twin towers on Queen Street West, completed in 1964 and replacing the nearby Late Victorian Old City Hall; and there were also the much taller black-coloured twin towers of the Toronto Dominion Centre on King St. East, completed in 1965 and designed by Ludwig Mies van Rohe in the then popular "Form Follows Function" International Style. Highrise residential towers were scattered throughout the city, along for instance the Don Valley Parkway, but they were far and between. During the 1970's only two more supertall buildings, those of the Imperial Bank of Commerce and the Royal Bank, went up in the downtown. For three years, together with Brian in 1970-1 and with Scott in 1976-8, I lived in two relatively small highrise buildings of no more than eleven stories high, in each occupying a one-bedroom apartment on the tenth floor which commanded a fine view of part of the city. The apartment I shared with Scott on Isabella Street offered a particularly panoramic view of east Toronto, with St James town, the complex of tall residential towers of public housing, looming in the foreground. I have nostalgic memories of all my living arrangements during this decade, sharing a flat with an earlier friend, Peter, in the West End in 1968-70, and then with Brian in 1971-2 a one-bedroom apartment in a small vaguely Art Deco style building on Vaughan Road near its intersection with St Clair Avenue West, and finally from 1972 to 1975, an upper floor two-bedroom apartment in a small four-plex in the East End.

In Toronto of the seventies, which comprised almost in its entirety the terms of office of mayors David Crombie and John Sewell, an anti-development spirit reigned supreme, bringing about, among others, a halt in the construction of Spadina Expressway, which exists now only in the truncated form of the Allen Expressway. All this started to change when Art Eggleton assumed the reigns of office in 1980. By this time I had moved with Scott to Nova Scotia, but each of my frequent visits to Toronto has impressed upon me the city's accelerating transformation, and over the past two decades in particular it seems indeed to have come in a whirlwind.

The plain International Style of architecture is still ubiquitous in Toronto's highrises built over the past few decades but it often incorporates some eclecticism, thus avoiding sheer monotony: thus we see curved instead straight vertical or horizontal lines, noticeably tinted (e.g. bronzed) instead of clear glass windows, and striking touches of Art Deco design reminiscent of Manhattan's Empire State Building. Lofty highrises, both commercial and residential, including supertall buildings, now dot all of metropolitan Toronto, indeed the entire Greater Toronto area; thus, the skyline of downtown Mississauga, as seen from a distance, appears like an only slightly reduced version of downtown Toronto. Impressive ultra-modern cityscapes loom everywhere in the GTA. Those of downtown, eastern and western Toronto can be admired from the wide balcony of Brian's 20<sup>th</sup> floor apartment on Isabella Street near the intersection of Yonge and Bloor Streets; the view southwards extends as far as Lake Ontario, while myriads of lights brighten the dark of night, most spectacular among them the illumination of the top of a supertall downtown highrise by a diadem of huge dazzling-white-lit tubes plunging many stories downwards, a truly mesmerizing sight—I have not seen anything like it elsewhere.

Even so, despite the enthrallments these new cityscapes can hold out for me, I am uncomfortable with the thought that Toronto and indeed much of the entire GTA may eventually become a conurbation of highrises. I was shocked a few years ago to read such a recommendation from an urban planner to this effect, at least with respect to downtown and central Toronto: there are way too many lowrises still in these areas; tear them down, and replace them with highrises; it's a much more efficient use of high-density living spaces; it's the wave of the future for all mega-cities and Toronto, too, must ride it.

I have seen photos of today's Beijing, Shanghai, and Seoul, mega-cities where towering apartment buildings set close to one another reign supreme. In Seoul there are distinct strips of greenery and even artificially fed streams which admit a small taste of nature amidst the giant megaliths of glass and concrete, but this is not the route Toronto or any large Canadian city should go. As a boy who immigrated with my family to Canada at the age of fourteen, I immediately sensed that this country is one of far-stretching, even endless spaciousness.. For me this is still the grand signature of Canada, and I like to think this holds true for the large majority of Canadians. Even a mega-city, which is what today's GTA has become, can continue to nurture this sense of life with wide tree-lined trees with architecturally attractive lowrise townhouses on either side—not necessarily detached homes, which have become an unaffordable luxury in many of our cities—with due allowance in certain areas and neighbourhoods for well-positioned highrise commercial and residential buildings. Even today, taking your stand at a high vantage point nearly everywhere, you can still see that most of Toronto is still very much a city blessed with an abundance of trees. I also remember that the city of London, Ontario, where I studied for five years at Western University, had the well-deserved moniker of “The Forest City.”

