

# BUILDING BY DECADES



**DAVID WILKES**  
PRESIDENT & CEO OF BILD

## LIFE DURING WARTIME

Toronto plays its Home Front role in the war effort

Putting together this special feature for the Building Industry and Land Development Association's (BILD) 100th anniversary has given us an opportunity to trace the evolution of residential and commercial construction in the GTA over a 100-year period. Through that lens, if the 1920s turned on the ignition and the 1930s primed the pump, then the 1940s provided the spark for the engine of economic growth and development that is residential and commercial construction.

A number of important factors came into play in this decade, the first of which was a significant increase in demand for housing. This was precipitated by the flood of returning service members after the Second World War and an influx of newcomers from other countries with the start of the fourth wave of Canadian immigration. These groups came to a region where the housing stock had stayed quite stagnant in the previous decade due to the economic hardships of the Great Depression and later the material and workforce constraints of the home front during the war.

The second important change in the 1940s was a rapid evolution in the speed and scale of new home building, which came out of the necessity to build homes quickly for war workers and veterans. The changes are exemplified by the simple, economical designs of Victory Housing built

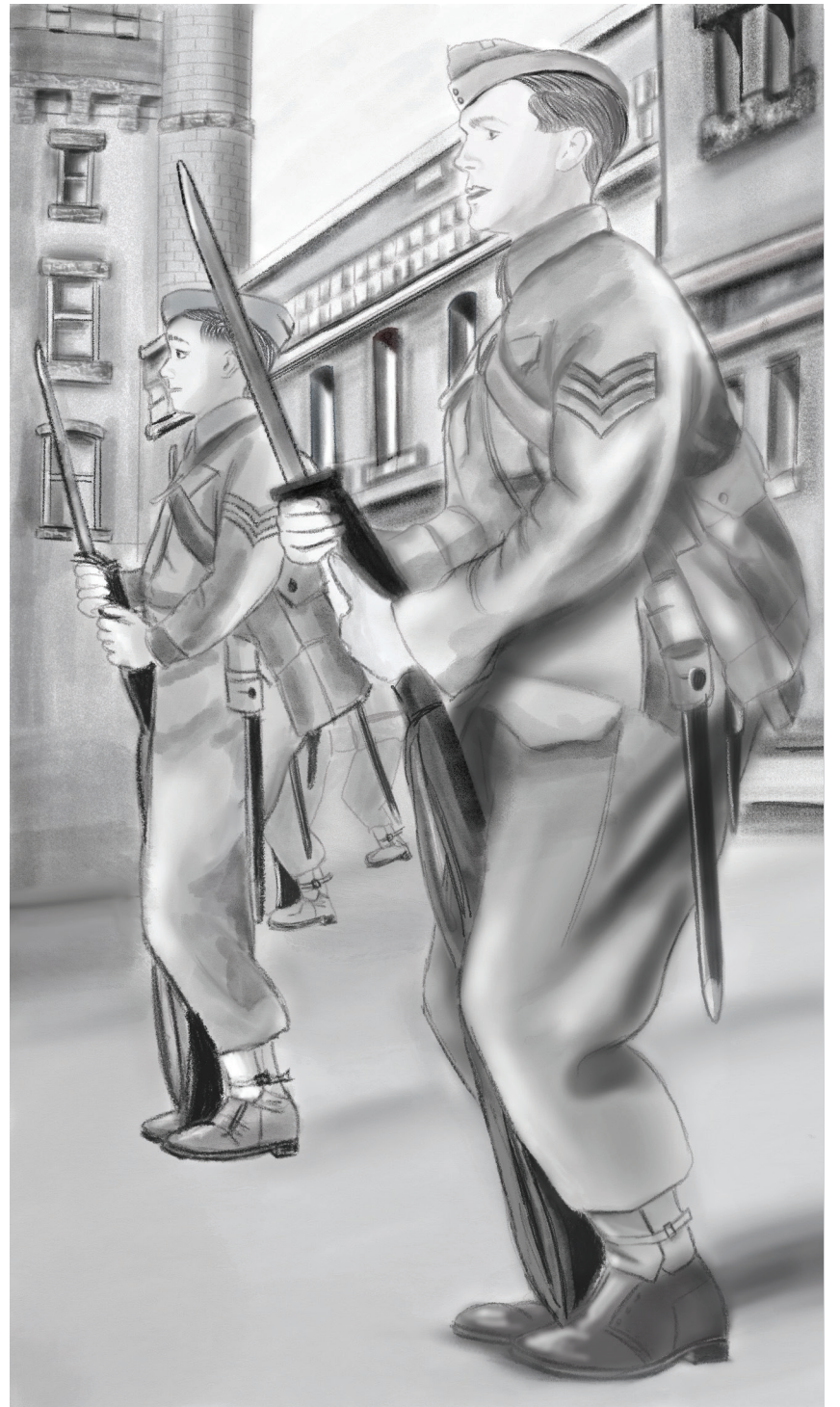
by Wartime Housing Limited, Canada's first federal housing corporation.

