

BUILDING BY DECADES



DAVID WILKES
PRESIDENT & CEO OF BILD

The Building Industry and Land Development Association, as the successor of the Toronto Home Builders' Association, is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. To mark this important milestone, BILD has partnered with the Toronto Star to produce a decade-by-decade retrospective of our industry's contribution to the growth of the cities and towns of the GTA.

When we look at the developments of the 1950s, it comes as no surprise that many of the titans of today's residential and commercial building and development industry trace their company origins to this decade.

The 1950s were a monumental time for the region, with many firsts that provided the backbone upon which later development occurred. The ribbons of the 400-series highways expanded out, removing transportation barriers and enabling the development of what would become the multiple cities and towns of the Greater Toronto Area.

Toronto's first subway opened early in the decade and plans were made immediately to expand the network. The first dedicated zoning bylaws were put in place in 1952, 1953 and 1959, significantly influencing how the city would grow.

Toronto became a metropolis out of a

regional federation between the old city of Toronto, the regions of York, East York, North York, Etobicoke and Scarborough, the villages of Forest Hill, Long Branch and Swansea and the towns of New Toronto, Mimico, Weston and Leaside. The name of BILD's predecessor association mirrored this change and became the Metropolitan Toronto Home Builders' Association.

The construction of the Gardiner Expressway kicked off in the mid-1950s. Other infrastructure to support a growing region and industrial base was either being started—like the Lakeview Generating Station in 1958—or being contemplated. Toronto and its surrounding regions were well on their way to becoming Canada's economic engine and surpassing their traditional rival of Montreal.

These changes—combined with an influx of migrants in Canada's fourth wave of immigration, the post-war baby boom, the increasing shift of population from rural to urban Canada, and the introduction of mortgage loan insurance under the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation in 1952—resulted in a significant increase in housing starts in this decade. The rate at which new homes were started and completed in the 1950s virtually doubled from the levels of the 1930s, foreshadowing another doubling in the 1960s.

1950s

1950

THE BILD CORNERSTONE

Durham Custom Homes (G & G Construction) 1950

Construction starts on Don Mills, Canada's first planned community 1952

SCAN TO SEE OUR DECADE-BY-DECADE TIMELINE

City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 220, Series 65, File 47, Item 4

BECOMING A METROPOLIS

Toronto embraces progress, leads with infrastructure



An aerial view of Old City Hall, Queen St. W. in Toronto, circa 1950s. Illustration by Suzana Esteves

Suddenly, it seemed, Toronto was a city. And not just a city, a big city. Now was the time to act like a big city, boldly take control of its destiny and meet the future head on. Greatness awaited.

More prosaically, that meant building the infrastructure on which greatness and growth would depend, the vast network of transit, roads, highways, bridges and sewers that keep things moving and that would eventually lay the foundation for the entire region, the Greater Toronto Area.

Toronto would also need an updated legal structure that recognized it faced new challenges and gave the city the power it needed to meet them. That happened in 1953 when the province passed the Munic-

ipality of Metropolitan Toronto Act. It set up a regional federation comprising the "Old" City of Toronto, the townships of York, East York, North York, Etobicoke and Scarborough; the villages of Forest Hill, Long Branch and Swansea and the towns of New Toronto, Mimico, Weston and Leaside. The new entity was empowered to levy real estate taxes and borrow money. It also controlled public transit, arterial roads, regional planning, water and major sewage systems, implementation of justice, social housing and large parks. Individual municipalities remained in charge of public health, police and fire departments, libraries and business licensing.

(Continued on pg. 2)

STANDING TALL.

