

Setbacks and the Midtown Streetscape – SPRA 26th Sept '13

The cornerstone of the current Toronto Official plan is an intensification programme which sees the City's existing apartment areas doubling in population while their low-density counterparts see virtually no change. The financial progress of the city – the creation of new property value, new assessment and, therefore, new taxes – rests largely on the growth of apartment residential communities.

Some of the apartment communities, such as those in downtown Toronto, are communities in need of renewal and are ready for relatively painless changes. Examples are the former industrial areas of Leaside or the Massey Ferguson or Distillery lands. But there are areas where change is becoming painful.

One such area is the Midtown area centering on the Yonge and Eglinton intersection and particularly affecting the quadrant north to Keewatin Avenue and east to Mount Pleasant Road. This a relatively stable community with a mix of high rise buildings of up to twenty five stories and 4-6 storey apartment buildings most of which are rental. Buildings are characterized by large front yard setbacks which provide substantial green space walking and sitting areas as well as circular driveways and weather protected entrances.

This green space has important visual and environmental effects. To the pedestrian, it provides a gracious shaded environment that makes walking in inclement or hot weather more pleasant. It also provides some protection against winds. But the effects are not limited to the ground eye view of the pedestrian and motorist. Trees provide privacy between buildings and add to the view from upper storey windows and balconies. They turn a concrete landscape into a green view, providing both privacy and a peaceful setting appropriate to a place where people live and play. The open spaces, virtually all of which (including the Redpath Parkette) were provided by the private sector as part of planning negotiations, add places for people to relax close to home and take pressure off already overloaded park space.

These are important characteristics of the midtown apartment community. They are as important to the midtown apartment resident as they are to the single family resident, perhaps more so given the increases in densities the apartment communities are facing. (The various developments in the area will eventually double the population of the Midtown northeast quadrant from the present 15 to 20,000 to between 30 and 40,000 people). Moreover, just as planners defend restrictions on development in single family areas as being necessary to maintain the character of the community, so should they defend measures to maintain the character of the midtown area.

But new development proposals seem to be ignoring those characteristics of the northeast corner of Midtown which has made it one of the most desirable apartment communities in the City. Low rise rental buildings have been replaced by high rise buildings built on podiums. A few developments, notably the Republic and 99 Erskine, have sought to increase sidewalk depth and

pathways through the development. Others have more or less followed the setbacks that existed on the older, much lower, buildings maintaining sidewalk widths. Still others are proposing building virtually to the property line, allowing no setbacks or green space. Most notable among these is the proposal for 18-30 Erskine Avenue. Moreover, as Terry Mills has shown in his reviews, the sidewalks of the northeast quadrant are hardly wide enough to accommodate existing, much less future, pedestrian traffic.

The intensification of the Apartment Neighbourhood area will inevitably reduce the amount of open space available to residents. Given budget limitations, therefore, this open space can effectively only be provided by the private sector.

The key to maintaining the virtually unique characteristics of the apartment residential area of the northeast quadrant of Midtown is the strict adherence to setbacks at both grade and upper storey levels. Other tools, such as the application of angular planes as outlined in the tall buildings guidelines, are also required. To that end it is suggested that the City adopt the following policies, not as guidelines but as policies to be applied without exception to all new developments, regardless of use in the apartment residential area:

1. Front yard set backs should be wide enough to allow for reasonable landscaping and the growth of trees of significant height. Podiums over sidewalks may be suitable in office areas but they are not sufficient within the residential community where trees and green space are required. The minimum distance between the street curb and the building face must be in the order of 12 metres.
2. Where existing setbacks are greater on either side of the property to be developed, the required setback should be increased to maintain streetscape continuity. The additional setback should be no less than 50% of the additional setback of the adjacent property.
3. Side yard setbacks should be wide enough to allow walkways between buildings and appropriate landscaping, including trees – 7.5 metres. Buildings at ground level should be at least 15 metres apart. The taller the building and especially the higher the podium, the greater should be the setback.
4. Rear yard setbacks should be enough to provide outdoor seating and recreational areas scaled as a minimum to the needs of the building, as well as public walkways where appropriate. The rear setback should be at least 10 metres, more depending on the size of the building.
5. At least 50% of podium roofs should be landscaped.
6. Sidewalks in the apartment residential area should be wide enough to allow two couples to pass simultaneously – a minimum of 3 metres. These minimum widths should be increased as the sidewalks become closer to

Yonge Street, Eglinton Avenue and Mount Pleasant Road to accommodate the cumulative increase in pedestrian traffic from the community.

7. Walkways between buildings should be linked to provide northeast to southwest pedestrian flow.
8. There should be no net loss of at-grade open space (sidewalks, green space, walkways and related spaces) in the apartment residential area.