

Neglected high-rises hold the key to a sustainable future



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There is this myth, promoted mainly by developers, that Toronto is “afraid” of tall buildings. The truth, as architect Graeme Stewart demonstrated in a quite brilliant presentation at City Hall yesterday, is that Toronto has more high-rise buildings than any North American city except New York — and significantly more than sprawling, third-place Chicago.

But the myth is understandable, because the most common and characteristically Toronto high-rise, a type unique on the continent, has

become almost invisible.

These are “the buildings you see on your way to the airport,” according to the architect — not the blockbusting developments that disrupted neighbourhoods during the postwar boom, but whole forests of towers built around the same time, at Hong Kong densities, on farm fields miles outside the settled city. Created by government incentives but privately owned, Toronto’s suburban slabs and their neighbourhoods are severely neglected today.

“For a long time, we’ve done a very good job of ignoring them,” Mr. Stewart told council’s executive committee. But they remain “an incredibly important part of the city’s housing stock” — and the key to its hopes for creating a sustainable future.

“These buildings have a stigma,” added his boss, Michael McClelland of E.R.A. Archi-

tects. “Nobody likes these buildings. But when you actually start to look at them, you realize they’re incredibly useful, incredibly solid buildings.”

Inspired by the vision outlined by Mr. Stewart and Mr. McClelland, Mayor David Miller has already pledged to invest Toronto’s share of the funding from the Clinton Climate Initiative announced this month in New York into retrofitting suburban high-rises. As Mr. Stewart demonstrated with ample European examples, nothing is easier or more rewarding than reducing the energy consumption of such buildings.

“It’s really dead simple to fix them,” he said. “Conservatively, you can cut energy consumption in half.”

But the large scale of the buildings, he added, encourages the use of innovative technology to achieve even greater reductions.

But new cladding and solar panels are only part of the new vision, according to the architects. The best European projects include wholly new amenities, such as retail concourses, markets and gardens, as well as new housing. The fenced-off open space that surrounds such buildings is “an enormous land resource sitting vacant and unused,” according to Mr. Stewart, allowing ample elbow room for innovation.

The result, in such cities as Moscow, is vibrant new neighbourhoods where once there were only sterile developments. Moscow today makes suburban Toronto look positively totalitarian.

In one sense, the architects are only affirming the wisdom of official thinking. The suburban slabs are the very bones of the “vulnerable neighbourhoods” that the Miller regime has targeted for

special treatment, and its Transit City plan for light-rail expansion fits the same map equally well. The social and geographical coincidences are striking — and ignoring them, according to the architects, would be a mistake.

To that end there is the example of Paris, which has invested heavily in the physical rehabilitation of its high-rise suburbs while doing nothing to address underlying social problems. “Paris is a warning as to how this can go all wrong,” Mr. Stewart said — a reminder that architecture alone can’t solve the problems of neglected modern suburbs.

But one thoughtful initiative can change the direction of an entire city. As the mayor has recognized, this is one of them. After years of neglect, the suburban slabs are now the prime focus of Toronto’s quest for both sustainability and social justice.