TORONTO IS MORE THAN A CITY. MORE THAN A PLACE WITH TALL BUILDINGS AND A WATERFRONT AND PARKS. MORE THAN A COLLECTION OF NEIGHBOURHOODS, OF SHOPS, RESTAURANTS, SCHOOLS, AND HOUSES. TORONTO IS ALL OF US. THE PEOPLE WHO STAND TOGETHER, FACING THE FUTURE, RESILIENT, HOPEFUL, AND OPTIMISTIC. WE ARE TORONTO. WE STAND TALL. MENKES.COM

(Continued from pg.1)

The impact on development was profound. The infrastructure constructed between the ‘50s to the mid-‘70s made the Greater Toronto Area possible. Builders were thrilled; though financier E.P. Taylor paid to service the land that made Don Mills possible, he also found the key to keeping local government on side. At the same time, new roads, highways and transit built by government created unprecedented access across the region.

The arrangement worked better than anyone could have hoped. While Metro handled the big issues that crossed boundaries – mostly related to infrastructure – smaller jurisdictions continued to elect their own council and were able to

It’s safe to say that the Toronto we know today would not exist without Fred Gardiner. Though his plans to run highways through the city would ultimately have to be halted, every municipality across the region still relies on the infrastructure constructed during his years in office.

Though the Yonge subway, which ran from Union Station north to Eglinton, predated the creation of Metropolitan Toronto, the 12-station line changed everything when it opened in 1954. It reduced the time needed to travel between downtown and uptown to mere minutes. Even today, it is the busiest stretch of the subway, the north-south spine that keeps city transit upright. Little wonder it triggered an unprecedented round of intensification.

But the developments that best express the growing optimism of the ‘50s were New City Hall, the Toronto-Dominion Centre and Canada’s first fully planned mixed-use suburb, Don Mills. Each was emphatically modernist and singularly ambitious. Though the first two wouldn’t actually appear on the skyline until the ‘60s, the groundwork was laid in the ‘50s. Don Mills, which opened to residents in 1953, remained under construction until 1965. All three – whether vertical or horizontal – set the stage for much of what followed. Tall and dense downtown, low and spread out outside of town.

Inevitably, ideas of what constitutes the common good evolve over time. When the first stretch of the Gardiner Expressway opened in 1959, it was hailed as the solution to Toronto’s traffic woes. But before too long, it was viewed as another source of congestion. As demand grew, the Gardiner simply couldn’t keep up.

In the ‘50s, cars were the future. With enough freeways, expressways and parkways, the automobile would take us wherever we wanted. But more highways mean more vehicles mean more highways...

The ‘50s gave us the city we inhabit today. We might not always share that decade’s impatience for the future, but cities aren’t museums or artworks; they are always a work in progress.

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BEYOND THE CITY: OAKVILLE IN THE 1950s

It was in 1953 that Ford Motor Company built its Canadian headquarters and an assembly plant in Oakville, which transformed this rural area into what is modern-day Oakville. While the 1950s saw a steady expansion of the town through industrialization – including two oil refineries also built during that decade – prior to that Oakville had a long history as a thriving port town on Lake Ontario. The town was founded in 1857, and its first mayor was George King Chisholm. The town was reliant on key industries such as lumber and ship-building. It also happened to be a terminus for the Underground Railroad, a secret network that helped African Americans escape from enslavement in the American South.

Further inland, the area was sprinkled with small settlements and fertile agricultural land, and in the early 1900s the area became known for its fruit farming, including apples, pears, plums, cherries and raspberries. Oakville strawberries were particularly renowned and gave rise to the Oakville Basket Company. But it was Ford’s Canadian headquarters and plant, close to the Canadian National Railway, along with two oil refineries (the Shell Oakville Refinery and the Oakville Refinery, operated by Petro-Canada, both of which are now closed) and the Procor rail car factory (now closed) that changed this sleepy rural area into an industrial mecca and commuter town.

As its population grew, so too did residential development. In 1962, the town merged with its neighbouring villages, including Bronte, Paleramo and Sheridan, becoming the Town of Oakville – Canada’s largest town, just a 30-minute drive to Toronto and a one-hour drive to the U.S. borders at Niagara Falls and Buffalo. Even back in the day, many residents would commute to Toronto for work on the Grand Trunk Railway. Later, with easy access to Toronto via the QEW, 403, 407 and GO Transit, Oakville evolved into a popular commuter hub.

