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Putting Toronto's Best Self Forward [Housing on Toronto's Main Streets]

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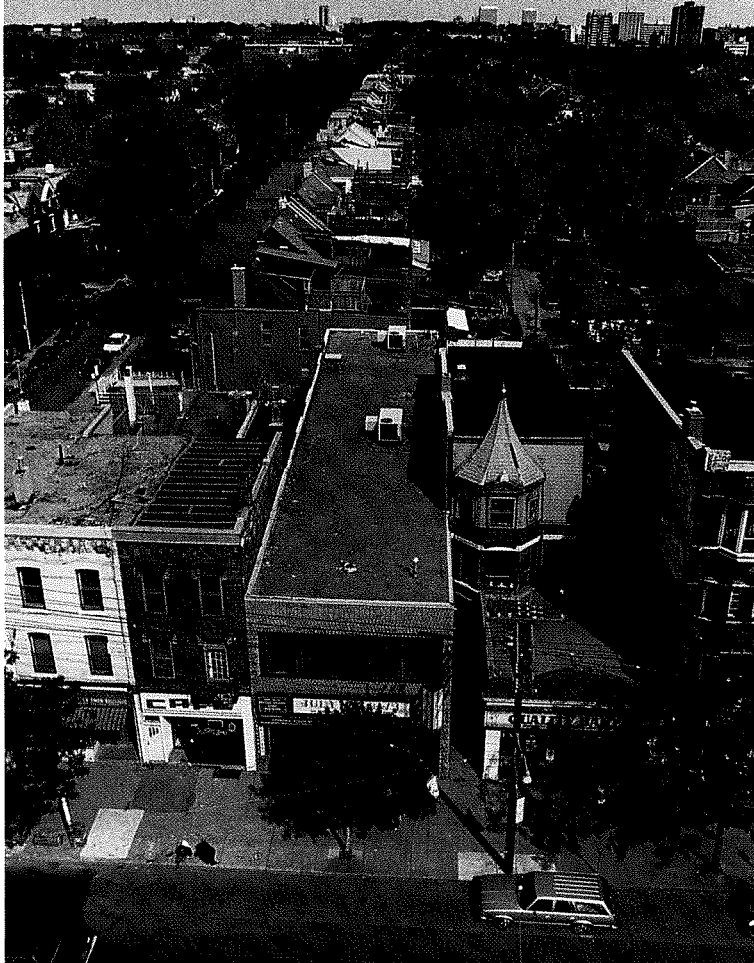
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Jane Jacobs



Putting

A good basic precept is be yourself. Another good precept is become your best self. That isn't quite as basic, because if you don't accept and have some understanding of yourself, and some self-esteem, you can't become your best self.

Toronto's

It is the same with cities. That's what the Housing on Main Streets competition was about — Toronto being itself and becoming its best self, instead of working at cross purposes to its nature.

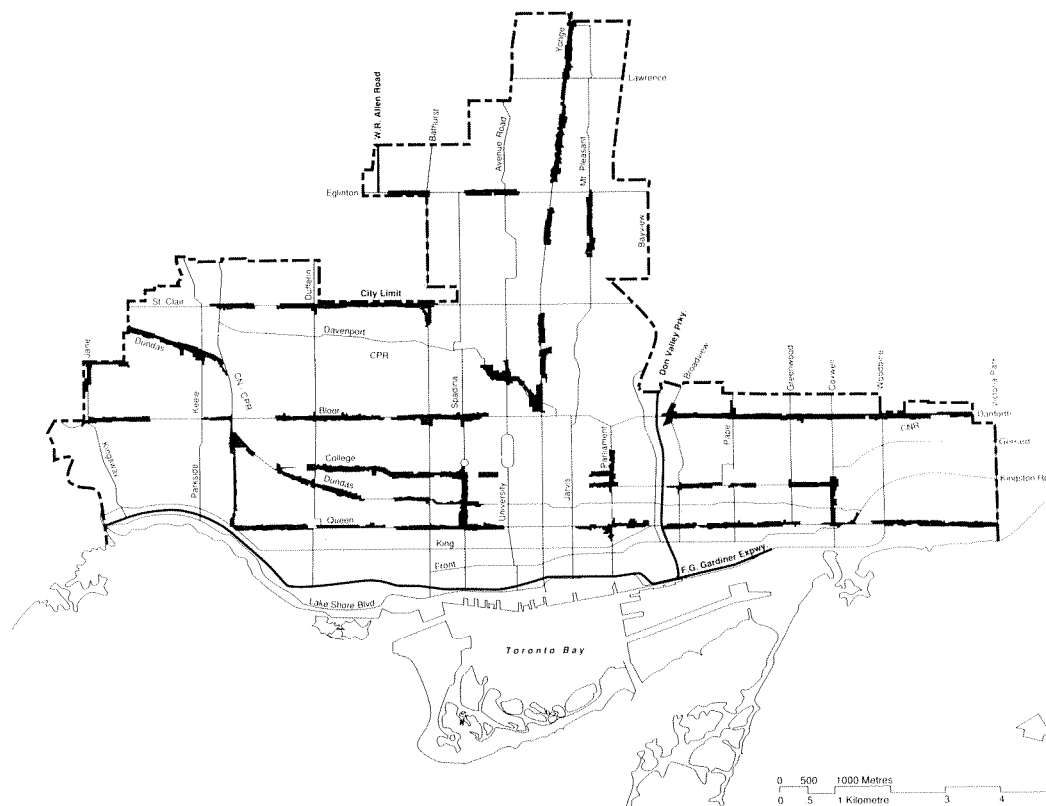
Best Self

It wasn't many years ago that Toronto, like other cities, was in a kind of delayed adolescent dither about its identity, in which it asked, "What's my type? Am I the homey kind or the svelte sophisticated type?"

