



Gardiner Versus Towers: Who Said Toronto Is Not Dominated by Cars?

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by Dr. Ted Kesik, P.Eng.

There are two recent events that shed light on the confused thinking that dominates the Mayor's Office at the City of Toronto. To put it in sporting terms, it is Toronto's biggest fight of the early 21st century – Gardiner versus Towers – but nobody knows it. Stranger yet, this political boxing match is unusual in that both fighters are being managed by Mayor David Miller. Perhaps Don King could learn something new here, but let's set that issue aside and examine the fight card.

The Gardiner Expressway has been a controversial intervention since its inception in 1958. Offering some of the most breathtaking views of Toronto, it has been blamed for separating Toronto from Lake Ontario and screwing up future plans for regeneration (a process that has been discussed for over a quarter of a century with no significant actions apparent to date). Some want to destroy it, some want to restore it, and others want it transformed into an exclusive pedestrian and bicycle path served by markets, cafes and shops, enclosed under retractable glass canopies for year-round use, all powered by renewable energy and serviced with green infrastructure. It was not possible to determine the total value of all the human effort and resources deployed in studying options for the Gardiner Expressway since 1958, but a recent decision by Toronto council allocated another \$11 million to study the possibility of taking down the Gardiner east of Jarvis Street. The review is forecast to take up to 4 years and is expected to nail down the \$200- to \$300-million price tag.

Towers adorn the landscape of Toronto, which has the second highest number of concrete tower apartment buildings than any other city in North America. They were constructed in the 1950s through to the early 1980s, with the vast majority coming online in the 60s and 70s. Research conducted at the turn of the millennium by the University of Toronto indicated tower renewal was both necessary to avert serious deterioration, and cost effective because of the energy savings. Many additional benefits associated with retrofits of the walls, windows, balconies and roofs were also identified, chiefly the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. The savings could also finance intensification at the base of the towers to house social services, public amenities, retail and commercial development. All of this information was presented to the Clinton Foundation last summer and its representatives indicated that tower renewal was indeed a worthwhile initiative, especially the enormous opportunity to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through improved energy efficiency. Shortly thereafter, the University of Toronto received funding from the City of Toronto, the Toronto Atmospheric Fund and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to conduct research into the development of the Tower Renewal Guidelines – a technical document intended to ensure that tower building energy retrofits delivered on their promise. The University of Toronto received a total of \$162,000 in funding to research and develop best practices for an estimated population of some 1,000 tower buildings in the GTA. The University provided another \$50,000 in-kind contribution. The investment potential of tower renewal, using an average cost of \$5-million for a comprehensive retrofit, translates into a \$5-billion price tag.

Now, assuming that people and housing were as important as cars in the Mayor's Office, the amount of money allocated to a proper tower renewal research program would be in the range of \$200 million (the Gardiner study accounts for about 4% of the projected price tag). Looking at it from another perspective, the Gardiner study team receives a little over \$1,000 for every \$1 the U of T research team receives, based on the projected price tags of the respective projects. And to make matters worse, the U of T team is under pressure to deliver the goods in a year, not the 4 years generously allotted to the Gardiner study team.

September 2, 2008 witnessed the launch of the Mayor's Tower Renewal program. The U of T research team advised against any program launch until the technical guidelines were completed and vetted by the building restoration industry, designers and regulatory officials. Toronto does not need a BC condo scandal and it takes time to gear up for wide scale building rehabilitation that is done right, and without price gouging. Somehow, the City convinced ERA Architects to develop promotional materials and participate in the launch. The U of T research team was pressured into developing a project brief describing what would become the bible of tower renewal, but declined attending the launch in protest of political opportunism taking precedence over due diligence. Readers may now appreciate the real reason for apprehension among the four demonstration projects announced by Mayor Miller. Sailing into uncharted waters shrouded by political fog without a compass is simply not prudent. It will take over 25 years to renew Toronto's tower apartment buildings and everyone knows that haste makes waste.

Almost a decade ago, two U of T professors envisioned tower renewal as a collective effort by industry, government and academia aimed at the regeneration of concrete, high-rise apartment buildings to address issues related to the environment, housing affordability and social equity. Now, that idea's called the Mayor's Tower Renewal. What will it be called if the retrofits lead to problems such as concealed deterioration and mould? Politicians come and go, but the University of Toronto cannot hide from its responsibilities.

So, who said Toronto is not dominated by cars? They are, in fact, right. Toronto is dominated by narrow minded and opportunistic thinking that leads to disproportionate investments in cars over people and housing. Long after the Gardiner Expressway is torn down or outright crumbles, people will be living in Toronto's tower apartment buildings. Hopefully, they will be safe, clean, comfortable and energy efficient buildings with good indoor air quality that remain affordable despite rising energy costs. If they are properly rehabilitated it is estimated they have several hundred years of useful service remaining. The future is in people and housing, not cars. Charity begins at home.

Ted Kesik is a professor of building science at the University of Toronto. The Tower Renewal Guidelines is a funded research project hosted by the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design at the University of Toronto and being led by Ted Kesik, Ivan Saleff and Robert Wright in collaboration with Graeme Stewart, Nick Swerdfeger and Jan Kroman. Publication is expected in 2009.