

Shift happens

Mixing it up

Complemented by the provincial government's growth initiative, developers are riding the wave of the future with multi-function urban areas

Mixed-use communities are well-planned urbanized areas where people can live, work and play and the benefit beyond having all of those places nearby, is that the pressure on local resources like sewer, water, roads and transit is minimized.

Mixed-use development — which creates a complete community by blending residential living with a combination of commercial, retail or industrial spaces within a single area or building — provides condominium and townhouse communities with easily accessible places to live, work and shop. This urban design principle has been embraced by large and growing cities. Mixed-use development aims to utilize land more efficiently and cut down on traffic congestion and infrastructure expansion. By adding a mix of uses to the land, there is a greater return on the land value. In addition to providing employment opportunities for local residents, these lands also generate business tax revenue for the municipality.

When land was plentiful and uses were separated, commercial and industrial facilities were frequently built away from where people lived. But as Toronto grew, so did traffic congestion and commute times. Now, the amount of land that could easily be converted into subdivisions, businesses, shopping malls and parks without straining roads, sewers and green spaces is reduced. In 2006 the provincial government brought in the Places to Grow Act, which restricted new development to designated growth areas and encouraged mixed-use developments.

Consequently, new housing communities throughout the GTA would become more densely populated in order to conserve land for the future. For some communities, this meant more townhouses and, for other areas — such as those along subway lines and busy arterial roads — more condos. But implementing the province's growth strategy also meant that these new communities must incorporate places where people can work, play and shop, as well as raise families. Land developers in the GTA now aim to incorporate all of these functions into their creatively-designed projects.

One such community that's in sync with the principle of mixed-use development is at 156 Portland St., located in the bustling Queen

Street West neighbourhood. When it was completed in 2011, it offered 96 condominium units and an assortment of retail stores such as Winners and Loblaws, as well as a new, innovatively designed branch of BMO Bank of Montreal. There is, in fact, more non-residential floor space at Queen and Portland than residential square footage.

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“It started as an opportunity to add value to a building and make it more than people just living together,” says Steve Deveaux, vice-president of land development for builders Tribute Communities. “It was an

opportunity to build a more interesting vertical neighbourhood.”

Evidence of the shift to increased mixed-use development outside the City of Toronto as well, is Markham's World on Yonge community, currently under construction at Yonge St. and Steeles Ave. A project of Markham-based real estate company Liberty Development Corporation, World on Yonge will feature about 1 million sq. ft. of new residential housing and 500,000 sq. ft. of office and retail space on a 10-acre site. “We wanted to add value to the corner of Yonge Street and Doncaster Avenue and we are doing it by bringing people close to job opportunities, amenities, transit and the existing neighbourhoods nearby will benefit

from the revitalization as well,” explains Marco Filice, a senior vice-president at Liberty Development.

World on Yonge is in an established neighbourhood; it integrates well into the community; and it is close to existing infrastructure and mass transit. It also means that the City of Markham doesn't need to build new sewers or roads. Filice compares these new developments to streetscapes before the postwar suburban explosion, when people happily lived above shops or near commercial hubs because they didn't have cars. “Really, this is a re-

naissance of how things used to be, before suburban development bifurcated the land,” says Filice.

There still remains areas of the GTA where strategic employment lands need to be preserved for industrial uses such as manufacturing, food processing, wholesale trade and distribution.

“Due to current market trends, there is not much demand for additional manufacturing and processing facilities. However, with an ever-increasing amount of imported goods being shipped locally, warehousing and distribution buildings are in high demand. These buildings store product efficiently and even though they not large employment hubs, they are huge generators of tax revenues for municipalities,” says Blair Wolk, vice-president of Orlando Corporation, a major developer of commercial space in the GTA.

According to Wolk, the changing nature of work means there will be greater demand for service-oriented industries such as finance, insurance and other professional services, as well as the growth of the corporate head offices. This kind of facility, however, can be easily integrated into existing neighbourhoods and requires less space per employee.

One such project is the Heartland Business Community, a 1,250-acre development being undertaken by Orlando on Mississauga's Hwy. 10 corridor, which, says Wolk, is where the municipality has planned for more integration. Once fully built out, Heartland will offer 25 million square feet of office, industrial and retail space — enough to employ 35,000 people.

Blending right in

Bank sees mixed-use developments as an opportunity to nurture strong relationships with customers

In October 2011, BMO opened up a new branch within the Queen and Portland development of builders Tribute Communities. Specifically designed to blend into an urban residential setting, the branch has few of the physical barriers between staff and customers typically found in traditional bank branches, such as counters and desks.

The design of bank branches like the one at Queen and Portland allows BMO to establish a friendly presence in emerging communities and be closer to where customers actually live, says Paul Dilda, head of the bank's North America Branch Channels.

Are you happy with how things are going at Queen and Portland? Are there similar branches planned?

We have been opening new branches in key markets across the country, particularly where we see increased development. The neighbourhood served by our Queen and Portland branch is such a market, where increased residential density [arising] from redevelopment over the years has created a vibrant neighbourhood that we are delighted to serve. Our branch location is conveniently located [amid] groceries, drugstores and other retailers. We are very happy with how things are going there; our branch is well received by the community and our team is having great conversations with our neighbours every day.

What attracted you to this type of location? Does BMO want to be closer to people in changing high-density neighbourhoods?

BMO is attracted to the growth that redevelopment has created as well as the sense of community that is formed. Our neighbourhood branch model is designed to be a convenient, welcoming part of such a community. These types of mixed-use developments often offer retail opportunities that provide residents with convenient access to business services, banking being one of them, and we are excited to be a part of the community.

Do employees express a preference for working in a mixed-use branch?

Employees do appreciate being part of the community that this type of location affords [because] they are part of the “scene,” which helps to nurture strong relationships with our customers.

This is the seventh in an eight-part series sponsored by BILD. Look for the next one on Sat., Dec. 22



Live, work, play

Time is too precious to commute, says resident

Entrepreneur Adrian Bartha, 30, grew up in Parkdale, in Toronto's west end. He recently moved into the mixed-development community at 156 Portland Street. For Bartha — who is the CEO of eCompliance Management Solutions Inc., a software company that creates Web-based occupational health and safety products — the daily commute to his office is now just a short walk away from his home on Wolseley Street.

What is your daily commute to work? How long does it take you to get there?

My commute is around 100 feet! I had to work in the suburbs before and [had to] commute.

What is the Queen Street West and Portland area like to live in? What types of people live here?

This area is very eclectic and it has a lot of diversity to it. There are different types of people from all walks of life here...great restaurants and a real sense of culture and community. I might not be part of all the little communities here, but I like being around them. There is a good energy.

Do you socialize here too?

Yes, I stay along King or Queen West or Roncesvalles for the most part. And I feel like I have most of what I need in and around here. Toronto is almost like a dozen different little cities in one, and people usually to stick to their two or three [favourite areas] — and that's what I do as well.

You've lived in this area for years. How have you seen it change and grow? How do you see it continuing to grow?

As a child I grew up further on Queen West and this neighborhood has changed a lot. There are some affluence and gentrification effects taking place. As long as it remains diverse I'll be happy. I want the little independent stores and restaurants to stay.

Would you recommend living and working in the same area?

I'd highly recommend it. I'll always strive to work and live in places that are close together — it saves time. Time is too precious to spend commuting.



Busy CEO Adrian Bartha, 30, works, lives, shops and spends much of his free time in his Queen and Portland neighbourhood. “There is a good energy [here],” he says.

ROGER YIP

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