The expansion of the region's road and highway infrastructure, including the start of the province's 400-series highways later in the decade, began to remove the traditional transportation barriers for what would later become the "suburbs."

Finally, the decade saw the creation in 1946 of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, today known as the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. While its initial purpose was to administer the National Housing Act and the Home Improvement Loans Guarantee Act, the role of this vital organization was to grow in the 1950s to provide mortgage loan insurance, greatly expanding the possibility of home ownership for the average Canadian.

All of these factors worked together to produce a dramatic increase in housing starts in the region, which was to continue in the following decades.

For the Toronto Home Builders' Association and other local home builders' associations across the country, the decade also held a very important milestone. Our national association, now known as the Canadian Home Builders' Association, was founded in 1943. It allowed builders from coast to coast to come together to advocate for the consistent national policies and standards that continue to shape our cities and towns to this day.



University Armory training in Toronto, circa 1940s. Illustration by Suzana Esteves

The Second World War changed the course of history. And the city's development was certainly not exempt.

Though Toronto had never been busier than it was when war broke out in 1939, the city itself would be neglected until well into the next decade. The war effort needed all the men, money and materials the city could muster. Toronto was on its own. Basic necessities – food, shelter and mobility – had to wait for better times. Until then, Torontonians had to look after themselves. They had to make a little go a long way.

Plans were deferred. The housing market languished. Construction stopped, as did almost every other activity associated with a thriving urban centre. Residential repairs were delayed. Owners took in lodgers. Houses were overcrowded. Stores were reduced to essentials. Food and fuel were rationed. Such was life in a city at war.

Large swaths of Toronto – Exhibition Place, the Island Airport, Eglinton and Riverdale parks – were given over to the military for training and living quarters.

Men and women in uniform were a common sight on Toronto streets, as were army vehicles. Factories and warehouses, where men and women now worked, were retooled to make airplanes, small arms and munitions. Union Station was a major transportation hub, a departure and arrival point for countless Canadian and allied troops.

Torontonians not actively engaged in the war effort also had a big role to play on the "Home Front." They grew vegetables in victory gardens, collected old aluminum pans that could be melted down and reused, and generally learned how to get by with less. They also knitted, knitted, and knitted, making socks, mittens and scarves for servicemen.

"Anytime there was a spare moment in the office," Dorothy Inglis recalled in the book *Voices of a War Remembered*, "the knitting needles would be out. We knit before work, during work, during our lunch hours, after work and at home.... It

(Continued on pg. 2)

THE BILD  
**CORNERSTONE**

Work begins on what would become Ontario's 400-series highways, late **1940s**

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Monumental R.C. Harris Water Treatment Plant opens in **1941**

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1940s

1941

City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1128, Series 381, File 33, Item 6658-7

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(Continued from pg.1)

made us feel as if we were really doing something useful.”

Even children were part of the campaign, gathering scrap metal, empty bottles and used paper. They also raised money and “adopted” navy ships. Local schools were also filled with hundreds of British students sent by their parents to spend the war years in the safety of Toronto.

If work became a weapon of war, so did food. Driven by the pressure to feed its forces overseas as well as its European allies, the federal government moved aggres-

sively to control agricultural production and change the Canadian diet. By 1941, more than three-quarters of the grain and wheat consumed in the UK came from this country. Canada also exported eggs, butter, bacon, cheese and evaporated milk to Britain.