So-called parkettes scattered among the tall highrises—there are some now in

downtown Toronto—won't do; they won't help to nurture what I regard as this characteristic Canadian sense of life, of the seemingly boundless spaces of nature, a sense of life which I do not hesitate to call spiritual. Even large parks in such a setting have, in my opinion, their limitations. Compare New York gigantic Central Park with Toronto's equally huge High Park. The former is indeed magnificently designed laid out and considered a model of nineteenth century urban planning. I have walked through it and admired it, but enclosed as it is by towering highrises, it struck me only as an artificial, almost surreal escape from the welter and noise of the city. An aerial view of the Park confirms this impression even more. Toronto's High Park, not enclosed, not hemmed in. There are similar venues elsewhere in the GTA and in other metropolitan areas in Canada; think of Montreal's Mont Royal and Vancouver's Stanley Park, these two in especially spectacular fashion— induce this almost magical sense of life I cherish.

The Netherlands saw a turn to multi-story apartment buildings after the Second World War in order to provide inexpensive—often subsidized—housing for a rapidly growing population. On the outskirts of large cities, especially Amsterdam, one can see the outcome of this policy in the form of drab looking building complexes which are not likely to inspire its residents with a sense of pride and belonging in their homes and surroundings and thus almost inevitably create a general milieu of neglect, vandalism, and even criminality—one see the same in many of North America's large cities. In the course of the 70's, therefore, there was a sharp return to lowrise housing consisting of attractively designed townhouses in park- and garden-like settings. Now, too, home-ownership was encouraged, which previously had not been the norm for the large majority of the population; the country's economic prosperity which led to rising real incomes for most families helped to foster this trend. My hometown of Zwolle provides a striking illustration of these two types of urban development: in the 60's a large new subdivision, Holtenbroek, consisting largely of residential highrises went up, but the new subdivision, Zwolle-Zuid, on which construction started in the following decade, shows a return to lowrise and is a model of urban planning.

The Dutch have indeed done wonders in urban planning and design in their densely populated country. The four largest cities, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht, have not been allowed to grow into mega-cities. The so-called Randstad (“Rim City”) Holland, the conurbation which includes these four and is an irregularly pear-shaped chain of close-set cities, towns, and villages, is not a real mega-city but must be unique in the world in that it encloses a giant “green heart” of thousands of square kilometres of meadowlands, rivers, lakes, tulip fields, hothouses, and nature preserves. Amsterdam, the largest city, has avoided the all too typical urban sprawl. Its population, 800,000, has remained pretty well stationary over the past five decades and much of its population overflow has been diverted to the nearby brand-new city of Almere in the brand-new giant polder of Flevoland. Almere will eventually have a population of 200,000. Not surprisingly, residential housing is overwhelmingly lowrise, with a striking degree of attention paid to individual character in home design.

I may have pushed the contrast between highrise and lowrise in terms of quality

of living and liveability too much. The individuals and families living in the towering residential complexes of Beijing, Shanghai, and Seoul may be perfectly happy there; the buildings seem to be well constructed and maintained and there is little vandalism and crime—the terrible air pollution in many of these cities has a different causation and is thus a separate issue. I have driven through the vast new subdivisions of the GTA and Calgary with their cookie-cutter style townhouses and detached homes—the latter so closely set together that they might just have well have been constructed as townhouses—with very little in the way of greenery. If I have to make this kind of choice, I far prefer a smartly designed highrise in an agreeable park-like setting and with good access to public transit.