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One step at a time: Patience, dialogue help produce successful community revitalizations



Jeff Woo and Angela Yiu in the lobby of their condo building at Emerald City.
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Parkway Forest is a community in the remaking.

Situated steps from Highway 404 near the corner of Sheppard Avenue East and Don Mills Road, the 20-acre development originally built in the 1960s is nearing the end of a 10-year transformation and Jeffrey Woo couldn't be happier.

“This project has taken a very long time but the end result will be tremendous,” says Mr. Woo, a 28-year-old small-business banker.

Mr. Woo put down money on a one-bedroom, 572-sq.-ft. Emerald City condominium suite five years ago and finally moved in with his girlfriend last month. Having grown up in North York, he chose the area because it’s close to his parents’ house, his favourite hockey rink, and Fairview Mall where he once worked. Subway and highway access are steps away so it’s easy for the couple to get to their downtown jobs. And being a child of immigrants, Mr. Woo is thrilled with the multicultural vibe.

“The density is going to get really high really fast, but [the developer] is accommodating for a lot of that with public parks and a recreation centre,” Mr. Woo says. “Their focus on greening the space and keeping it to that kind of mantra is really positive.”

Parkway Forest just one of several impressive projects across the city designed specifically to create vibrant neighbourhoods. Described officially as “planned communities” due to their size and scope, most incorporate a variation of condos, affordable housing, public spaces, community centres, parks and shops encouraging residents to meet and mingle. Some are areas that the city has been wanting to redevelop for some time while others are ideas brought forward by eager developers, but all are gaining attention as they make their mark on Toronto’s ever-changing urban landscape.

“Everybody is looking for ways to revitalize their main streets and add more people, to take abandoned industrial lands and turn them into higher density, real and authentic neighbourhoods,” says Leo deSorcy, program manager in urban design for Toronto’s City Planning department. “The region is really holding its own in terms of building proper 21st-century cities.”

Parkway Forest is a perfect example. Once complete, it will boast 2,500 new Emerald City condo suites in nine towers, 11 townhomes, 332 apartments in four replacement rental buildings, and shops. A redesigned family park with basketball court and 50,000-sq.-ft. community centre with outdoor pool and daycare will open in the fall. Canadian artist Douglas Coupland’s crayon-inspired, seven-cylinder art installation will dot the landscape.

Naturally, projects of these magnitudes often cause a stir when initially proposed, so getting area residents on board is well worth the effort. In Parkway Forest’s case, developer Elad Canada, approached the city about its plan shortly after the Sheppard subway line opened in 2003. But as Ward 33 City Councillor Shelley Carroll recalls, the original plan was so “aggressive” that residents balked. She says their biggest concerns

were how the large-scale project would affect schools, public green space, traffic, safety and potential shadowing on the adjacent Henry Farm neighbourhood. Community consultations ensued, she says, and the developer responded positively to all the issues.

“Giving the community that much time, and really designing the whole neighbourhood instead of just figuring out the buildings, was obviously the way to go,” Ms. Carroll says. “They’re suffering through 10 years of construction but they’re happy to do it because they know what they get at the end.”

That’s the reaction Jason Garland hopes to garner once Streetcar Developments’ 2.5-acre planned community near the intersection of Queen Street West and Gladstone Avenue (above) is complete. Situated near the historic Gladstone Hotel, the project comprises five boutique loft buildings, connecting laneways, public art, and a large grocery store. It’s all aimed at young professionals who crave downtown living.

“We’ve always been fans of the Queen West area,” admits Mr. Garland, Streetcar’s vice-president of development. “We’ve kept a watch over the area for the past decade and saw the landscape evolve into an eclectic mix of trend-setting restaurants, boutiques and galleries. We felt there was a real opportunity to see us convert what were predominantly industrial lands into a mix of more desired retail, residential and non-residential uses suitable for arts- and cultural-related opportunities, which match with some of the shops along Queen Street.”

Like Elad, Streetcar worked closely with city planners and local residents to address their call for more exceptional design, more greenery and retail, plus pedestrian connections to parks, main streets and the West Toronto Railpath. Streetcar listened and complied. Or as Sarah Phipps, senior planner at Toronto’s City Planning Division, puts it: “The applicant shared these goals so this became a project where we could work together to achieve a good result.”

“We’re typically very infill-focused and a lot of our sites fall within, or close by, neighbourhoods, so we’ve naturally become a community-centric developer,” Mr. Garland says. “We always tend to engage the community early in our development cycle. It provides us the opportunity to share ideas and understand what’s meaningful to the residents in the area, and it gives us the time to incorporate many of those interests into our proposal.”

One major project that has endured two decades of on-and-off public dialogue is the 80-acre West Don Lands at the mouth of the Don River. Mr. deSorcy says back in the 1980s there was talk of extending the St. Lawrence neighbourhood towards it. But the site was

toxic and much of the land was under a floodplain, and environmental costs for cleanup and flood protection were prohibitive. The site was eventually folded into Waterfront Toronto's jurisdiction and extensive public consultations ensued.

Now Dundee Kilmer Developments is at the helm of a 35-acre planned community called Canary District (above), set to open in time for the Toronto 2015 Pan Am/Parapan Am Games. The site will consist of 808 townhomes and loft units in two condominium buildings, 253 affordable housing maisonettes and apartments, and George Brown College's first student residence. Also planned are shops, cafés, parks and promenades, and an 82,000-sq.-ft. YMCA.

Canary District will be used initially by the Games' 20,000 international athletes and their coaches. The premises will be "Games-ready" (think condos without kitchens) this spring and turned over to condo purchasers in 2016.

"It's going to complement the entire downtown east, whether it's the Distillery District or Corktown," says Jason Lester, president of Dundee Kilmer Developments. "It will be one of the most livable communities in downtown Toronto."

No doubt, patience is a virtue for makers of planned communities. Just ask Netanel Ben-Or, Elad's vice-president of development and marketing. With land at a premium and more people moving to condos, he is a firm believer that transforming a neighbourhood is complex yet satisfying — even if it is a decade in the making.

"It is totally different than just designing a tower because you're creating a community and a lifestyle," Mr. Ben-Or says.