“Predictably, it was the women of Toronto who bore the brunt of wartime hardships, working to keep their families healthy, happy and housed through shortages while doing hard labour in various war industries.”

sities of locally grown fruit and vegetables. Part of Ottawa’s strategy was to declare certain homegrown foods “patriotic.” Typically, these were products that had lost their export market. In 1939, for example, the federal Department of Agriculture initiated a series of magazine ads urging readers to eat apples. By serving apples daily, the commercials declared, “you serve your country too.”

At the height of the fighting, Canadians were even collecting fat and bones for use in war munitions. “Fat is Ammunition,” one ad shouted. A single pound of fat, it explained, has “enough glycerine to fire 150 bullets from a Bren gun.” By 1945, Canadians had contributed millions of pounds of the stuff to the war effort.

Predictably, it was the women of Toronto who bore the brunt of wartime hardships, working to keep their families healthy, happy and housed through shortages while doing hard labour in various war industries. The majority of those Brens, for example, were assembled at Toronto’s Inglis factory in Liberty Village, most famously by Veronica Foster, aka Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl. Alluringly photographed in a cloud of cigarette smoke, her hair in a scarf, Foster was the poster girl for wartime working women and also served as the inspiration for Rosie the Riveter.

Once fighting ended, people were ready to celebrate. When Germany surrendered on 7 May, 1945, Torontonians danced in the streets. They poured out of office buildings and factories in sheer joy, paraded up and down Yonge Street, hugging and kissing strangers and waving flags, in those days Union Jacks. They also crowded around newspaper offices to hear the latest news. Department stores were quickly festooned in patriotic decorations. The official celebrations took place the following day. Religious services, concerts and more parades were organized. Three months later, on V-J Day, the city erupted in euphoria all over again.

At last life could return to normal. Finally the future would be about Toronto, not war.

This content was funded and approved by the advertiser.

## BEYOND THE CITY: AJAX IN THE 1940s

While Ajax didn’t officially become a town until 1955, it played a major part in the war effort — and set the stage for a modern planned community. Europeans settled in the region in the early 1800s, and it remained largely rural and agricultural into the 20th century. In 1941, during the Second World War, everything changed with the creation of Defence Industries Limited (DIL). Thousands of workers settled in the area to work at the largest artillery shell plant in the British Commonwealth. Many of them were women, called Bombgirls.

A townsite developed around the plant, and since it needed a name, DIL employees voted on one. The winning name was Ajax, in honour of a British naval ship that defeated the German battleship Admiral Graf Spee in 1939 — a fitting name for a community born out of wartime necessity. At peak production, the plant employed more than 9,000 people, and by war’s end it had its own housing, water and sewage treatment plants, a network of roads and railroads, and even a school. After the war, the University of Toronto leased many of the former DIL buildings until 1949, enrolling discharged soldiers as engineering students.

In the 1940s, Ajax didn’t have its own municipal government, but in 1954 residents elected their first town council in the newly created Town of Ajax. Its first mayor was Pat Bayly. Thanks in large part to George W. Finley of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., the post-war town was developed as a modern planned community. In the 1970s, subdivisions were built on vacant land in central Ajax and major shopping centres were constructed. In the 1980s, extensive development took place in southern Ajax, with upscale homes built along Lake Driveway — even during the recession — as well as an expansion of retail shopping. Development continued north of Highway 2, from Church Street in Pickering Village to Harwood Avenue, with more development south of the highway to the edge of the 401.

Today, Ajax has one of the fastest-growing populations in the eastern GTA — and a culturally diverse one, with more than 65 languages spoken. This Great Lakes community features a 70-hectare stretch of publicly owned lands alongside Lake Ontario, with an additional 400 hectares of parks and conservation areas. But it’s also redeveloping its downtown core with urban spaces and gathering places. Like many communities around the GTA, Ajax is undergoing intensification with a pedestrian-oriented built environment and transit-supportive development, which means high-rise condos and apartments are now part of the Ajax skyline.

THE BILD <b>CORNERSTONE</b>	Town of Ajax formed <b>1941</b>	Wartime Housing Limited formed <b>1941</b>	Victory Homes being built <b>1941</b>
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# TORONTO TAKES SHAPE

A POST-WAR CITY CLEANS  
UP, GOES UNDERGROUND



The Adelaide Coach Terminal, which opened in 1947. Toronto Star Archives / Contributor

**W**ith the war over, Toronto could finally turn its attention to the challenges of peace. Torontonians had lived through six years of hardship with patience, strength and grace. They had risen to every occasion, but now it was time to face the problems of the city, problems that in many cases went all the way back to the beginning of the Depression in 1929. Now the “Home Front” was exactly that.

