

Tower Renewal Project Series

URBAN FARMING

Redefining the landscape

By Michael McClelland and Graeme Stewart with Hélène St.Jacques

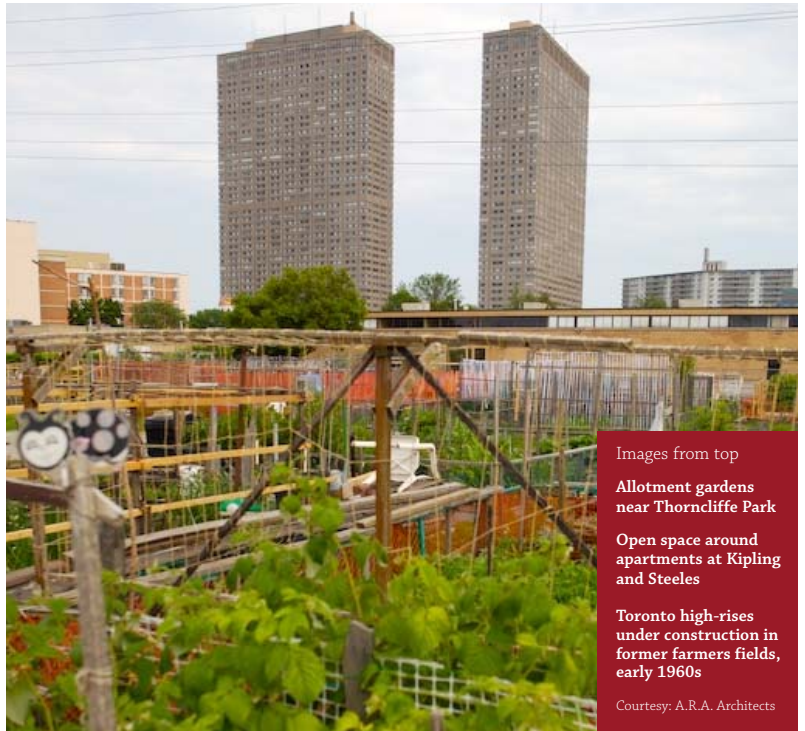
The idea of the tower in a genuine park or landscape setting was a popular notion after the Second World War. As a result, during the post-war boom in Toronto, a minimum of 60 per cent open space around multiple dwellings was promoted as a best practice. If developers wanted larger buildings, they were to provide a greater ratio of open space to building footprint. The results are the large towers surrounded by 90 per cent open space found across Toronto's suburbs.

Today this land is not being used as planned. Shy of the recreation and amenity space envisioned, much of this open space is either surface parking or is simply fenced-off. Rather than park-like communities, high-rises generally sit as isolated islands. City-wide this represents an enormous and underutilized land resource.

A good example is the area in north Etobicoke around Kipling and Steeles where 19 towers accommodate over 13,000 people. While this tower district adjacent to the Humber Valley appears more pastoral than urban, most of its open space lays unused and inaccessible.

While there are a number of options for site renewal, a key question concerns how the landscape itself might be used. In addition to providing much needed active and useable pedestrian space, a simple response is urban farming. If we look to other successful examples like London for instance, urban farming has had a strong presence since the 1970s. Many of the sites in the Farm Garden UK Network (www.farmgarden.org.uk) are integrated into tower blocks and Council Housing—complete with livestock. These farms provide training for children as part of local school curriculums, as well as community kitchens and seasonal markets. In China urban agriculture now feeds one third of the population.

In many ways, Toronto is already a leader in community gardening, yet our local food production still only accounts for a small percentage of that consumed. The abundant fertile lands found in many apartment neighbourhoods, only a generation removed from agricultural use, are ideal sites for food production. Linked to compost programs and farmers markets, current no-man's-land could be rendered productive, self sufficient and the focal points of diverse communities. Applied at a city scale, these initiatives could have a significant impact on consumption patterns, resource management and greenhouse gas production, as well as providing ready access to local food.



Images from top
 Allotment gardens near Thorncliffe Park
 Open space around apartments at Kipling and Steeles
 Toronto high-rises under construction in former farmers fields, early 1960s
 Courtesy: A.R.A. Architects



Informa Market Research president Hélène St.Jacques is a recognized social marketing expert working with communities across Canada on health, food and environmental issues. She is also a board member of Toronto's FoodShare (www.foodshare.net). Michael McClelland is a principal and Graeme Stewart is the project architect for Tower Renewal with E.R.A. Architects. The Tower Renewal Project, spearheaded by the mayor of Toronto, is being developed in collaboration with E.R.A. Architects and an interdepartmental municipal staff working, City of Toronto agencies, the University of Toronto and CMHC and the Clinton Foundation, among others.

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