Oakville, which is forecast to reach a total population of 267,400 by the year 2031, is now home to more than 200,000 people in 13 neighbourhoods – many of those based on the traditional villages that came together during amalgamation. Old Oakville, for example, is now Downtown Oakville. The town is also home to three distinct business areas: Downtown Oakville, Bronte Village and Kerr Village, each with its own unique character. Yet it retains its industrial roots, home to headquarters representing automotive, technology, aerospace and pharmaceutical sectors. But it’s also kept some of that rural charm, with more than 1,420 hectares of parkland, 150 kilometres of trails, 200 parks and outdoor spaces, 31 waterfront parks and two harbours.

THE BILD
CORNERSTONE

City of Toronto passes first
zoning by-law 18642
1952

Cadillac Development
Corporation
1953

Donald Contracting
(Donald Construction)
1953

Lebovic
Enterprises
1953



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SUBURBAN SOLUTIONS

Housing shortage leads to greener pastures beyond the old city



Homes in the new subdivision of Don Mills, circa 1950s, show ample lot sizes. Toronto Star Archives / Contributor

Finding a place of one’s own is never easy, especially in Toronto, a city experiencing a chronic shortage of housing. That’s as true today as it was in the 1950s when the economy, local and national, was booming.

Wealthy and middle-class residents had plenty of choice. In 1957, those who had the means could buy a detached two-storey house on leafy Chaplin Cres. for \$30,500.

That sounds cheap by today’s standards, but back then an annual salary of \$3,000 was considered pretty good. In 1958, a two-storey semi at Birchmount and Eglinton fetched a more modest \$16,900. Today, these houses would fetch about \$2 million and \$850,000 respectively.

But for low-income Torontonians, finding affordable accommodation was difficult, if not impossible. Nearly 1,350 families still lived in army housing constructed during the war to meet emergency demand. Regent Park, lauded as the city’s largest and most successful renewal program, had been under construction since the late 1940s.

And though work continued through the ‘50s, it could not meet demand.

Not even a series of Housing Acts passed by Parliament starting in 1935 did much to alleviate the need for housing. For the most part, the legislation was intended to protect financial institutions that offered mortgages rather than provide direct economic assistance to the needy. The focus of policy was on helping people buy a home rather than providing “social housing.” For the most part, however, federal and provincial governments sought to avoid the obligations set out by the housing legis-

lation. Both were content to let Canadian cities do the heavy lifting.

More than anything, the succession of housing legislation laid the groundwork for Ottawa’s withdrawal from public housing. Given that cities – where the need was greatest – were “creatures of the province,” the federal government felt little pressure to intervene, except in emergencies such as the Second World War.

In 1946, the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) replaced the Wartime Housing Corp. Its mandate was to increase home ownership rates and improve housing by providing grants, loans and mortgage protection to financial institutions.

At the turn of the 20th century, two-thirds of Canadians had lived in rural areas. But by the ‘50s, the rush to big urban centres was in full swing.

In 1954, Toronto ranked among the fastest-growing cities in North America. It helped that women were entering the work force in growing numbers. As family incomes rose, the dream of owning one’s own home came ever closer.

For many, the solution to finding more affordable housing lay in the suburbs. Young couples starting a family were attracted by the lure of detached houses, large lots and cheaper financing available through the CMHC. Cities, on the other hand, were increasingly seen as inimical to family life, especially young children. Though the suburbs, which Metro Chair Frederick Gardiner liked to call “multiplication by subdivision,” meant spending more time in the car, it was a price people were willing to pay.

“

In 1954, Toronto ranked among the fastest-growing cities in America. It helped that women were entering the work force in growing numbers. As family incomes rose, the dream of owning one’s home came ever closer.

Besides, the growing network of highways taking shape in and around Toronto was going to reduce gridlock and make getting around quicker and easier than ever.

More importantly, the suburbs represented the natural evolution of housing. A seemingly endless supply of land, increased mobility and a growing population gave the development industry an opportunity to apply its newly refined ability to build housing quickly and at prices people could afford. The lessons learned during wartime were not wasted; they were transformed to the new frontiers at the edges of towns.

