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In the 1980s, the Toronto region experienced a problem common to many metropolitan areas in North America — it could not build enough housing at low enough cost to keep up with its rapid population growth. One of the consequences, just as elsewhere, was that a large amount of farmland was converted into spread-out, low-density suburbs.

By the end of the decade, it was evident that Toronto was overlooking an opportunity to provide new, affordable housing and strengthen its urban character: intensifying development along the network of main streets that overlays the city and its older suburbs. These main streets are the commercial and social centers of the neighborhoods through which they pass and carry public transit and utility trunk lines, yet buildings along them are typically of a relatively low density, perhaps one or two times the lot size. Development along main streets has been slow because of complex housing and zoning regulations and because much of the property is owned by people who operate small businesses there and have little desire to rebuild.

Proponents of the idea argue that putting more housing on main streets would reduce the demand for developing farmland, require minimal investment in infrastructure and provide opportunities for small builders and design firms. They also believe such a strategy would reinforce the urban community by concentrating more population — and a greater mix of income groups and household types — along these very public, very social streets.

The challenge is creating regulatory reforms and financial incentives that are strong enough to encourage a modest amount of housing development, but not so strong as to precipitate the wholesale, irrevocable redevelopment of these streets. Similarly, Toronto must determine what design regulations will support both the public nature of main streets and the private nature of housing.

Last year Toronto's planning and development department staged a competition to find prototypes for what new housing on main streets could look like, to gather ideas about regulatory reform and to gauge public reaction to the concept. This special report presents the results of that competition and comments from competition jurors on the architectural and urban design questions that the Housing on Main Streets program raises.

Few cities have a network of main streets that is as extensive, or as important to the city's social and economic life, as Toronto does. But the questions Toronto is trying to answer provide a starting point for any community that is trying to cope with growth or plan for new growth within already-developed areas.

Can Toronto attain its vision through a succession of small scale steps — each of which expresses the vision and investment of individual citizens, owners and designers? Can Toronto assert the values of urban community, of human interaction, of diversity, within a program for new development? Within Toronto's vision, can the art of architecture co-exist with the mechanics of community building?

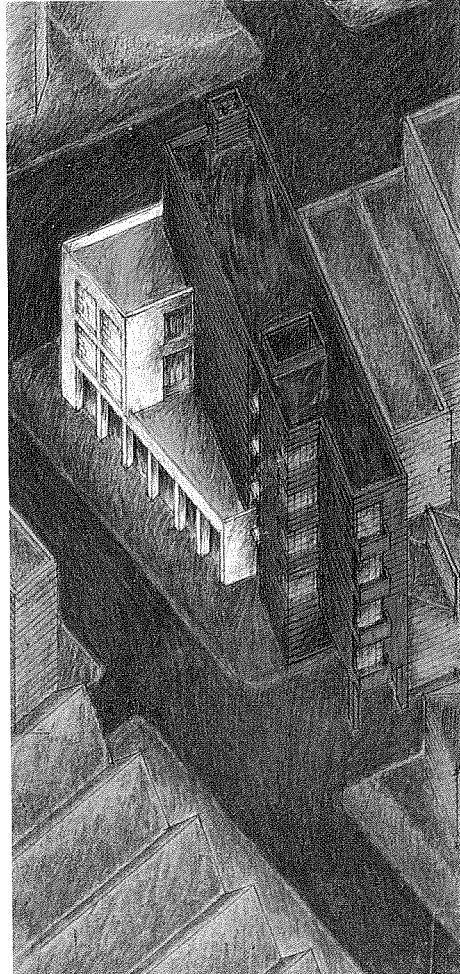
It is these questions around which the jurors' comments are framed. Toronto's answers may be visible before long. The city's planning and development department is preparing a set of zoning revisions for consideration by the city council and has started working with public, private, for-profit and not-for profit developers on the realization of several prototype Housing on Main Streets projects.

— *Todd W. Bressi*

HOUSING ON

TORONTO'S

MAIN STREETS



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