Where to start? There was a chronic housing shortage. Transit was inadequate. Civic infrastructure had not kept pace. And as thousands of fighting men returned home, they were not prepared to go back to the way things were. Neither were the women who had worked in factories, kept their families together and grown accustomed to independence. The war had changed a generation of Torontonians, male and female, and now they would change Toronto.

These were issues that the city alone could not solve. The war, and before it the Depression, had revealed just how powerless Canadian cities really were. Dependent on nothing but property taxes, municipalities were unable to raise the revenues needed to deal with the enormous task ahead. Legislatively, Canadian cities were entirely reliant on the provinces to pave the way.

In other words, with its fiscal hands firmly tied behind its back, Toronto had to rely on help from Ottawa and Queen’s

Park to achieve its goals. In 1946, Toronto launched Canada’s first and largest social housing scheme, Regent Park. It began with a vote. The question was simple:

“Are you in favour of the City undertaking as a low cost or moderate cost rental housing project, with possible government assistance on the clearance, replanning, rehabilitation and modernization of the area bounded by Parliament, River, Gerrard and Dundas Streets... at an estimated cost of \$5,900,000?”

The response was positive, though not overwhelming (29,677 to 18,028). Two years later, the first tenants moved in. Rents were set at 20 percent of family income and eligibility defined. More important, perhaps, the city had managed to wrangle \$1.5 million from Ottawa and \$1,000 per apartment from the province.

As contemporary news reports made clear, residents were thrilled. They loved the cleanliness, the modern appliances, the space and above all, the bathtubs. “[It’s] like walking into a dream,” said a tenant whose previous dwelling was a decrepit four-room flat held up by railway jacks. Their rent increased from \$19 a month to \$67, but no one was complaining.

Work continued at Regent Park until 1960. Before long, however, it became clear that the ideas behind the project were flawed. Cut off from the larger city and lacking in neighbourhood amenities – Regent Park didn’t actually have a park – the community was declared a failure by the late 1960s. Though residents were the neighbourhood, they recognized its problems were intrac-

table. By 2005, Toronto Community Housing had decided to tear it down and rebuild from scratch as a modern mixed-income high-rise community. The size and singular focus of a mega-project like Regent Park makes success unlikely. The lessons were clear, if complex; much like the rest of the city, neighbourhoods

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As thousands of fighting men returned home, they were not prepared to go back to the way things were. Neither were the women who had worked in factories.

work best when they’re connected, physically accessible, economically varied, ethnically diverse and culturally open.

More successful was the city’s decision to build a subway. It came after a plebiscite in 1946 overwhelmingly approved a 12-station, 7.4-kilometre line running north from Union Station to Eglinton. That same vote also okayed an underground streetcar line to go beneath Queen

St. from Logan to Trinity-Bellwoods Park. Work began on 8 September, 1949 in a ceremony presided over by soon-to-be TV game show host, Monty Hall, and various dignitaries, provincial and civic. Hopes the Dominion government would contribute one-fifth of the final cost of \$67 million, more than double the original estimate of \$29 million (plus \$3.5 million for rolling stock), were dashed. Because federal funding never materialized, the Queen line was dropped.

To save money, the subway was built using a “cut and cover” technique. That meant excavating a giant trench that could later be covered. Though that meant closing stretches of Yonge for months at a time, it was cheaper than tunnelling. For businesses, especially those on and near Yonge, five years of construction was tough. Many went bankrupt. Through it all, Torontonians maintained their wartime stoicism and watched quietly as the new subway took shape. As TTC chair William McBrien said at the time, the commission couldn’t “pay too high a tribute to the forbearance and public spirit which those most affected manifested under these trying circumstances.”

Once the dust settled, there could be no doubt: The subway had arrived, and so had Toronto. Transit plans developed then would set the pattern of development – residential, retail, commercial and industrial – for decades to come. The ‘40s are long gone, but their influence can still be felt today.

This content was funded and approved by the advertiser.