Though Toronto’s suburbs began as residential “satellites,” they quickly evolved into independent jurisdictions with their own economic base. Mississauga is a good example; it started as a “bedroom community,” but became a discrete urban centre. Today, more people commute to Mississauga to work than leave it for work. By

the end of the last century, three-quarters of Torontonians lived in the suburbs.

The suburbs have not lost their appeal. According to Queen’s University planning professor David Gordon, 66 percent of Canadians now live in suburbs of one form or another.

At the same time, the inner suburbs built in places like North York, Etobicoke and Scarborough starting in the ‘50s are now part of the new Toronto created in 1998 when the city and surrounding municipalities were abruptly amalgamated. So perhaps suburbia is a relative term. The 905/416 divide that delineates urban from suburban today would have made no sense in the ‘50s. Then, suburbia was more than a location—it was a frame of mind, a way of life and a move toward a better future.

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THE BILD
CORNERSTONE

City of Toronto federated into a regional government known as Metropolitan Toronto
1954

Federal government amends Bank Act and agrees to insure mortgage loans
1954

Menkes Developments Ltd
1954

Yonge Street subway opens
1954

Minto Group (Mercury Homes)
1955

Thomas Feeley Construction (Feeley Group Developments Limited)
1955

THE BIRTH OF DON MILLS, CANADA'S ORIGINAL SUBURB

Don Mills: there's something about the garden city suburb, and the motivation behind it, that speaks of a desire to create an ideal community.

No one questions the enormous influence Don Mills had on subsequent suburban development. It became a template. Its beginnings date back to the late 1940s when Toronto industrialist E.P. Taylor began to assemble farmland north and east of the city. His initial plan was for a brewery surrounded by workers' housing. But by the early 1950s, when he had acquired more than 2,000 acres, it was clear his dreams had grown much more ambitious.

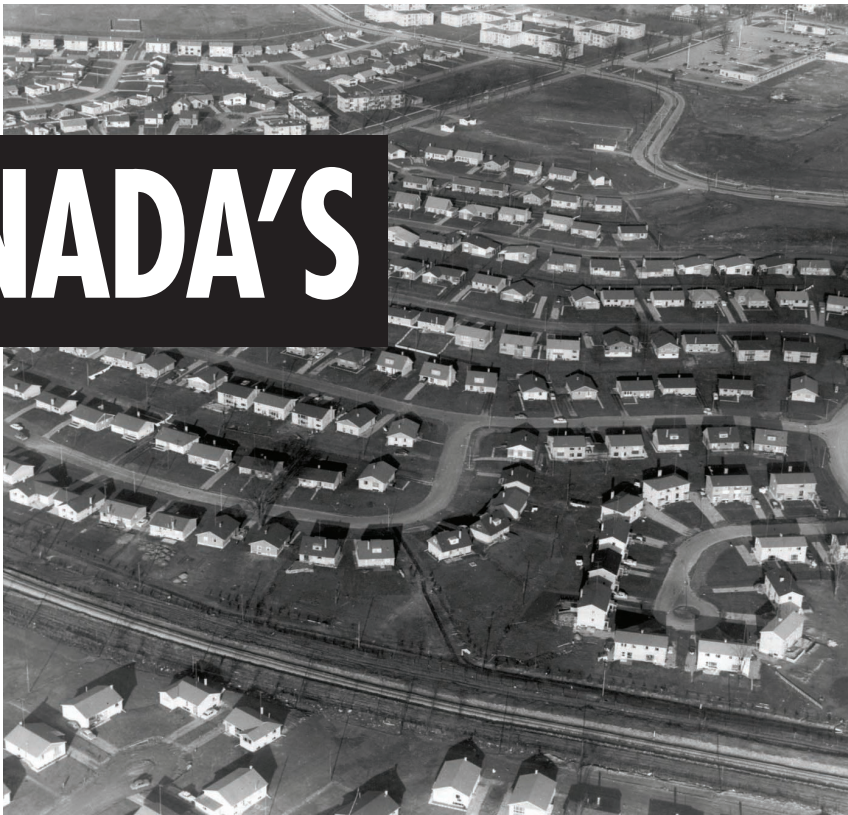
How ambitious became clear in 1951 when Taylor requested a meeting with North York Council to present his proposal for a new community. Also that year, Macklin Hancock, son-in-law of Taylor's executive assistant, Karl Fraser, was named the project's chief planner. Though still a student at Harvard, Hancock had studied with leading-edge planning theorists including Walter Gropius, William Holford and Hideo Sasaki. Young and idealistic, he laid out a contemporary garden city scheme guided by several principles: the primacy of neighbourhoods; separation of uses; proliferation of green spaces; irregular street patterns; large lots and modernist architecture.

