

Homing In on Housing

The time-worn image of Canada as an endless expanse of mountain and prairie is belied by the facts. To be sure, the wilderness is still there, but most Canadians live in a narrow band of populous modern cities stretching across the country along the southern boundary. The cities are hubs of commerce and culture and each year they get bigger. The population of metropolitan Toronto, for instance (now at 3.5 million), grows at a rate of 2 per cent per year. One of its suburbs doubled in size over the past five years, and the growth of many other suburbs is similar.

As cities grow, accommodating families with regard to both comfort and disposable income presents a major challenge. Architects openly declare that modern housing is their most difficult design problem and continually work to conceive housing solutions which at one stroke can offer privacy, space, convenience, energy efficiency, beauty and economy — even smack in the middle of town.

This would not be difficult were their clients more open to high-density forms of housing such as apartments, shared houses, and co-operative dwellings, but Canadians have come to view the single-family dwelling as the norm.

Erecting separate houses which marry space, privacy and economy in the downtown core is seldom possible, but by working together, urban planners, developers and architects have arrived at some ingenious compromises.



The most renowned adventure in this regard was Habitat, an architectural experiment at Montreal's 1967 World Fair. Created by Canadian architect Moshe Safdie, the structure attempted a radical departure from standard high-density housing solutions. With an unusual internal design rejecting straight corridors and common entrances, Habitat featured private terraces and gardens for every unit. While it proved enormously popular with the original tenants, it unfortunately also proved enormously expensive to build and has never been repeated.

Another celebrated example is the Pacific Heights Housing Co-operative in Vancouver. In an area of extreme density (over 245 units per hectare),

the co-op has used city-owned land on which to erect an unusual structure to reclaim a once-noisy downtown street for family dwelling. The central features of the co-op's project are the reconstructed façades of six Victorian houses and the block of units designed onto them. The restored houses, with their varied angles and jutting verandah roofs, have reduced street noise by 50 per cent, and the project has confirmed that families can be accommodated at high densities in an agreeable environment.

On the other side of the country, in St. John's, Newfoundland, architects have achieved success incorporating inexpensive publicly

The Forest Road Infill Project provides dignified and comfortable non-profit housing in St. John's, Newfoundland.

sponsored housing into existing neighbourhoods by mirroring the style and colour of the traditional Newfoundland house. The Forest Road Infill Project is a 26-unit non-profit string of wooden houses down a steep grade, each unit painted in a different bright colour, each offering dignified and comfortable housing to those who could not otherwise afford it. With the appearance of a typical Newfoundland street, the project has scored a victory for its regional sensitivity and practical benefit to the community.