THE BILD  
CORNERSTONE

Sorbara Group of Companies  
(Sorbara Group) founded  
1942

Canadian Home Builders’  
Association established  
1943

# VICTORY COMES HOME

## The post-war housing boom reshapes life in Toronto



One of the countless Victory Houses, which can still be seen across the GTA today. Toronto Star, Reg Innell / Contributor

There were only three models – small, smaller and smallest – but that was enough. Known as Victory Houses, these tiny perfect structures were Canada’s response to the desperate shortage of homes for returning veterans and war industry workers. During the 1940s, 32,000 Victory Houses were constructed across Canada, many located across Toronto and its (then) suburbs of Etobicoke, East York, North York and Scarborough.

The federal government had passed the Veterans’ Land Act to provide funding to municipalities to build and also help returning servicemen purchase these homes and their contents. The legislation continued a Canadian tradition that dates back to the 17th century, of rewarding ex-soldiers with land. The Act would eventually help more than 140,000 vets in various ways; as well as providing grants and loans to applicants wishing to become fishermen, farmers or small land-holders, it offered money for household appliances

such as refrigerators, stoves and washing machines. Those funds were funnelled through the Wartime Housing Corporation (WHC), which would later become the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). Formed in 1946, the latter has played a significant role in housing ever since. Mainly, it provides funding, loans and insurance on private mortgages. It also bankrolls urban renewal and housing improvement programs, collects data on Canadian housing markets and offers incentives to first-time home buyers.

The houses themselves were modest but efficient. With their pitched roofs and cube-like form, they couldn’t have been more basic. Typically, downstairs had a living room, dining room, bathroom and one bedroom. Upstairs there were two more bedrooms. These “Strawberry Boxes” were largely prefabricated. And though pared

down, they managed to impart a distinct sense of domesticity, even cosiness.

Clearly, the architects understood that ideas of home were emotional as well as practical. Using a pitched roof with a chimney on top, for example, signalled shelter, security and hominess. The porch entrance served a similar purpose. Every child’s drawing of home includes these features, along with windows, a front lawn, a white picket fence and smoke rising from the chimney. The details, though few, are sufficient to create a strong feeling of home, a place where a family can live and be happy.

Though most Victory Houses are one-and-a-half storeys, some consist of a single floor. Basements weren’t included, but lots tended to be big. Bureaucrats encouraged building in rural areas and suburbs where land was cheap and plentiful. But as cities grew, suburban development tended to be

absorbed into larger urban entities. A drive along O’Connor Drive in Toronto’s east end shows how these humble dwellings have survived, remained in use and, though not necessarily intact, are still recognizable. Other examples can be seen on The Queensway and Royal York Rd., Victoria Park Ave. and St. Clair Ave. E., Jane St. and Trethewey Dr., Warden Ave. and Eglinton Ave. E. Victory Houses were also built in Ajax. Many have had a full second floor added. More often, they have been re-clad in materials that often seem at odds with the simplicity of the original.

Advertisements for these post-war residences emphasize their versatility as well as affordability. The pitch was that families could buy now and expand later. A second floor could be constructed but left unfinished until income permitted completion, and perhaps the addition of dormer windows.

“The most popular model,” writes John Blumenson in *Ontario Architecture: A Guide to Styles and Building Terms 1784 to the Present*, “with steep roof, shallow eaves, small sash windows and clapboard exterior finish is stylistically reminiscent of a simplified Cape Cod Colonial.... And while clapboards were the favoured exterior finish, composite shingles, stucco, or brick veneer were also used.”

Considering the herculean effort required to accommodate the 620,000 military personnel that were demobilized between June, 1945, and June, 1946, Ottawa might simply have been too exhausted to carry on. Sadly, the need was greater than ever. The combination of the Depression, wartime shortages of labour and materials, run-down housing stock and over-crowding, left Toronto in desperate straits. By some estimates, 200,000 new houses were required to meet pent-up demand in Canada. In Toronto, nearly 20 percent of houses were doubled up, 13 percent overcrowded and almost 30 percent substandard.

The city’s already dire housing situation was heightened by a growing wave of immigration. Though originally intended to be temporary, it soon became clear Victory Houses were here to stay.

This content was funded and approved by the advertiser.