Hancock divided the "new town" into four quadrants defined by Lawrence Ave. and Don Mills Rd., which intersected at the

heart of the community. Each section was conceived as a distinct neighbourhood with its own parks, playgrounds, corner stores and schools. As Hancock wrote in 1954, "... the physical plan developed locates the school at the centre of each neighbourhood, the residential street system focusing toward the school with its related playground and open space. Residents will then be conscious of their neighbourhood identity in the overall scheme of the town."

A large area at Don Mills and Lawrence became the location of a shopping centre and a number of recreational facilities that drew people from the surrounding region. It's important to remember that the received wisdom of the '50s was that cities had become dirty, depressing and dangerous. They had grown so large, anonymous and dispersed that occupants were left feeling isolated and alienated. Don Mills represented nothing less than an attempt to restore a sense of place and renew the bonds that connect the individual, community and nature.

It was an immediate success. Houses sold as quickly as they were finished. Buyers, mainly well-heeled young professionals, liked the large lots, the light-filled houses, the profusion of greenery and the security of being separated from the cacophony and chaos of the city. This wasn't the sort of place that attracted non-residents; outsiders had no reason to be there. On the other hand, because houses were



The brand-new subdivision of Don Mills, as seen in 1955, shows its curving streets and cul-de-sacs. The area was split into four quadrants. Toronto Star Archives / Contributor

relatively expensive, only 5 percent of workers at local businesses could afford to live in Don Mills, considerably less than the 50 percent Hancock expected.

But as John Sewell points out in his 1993 book, *The Shape of the City*, "While Hancock delivered innovations in land-use planning, it was Taylor's skills as an entrepreneur and developer that made the plan so very successful. Taylor came up with radical new concepts in land development that ensured the spread of this new urban form."

Though he managed to maintain financial control of the project, he carefully ensured variety by employing no fewer than 50 contractors. Most importantly, Taylor paid for the land to be serviced. Freed from that very heavy burden, the municipality was less inclined to interfere, especially when dealing with one of Canada's most innovative entrepreneurs, whose brilliance was plain to see.

When completed in 1965, Don Mills was an established feature on the regional landscape. But like all "planned" communities, the coherence of the scheme was altered, as big lots were subdivided and corner stores repurposed for lack of buyers. What the neighbourhood lost in the purity of the plan it gained in a more open and relaxed mixed-use approach.

In the '70s, Don Mills Shopping Centre, which had started life as a strip mall in the '50s, was enclosed. Then in 2009, that was torn down and replaced by the Shops at Don Mills, an attractive open-air retail centre complete with narrow roads lined with glass storefronts – one of them named for Karl Fraser. Don Mills had come full circle. It was now part of the city it had left behind so many years before.

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THE BILD
CORNERSTONE

Kaneff Construction
(Kaneff Group)
1956

The Remington
Group
1956

Brookfield Residential
(Costain Homes)
1956

Fieldgate Development
and Construction
1957

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GOING UNDERGROUND

The subway moves the city – one fare at a time – into the future

It’s hard to exaggerate how much the opening of the subway in 1954 transformed Toronto. Running up Yonge St. from Union Station north to Eglinton, it changed everything, not just how people got around but where they lived, worked and played. Everywhere the subway went, growth was sure to follow.

