

Are we entering a new era of the co-op? Let's hope so

A new, big project on Eglinton may usher in the return of the co-op in a big way, writes Shawn Micallef.

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A proposed development at 2444 Eglinton Ave. E. designed by Henriquez Partners Architects for the city's CreateTO program, Windmill Development Group, and Civic Developments. The project will include co-ops, both market rate rent-controlled and rent-geared-to-income. CreateTO

A massive co-operative rental housing project is coming to Scarborough. Good news but so long-awaited it seems too good to be true. It's real though and exactly the kind of development, both in affordability and scale, that is needed to help get us out of the housing crisis.

In total, three buildings with 918 homes are coming to a scrap of land at 2444 Eglinton Ave. E. One building will be market condominiums for purchase, while 612 units in the other two buildings will be rentals in the co-operative model, either with market rent-controlled or rent-geared-to-income prices. “Truly affordable,” as the saying goes.

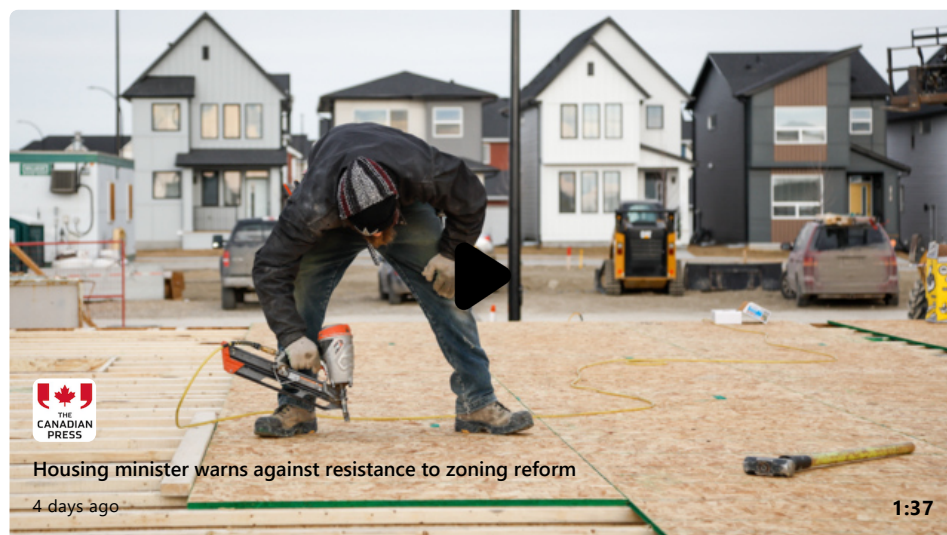
The site on Eglinton is appropriate for such a development — currently underused land next to an elevated stretch of Eglinton Avenue, up high here to cross the GO and former Scarborough RT rail lines. Future residents will be able to walk right underneath to get into Kennedy Station where they’ll have access to the Line 2 subway, the Eglinton Crosstown line, GO trains and TTC buses. A major node.

Apart from excellent subway access, and the variety of strip-mall shops in the blocks to the east and west, the site is just a few hundred metres to one of the most impressive and unique industrial-natural landscapes in Toronto. A narrow green corridor running alongside the rail corridor leads to Jack Goodlad Park and The Meadoway, the 16-kilometre hydro corridor that cuts a swath across all of Scarborough. It’s undergoing a multi-year conversion to a naturalized state with improved trails and other amenities.

The market part of this project will surely use this proximity as a selling point, as other developments use ravines or access to transit. The Meadoway is going to be a Toronto landmark, and hopefully this development will be a landmark start of many more like it and the return of the co-op in a big way.

I learned to love postmodern architecture because of co-operative housing. Let me explain.

Toronto and Canada once built lots of co-ops, a particularly special kind of affordable housing that is controlled collectively by its members (the residents), and with more of a community focus than usual rental buildings might have. However, Ontario largely stopped creating co-ops in the early 1990s when the provincial and federal governments largely got out of funding affordable housing altogether.



The last great era occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s and was in the postmodern style of the day: think lots of pastel colours, brickwork, and architectural flourishes like arches, roof peaks and other decorative elements that refer to older, classical styles.

While it fell out of fashion quickly, there's a legacy all over Toronto of these buildings, sometimes small, discreet buildings or huge ones, like the cluster along Lake Shore Boulevard west of Islington Avenue built on the site of a former Goodyear tire factory. Co-ops were often placed in wedges of leftover land, sometimes near rail corridors. Not always the best environments, pollution-wise, but the building of affordable housing was prolific. There's so much of it that I associate the postmodern style with this last great era of affordable homebuilding.

This new development may be the start of a new era and style, hopefully.

CreateTO, the city agency developing the site with private partners Civic Developments and Windmill Developments, says this will be one of the largest affordable housing projects built in Ontario in the past 25 years. That's a good thing, but really shows there are decades of catching up to do.

Older co-ops, such as the Bain and Spruce Court in Riverdale and Cabbagetown, respectively, were both established in 1913 and influenced by the English Garden City movement, set in genteel landscapes of grass, trees and shrubs.

Though much bigger than Bain or Spruce Court, 2444 Eglinton's landscape design will be in the hands of CCxA, the Montreal firm started by the late Claude Cormier that has worked on The Well in Toronto as well as Berczy Park with its beloved dog fountain.

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Lead architects are Henriquez Partners Architects, a Vancouver firm that has designed mixed affordable and innovative projects, such as Mirvish Village (former Honest Ed's site), that don't look like the standard-issue condo towers. The affordable co-op part will be run by the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto.

A transit-connected site, great architecture and landscaping, run by an organization that knows how co-ops work: it's a kind of triple threat that might help undermine the stigma affordable housing sometimes has.

"People don't want to live in public housing" is often heard in housing debates, but a lot of what exists is underfunded and maintained poorly, or had uninspiring design. The co-op model also gives people more of a stake in the building too, a feeling of ownership.

None of this is too good to be true. It's how it should be, and there should be much more to follow.



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