<p>THE BILD <b>CORNERSTONE</b></p>	<p>Canada Mortgage &amp; Housing Corporation (Central Mortgage &amp; Housing Corporation) founded <b>1946</b></p>	<p>Adelaide Coach Terminal built <b>1947</b></p>
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# THE ROAD MORE TRAVELLED

THE BIRTH OF THE 400-SERIES HIGHWAYS OPENS THE REGION



Construction on the region's 400-series highways began in the late 1940s. Toronto Star, Boris Spremo / Contributor

Technically, the 400-series highways are “controlled access freeways.” But we’re more likely to think of them as the vehicular arteries that keep us – and the vast economy of Southern Ontario – moving along smoothly. The most familiar examples are Highways 400 and 401, but if the Queen Elizabeth Way and the toll road, Highway 407, are included, there are actually 15 highways in the 400 series.

Planning for the network of highways is anchored in the 1940s and construction began late in that decade. However, its true beginning arguably came in 1952, when the province decided to remake the

landscape to accommodate the growing number of cars and trucks. This was the moment when Canada and Ontario got truly serious about infrastructure: when the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Trans-Canada Highway, the Trans-Continental Pipeline and other mega-projects changed the country.

Closer to home, the province embarked on a plan in the 1940s to design and build a comprehensive system of high-speed divided highways that would connect the GTA to the surrounding areas. When unveiled, these highways represented the province’s most ambitious response to what

was then still an emerging future of large-scale commuting. The challenge was time and distance. The obstacle was congestion.

Four to 18 lanes wide, with gentle curves, straight lines and raised intersections, these roads were intended for speeds of between 100 and 130 kilometres per hour. They’re meant for drivers traveling a long way in a short time. Then, as now, speed is the Holy Grail of highway engineering. This isolated, fast-moving asphalt grid was a self-contained linear network laid out for the clear economic benefit of moving goods efficiently – as well as the benefit of moving people in a hurry.

Though the framers of the 400s could not have foreseen the extent of things, where their highways led, development followed. The constellation of towns and villages that dotted the topography of Toronto and its vicinity were now part of a larger region knitted together by this new series of freeways. We know it today as the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and although the various jurisdictions remain politically independent, they are joined economically, if informally, to a larger regional entity. Despite rivalries within the GTA, there is a growing awareness that it succeeds or fails as a unit.

Highways alone cannot explain this emerging sense of regionalism, but they are fundamental to its existence.

The plan behind the 400 series was clear: highways were seen as the solution to congestion, not the cause. Old pre-war highways were unable to handle the growing number of cars and, worried that without better transportation the province would fall behind, Queen’s Park turned its attention to building better roads. The 400s were an ambitious, state-of-the-art scheme to put in place the infrastructure required for post-war prosperity.

The 401, which anchored the network, was intended to move through-traffic as quickly and efficiently as possible. Influenced by German autobahns, the new access-controlled arteries bypassed towns and cities. Having also learned the lessons of the QEW, started in 1931, engineers kept the new highway clean, simple and devoid of distractions. Not even a border of trees was allowed. Anticipating future expansion, 401 planners imposed a 91.4-metre right-of-way, up from 40 metres on the QEW.

One thing is certain: the designers of the 400s highways could not have known the 401 would eventually carry up to 500,000 vehicles daily. One of the busiest freeways in North America, it is also an economic lifeline. Estimated to carry 60 percent of vehicular trade with the US, it stretches 828 kilometres from Windsor to the Quebec border.

Highway 400 – originally the Toronto-Barrie Highway – opened in 1951. It was immediately the main route out of the city to cottage country and the north. Designed as a response to increasing weekend congestion, it followed changes in leisure and travel habits that were well underway in the ‘50s. As cars replaced trains, and cottages took over from resorts and amusement parks, highways like the 400 quickly became indispensable. In addition to weekenders, there were the commuters who worked downtown but lived upcountry. Like the 401, the 400 paved the way for major development – residential, industrial and commercial – along much of its length.

In a modern car-based society, infrastructure such as the 400s was now foundational.

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<p>THE BILD <b>CORNERSTONE</b></p>	<p>Orlando Corporation (Fidani and Sons) founded <b>1948</b></p>	<p>Construction starts on Yonge subway line <b>1949</b></p>
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