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Amidst a city in a housing crisis, single family homes are throwbacks to another era. // Chris Helgren/REUTERS

How Toronto's Dinosaur Homes Avoid Extinction

F.T. GREEN JUN 15, 2017

In 1902, Joseph West built a big house for his family on Homewood Avenue in Toronto. It was a model block back then, judging by city records — the kind of low-density development early Torontonians thought proper. It was a working-class block—West manufactured safes, and his neighbors included a coachman and a journalist—and each family had their own house and a little plot of land. No one in the area kept any hogs, sheep, cattle, or horses, but the census still bothered to ask if they did.

Today, Homewood Avenue is smack in the downtown of an enormous city, walking distance to transit and the other amenities of dense, urban living. Oddly, the house West built is still there, too, with a front yard, a back yard, a driveway, and a little fence. It's one of roughly 50,000 detached, single-family-style dwellings in urban Toronto, according to an analysis by the City Planning Division. Amidst a city in a housing crisis, they're throwbacks to another era, built when there was room to spare.

Back when West built his house on Homewood, first-generation Torontonians “almost entirely” had roots in the British Isles. And unlike their fellow Canadians in Montreal, who built lots of townhouses, they tended to be horrified by apartments.



City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1568, f1568_it0358

In 1904, sheep grazed at the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE)—a fairground that still exists—in what's now downtown Toronto. (Courtesy of the City of Toronto Archives, box 153780)

These Torontonians often believed that apartments wouldn't provide enough housework for women, which would lead them into temptation, explains Richard Dennis, a professor of geography at University College London. Apartment buildings also had dangerously ambiguous "not-quite-public, not-quite-private spaces," ripe for immorality. And critics thought apartments were too small for families, discouraging proper procreative sex.

Toronto's early homeowners also fought apartment buildings on financial grounds, fearing that proposed buildings, with their unhygienic and immoral reputations, would hurt their property values. They often won. Only property owners had a voice in zoning decisions back then, and apartments were only ever rentals, depriving their tenants of political power, Dennis explains. The government would poll local owners to decide whether to allow the construction of apartments, and the more your property was worth, the more your vote mattered. Some apartment buildings got built because a rich developer owned a bundle of local property, and their support for their own project could trump the rest of the neighborhood's opposition.

By the 1910s, the stranglehold on development created a housing shortage, Dennis wrote, leading to the spread of rooming-houses, and an increase in homeowners carving up their homes for a lodger or two. The trend exploded in the 1930s, when the Great Depression hit. Toronto, the self-declared "City of Homes," was a Potemkin village of sorts.

The rates at which people subdivided their houses have fluctuated since then, rising and falling in an inverse relationship to the value of the real estate. In 2011, roughly a quarter of detached, single-family-style homes in urban Toronto were subdivided. That's according to the same dataset from the City Planning Division, which is based on the 1966 boundaries of the city, before it merged with outlying areas. The current market frenzy means that rate is likely lower now, as rich buyers convert the most ramshackle of the city's "dirty mansions" back to single-family homes. (It doesn't make financial sense to do a big renovation to convert a polished property, real estate experts explain. You'd be crowbarring value you paid for.)

Still, as attitudes on density changed, why didn't demand for land vaporize those little homes to make way for bigger buildings? One simple reason is all those subdivisions—West's house on Homewood, for example, is an old-fashioned facade for a building that's now split into seven tiny apartments. Toronto's early, single-family houses have proved flexible, expanding and contracting to fit the needs of shifting demand. Unlike condos, their layouts are often uncannily easy to divvy up: think attics, basements, and former servants' quarters.

Another key reason why these houses are still here is that people never set them on fire. Bloorcourt, for example, never burned the way the Bronx did in New York. Unlike a number of American cities in the mid-20th century, the "broadly-defined middle class" never stopped wanting to live in Toronto, explains Richard Harris, a professor at McMaster University's School of Geography & Geology. As a result, there has always been money and political power invested in preserving its older housing.

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And then there was a quirk of Toronto's political history. Back in 1954*, the city merged with its outlying areas to form Metro Toronto. The arrangement enabled politically powerful downtowners to shunt the vast majority of public housing developments into the suburbs, relieving some of the pressure to densify.

It's also helped that Toronto has room to spare. De-industrialization has performed a magic trick, presenting developable land for highrises right in the city's core as if out of a hat. The old Railway Lands, for example, had zero residents in 1996, according to the City Planning Division. Twenty years later, it has over 20,000. Altogether, the city's downtown population rose from 103,000 in 1976 to 260,000 in 2016, with developments concentrated along Yonge Street and near the waterfront.

And there's more to come. The Port Lands, which juts into Lake Ontario, hosted an arts festival last year in the shell of an old power plant. Housing, offices, parks, and transit will follow. Tentative plans estimate it could eventually have around 30,000 residents—that would be up, again, from zero.

But should Toronto keep the old houses on their own merits? Frank Clayton, an urban and real estate economist at Ryerson University, tells a story. Back in the 1970s, the city government in Davisville was worried about the neighborhood losing low-density housing in favor of highrises. Poor people lived in those houses, which were old and shabby, and the city blocked development to protect them. About a decade later, the houses were still there but the area had gentrified.

“We kept the housing but lost the people,” says Clayton, quoting a planner's observation at the time. “The lower-income people would probably be better off if they had a lot more apartments built.”

**Correction: A previous version of this article incorrectly stated the year Metro Toronto was formed.*

About the Author

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