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Can we reinvent the suburbs?

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When most people look at suburban intersections, they see malls, gas stations and parking lots. Cliff Korman sees potential.

The Toronto architect specializes in “greyfield” development. Greenfield developers build on farmland or other undeveloped space. Brownfield developers build on old industrial lands. Greyfield developers exploit the grey asphalt of suburbia. The aim is to unleash the value of underused suburban land, replacing parking lots, low-rise malls and sprawling warehouses with new apartment towers, office buildings and shopping streets.

Mr. Korman’s firm, Kirkor architects, has its hand in 10 greyfield projects in the Toronto region. It’s good for business at his company of just 62 employees, but it’s even better for the city. By taking advantage of greyfields, he says, Toronto can reinvent its suburbs. His projects strive to bring urban vitality to barren suburban intersections by creating mixed-use “live, work, shop” development.

At Yonge and Sheppard, where a parking lot now stands, 45-storey and 37-storey towers mixing residential and office space will rise to create the new Hullmark Centre. Farther north near Steeles, another pair of glass-and-steel towers will go up at 7171 Yonge St., a mixed-use project incorporating two public parks.

Over at Don Mills and Steeles, Mr. Korman is hoping to replace a down-at-heel mall and big parking lot with a project that again mixes residential towers, parks and street-level shops. In an artist’s conception, what is now a bit of a dead-zone becomes a lively new mini-community where people walk and take transit instead of being slaves to the car.

He says there are dozens of similar underused intersections in suburban Toronto with nothing but “acres of grey and a little strip of plaza – there’s just miles of it.” In one site developers are considering for intensification, a warehouse with 60 employees covers seven acres, a gross waste of urban real estate.

If you concentrate development at suburban nodes, “think of how many less roads you build, how many less sewer lines you build, how many less fire hydrants you need, how much less police and fire trucks you use. This is ultimately sustainable. We’re talking a more sustainable world.”

That kind of thinking has been conventional wisdom in city planning departments for years. The problem is getting local residents to go along. Many fear more intense development will worsen traffic and hurt real estate values.

Not true, says Mr. Korman, a fast-talking dynamo who darts in and out of the room to fetch sketches and plans. His projects are designed to discourage car use. Many incorporate bike lockers and auto-share spaces.

As for property values, "Let's get rid of one huge urban myth: A mixed-use intensified project is going to devalue my property. Forget it! Total opposite. All we do is value-up the neighbourhood. We're the top end of the market."

Governments stand to gain, too. In one project, property taxes are expected to rise to \$5-million from \$200,000, a windfall for the municipality, which will also rake in big development fees.

Even so, Mr. Korman spends countless hours soothing community groups, preparing detailed submissions to the Ontario Municipal Board and negotiating with politicians. "Local councillors," he says, "are elected to protect the status quo."

In the project at Don Mills and Steeles, there have been no less than 22 ratepayers meetings on the supposed horrors of a modest development, already much scaled back in height and density from a developer's original proposal. The local councillor won election by loudly opposing it.

Despite such hurdles, Mr. Korman is optimistic. After years of planning and design work, many of his projects, and others like them, are finally taking shape. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants are streaming into the city, many of them people who were accustomed to apartment living back home, who want to avoid the expense of a car and who like living where the action is – even if the action is at Dufferin and Sheppard instead of Queen and Spadina. "The city can absorb a million people, but you've got to have a plan," he says.

That plan has to include a remake of Toronto's neglected greyfields.

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