With few exceptions, the Yonge subway and the lines that followed set the pattern of development, from the Financial District all the way north to the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Unlike other international cities such as New York, London, Paris and Hong Kong, however, Toronto has consistently failed to connect land use planning rules to transit. Even today, and despite provincial policy objectives, the city and many existing residents continue to resist high-density development around subway stations, where it naturally belongs.

Streetcars had moved passengers up and down Yonge since the early 19th Century, but the subway took public transit to a whole new level. It carried more people faster and farther than anything they were used to. Toronto suddenly seemed not just better connected, but smaller. For people more accustomed to sitting in slow-moving streetcars or being stuck in traffic, higher-order public transit had the almost magical ability to obliterate time and distance.

Though post-war material shortages slowed construction, building the 7.4-kilometre line required 1.4 million sacks of cement, 10,000 tonnes of structural steel,



The weekday morning rush hour along the Yonge subway line at the King St. subway station, as southbound passengers had only three narrow exits from which to choose. Toronto Star, Graham Bezan / Contributor

14,000 tonnes of reinforcing steel, 4,200 tonnes of rail steel and 240,000 tonnes of gravel. The cost was put at \$67 million. The rolling stock was purchased from the Gloucester Railway Wagon and Carriage Company in England for \$7.8 million. They would remain in service until 1990.

When it finally opened, the subway had been under construction for five years. We like to look back and admire the patience with which Torontonians endured the seemingly endless roadwork. Yonge was dug up, one block at a time, and covered with wooden planks that weren’t removed until the work beneath was complete and the road ready to be rebuilt.

Except for Eaton’s and Simpson’s, Yonge St. property owners were opposed to having subway entrances in their buildings. Clearly, they did not realize that merchants in

most cities considered them customer magnets. That would change in time, but Torontonians were still ambivalent. They had approved rapid transit in a 1946 vote (69,935 to 8,630) but worried about who would pay and how much it would cost.

In fact, the TTC had been saving for a subway for years. Because it wasn’t required to give surplus revenues to the city, it had accumulated enough cash to start digging. And though there was talk the federal government would contribute \$10 million to the project, that never materialized. As it turned out, Canada’s first subway was also the first in the world built without tax money. Amazingly, the funds came from the fare box.

By then, almost four decades had passed since the idea of subway was first proposed in 1911. Until well into the 1930s

and early ’40s, Toronto papers and politicians dismissed the notion out of hand. The city wasn’t big enough, they said. It couldn’t afford a subway. And besides, who knew what engineers might encounter underground.

Eventually, it dawned on even the most reluctant taxpayer that streetcars could no longer cope with demand. As *Maclean’s* magazine argued in an article written in 1950, months after construction had started: “There is little doubt the subway is necessary if Toronto is to grow without traffic choking it to death. In the horsecar days of 1861 the speed limit was 6 mph on Yonge. The legal limit is now five times that, but actual speed of traffic in rush hour remains the same. The subway will increase the capacity of Yonge St. from 14,000 passengers an hour in one direction to 50,000, and will cut traveling time by more than a half.”

Once dignitaries were finished making speeches and cutting ribbons at the opening ceremonies at Davisville Station, the Yonge line opened to the public. It was 1:30 and by closing time more than 200,000 Torontonians had lined up for a ride. Cash fare was a dime. Those who preferred could buy three tickets for a quarter. Almost immediately, the city began plotting ways to expand subway service. Within five years of the opening, the Yonge-University and the Bloor-Danforth lines were approved. Neither would start operation until the ’60s, but Toronto was now a committed transit city.

Nearly six decades later, the impact of that first stretch of subway can be seen not only in shorter travel times but in the transformational development along the line, from King, Queen and Dundas stations all the way to St. Clair, Davisville and Eglinton. The subway didn’t just take us to the places we wanted to go, it created them.

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Rockport Group
1957

Redpath Sugar Factory opens
1958

Construction of the Gardiner begins
1959

York University established
1959



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