Forward

You can still see results of the planning fashions the city tried on: Among the more unfortunate are relics of attempts to expunge linear main streets in favor of commercial nodes. You can see here and there these sad little places, dreary corner parking lots with dismal little sprawls behind them — so different from streets with vitality and dignity.

Toronto's main streets are more than commercial centers for the neighborhoods through which they pass — they are a framework that holds the city together. The darkened segments represent areas in which the potential for more housing has been studied.



A few years ago this attitude changed; planners began to observe, acknowledge and admire Toronto's main streets and to consider the advantages of adding housing to them.

Toronto is not different from other cities in having main streets, but those streets are especially important here, being part of the most basic "self" of the city. The city has many selves, as we acknowledge when we speak of the neighborhoods, the downtown and the waterfront. But what holds them together is the structure of the city, the grid upon which the city is built, with the main streets occurring every so often in both directions.

There are historical reasons why Toronto was laid out as a grid and why particular streets on this grid became main streets. But it isn't for historical reasons that these main streets retain their importance and vitality. They provide a congenial form for the city; if they hadn't, they would have disintegrated. They would have blurred. But they remain the bones of the city and have much to do with its personality.

One reason the main streets are so congenial and resilient is their easy adaptability, not only over time but also place. You can board a main street's streetcar or bus and pass through an encyclopedia of neighborhoods. The street takes on different nuances as it passes through different places, adapting to what is around it. This is a large part of the secret of these streets' vitality.

Another asset is their enduring hospitality to small land owners and small enterprises, important to the success that so many immigrants have attained after arriving in Toronto. These streets have been vital in giving commercial opportunities to immigrants and also giving to others the opportunity to share in what immigrants bring.

Another characteristic is that they are predominantly low-rise. Think how different they would be if they had walls of skyscrapers throwing great shadows on the neighborhoods behind them. But as it is, they don't blight their neighborhoods either with gratuitous shadows or with impersonal scale. They fit very well. It's surprising how you can turn the corner from a more serene residential street to a main street and be at ease with the change to commerce and bustle.

The main streets are also very democratic places. Everybody uses them. All kinds of activities take place along them. At their best they contain no end of conveniences and surprises in compact, short spaces.

Another virtue is their long continuity, which makes different parts of the city so accessible to all. There is a romantic notion that a city ought to be a series of insular villages. You don't really have a village if you attempt that, and you lose the advantages of being in a city. One can so easily share in the whole life of the city by traveling these streets.

For these streets to be at their best, they clearly need help in places; they need intensification, in particular. While they should be kept low-rise because that has so much to do with their human scale, hospitality to small enterprises, convenience and other characteristics, they are too low-scale and thin in many instances. A single story is not high enough. And a gap in which nothing is built is too low-scale, even if it has some automobiles on it. If you look, you see many stretches of continuous four- and five-story buildings, and in some cases six-story buildings, that retain excellent human scale, work well and express all the other assets of these streets.

We should begin filling in the missing teeth with four- or five-story buildings, with retail on the first floor and housing up above, because that is the nature of our main streets.

People who have never lived on busy streets seem to be frightened of two things: noise and parking. Let me try to lay those fears to rest. I lived in a three-story house on a street in New York, with more noise, more traffic and more dirt than anything you can imagine in Toronto. I can vouch that this house was not noisy (the street was terribly noisy) because the building itself, as long as the front windows were closed, was a buffer against the noise. This is why the gardens and courtyards behind buildings on main streets are typically so serene, surprising and delightful.

The other bugaboo is parking. It has become the practice, when a city falls into a dither about what kind of city it will be, to decide that, "I will be a city that solves the automobile problem." Well, solving the parking problem, I assure you, is never going to solve the automobile problem. There is no way that parking can deal with the many issues and difficulties of automobiles in the city. If we try to put the burden of solving the whole business of transport on providing parking places, we are going to be lost.

One of the many good decisions the organizers of this competition made was not mandating numbers of parking spaces per units of housing. One of their objectives, instead, was to explore anew the changes in zoning and other laws that may be advisable, including those respecting parking.

It is difficult, when regulations are already in place, to know what better solutions they may be blocking, hence, to know which are worth keeping and which are in our way. One of the advantages of this competition can be the guidance it affords toward re-evaluating, re-assessing and remaking zoning laws and other regulations so the main streets can be helped, not hampered, in fulfilling their best potential. In the process, can provide very much needed housing in a form that saves energy, farmlands and long commuting times.

The streetscape of Toronto's main streets is an eclectic mix of styles that were prevalent during the last century.

