Redesigning How to Live in the Inner Suburbs

by Lisa E. Boyes

The popular view of Toronto defines the city by its downtown core, and by contrast to the 905 outer suburbs. But it is the areas between these two poles, Toronto’s inner suburbs, that contain the bulk of the amalgamated city’s growing population, much of its aging population and cultural diversity, many poorer residents—and a greater proportion of neighbourhood infrastructure that is in decline.

It is this kind of neighbourhood—within 14 kilometres of downtown, in parts of North York, East York and York, Scarborough and Etobicoke—that George Brown’s Institute Without Boundaries (IwB) in the School of Design aimed to address through its Renovate Your Neighbourhood student research and design project in 2008-2009. Community organizations collaborating on the project were Habitat for Humanity and Evergreen. The Ontario Centres of Excellence (OCE) provided seed funding for research costs.

“The inner suburbs were built from the postwar era to the 1980s with the car in mind,” says Elise Hodson, IwB program coordinator. “Their limited access to quality public spaces, sustainable food, energy and services are issues ripe for revitalization.”

A case-study neighbourhood in Don Mills was chosen as a pilot design site for the project, so that a cross-disciplinary team of eight IwB students could relate their renovation ideas to a real setting, while bearing in mind the need to ensure the concepts could be locally adapted around the world, one of the mandates of IwB. All students had prior college diplomas or undergraduate degrees in graphic design, architectural technology, architecture, urban planning and engineering. They spent an intensive academic year at the IwB on the neighbourhood project, along with elective and required courses and other off-site practicum projects. IwB students graduate with certificates in Interdisciplinary Design Strategy.

With faculty guidance, the students first analyzed the Don Mills neighbourhood through door-to-door and mail-in surveys, photographs and observation, along with mapping the site to determine how it functions and connects to the rest of the city. They also applied the IwB’s World House Matrix to the pilot site, an analysis tool that groups design considerations into twelve systems under terrain, climate, economy and culture.

Finally, they considered all this data in light of their review of research into sustainable redevelopment and best-case community and urban planning projects including, for
example, Toronto’s Wychwood Barns community garden; the U.S.-based “Brush with Kindness” community cooperative home maintenance program; and New York City’s High Line, which has transformed a defunct freight rail yard into an elevated public park.

Once the students got to the design stage, even more rigour was applied to their ideas and plans: Habitat for Humanity and Evergreen, along with other external guest speakers and experts, regularly critiqued the students’ work and provided advice.

The resulting Renovate Your Neighbourhood proposal and exhibition book, which impressed Habitat for Humanity and Evergreen when the students presented in spring 2009, includes a design catalogue of small-, medium- and large-scale project ideas organized around four themes: schools, parks, malls and housing. The housing project, for example, looks at subdividing large residential lots and unused commercial spaces for new affordable housing, also providing designs for a modular housing system adaptable to a variety of sites. Also included in the book are planning guidelines; suggested timelines; checklists to assess community needs and goals for a renovation project; marketing and community-engagement techniques; and other resources for community-based development of more affordable housing, citizen-managed public spaces, ready access to nutritious food, and sustainable land development.

Not surprisingly, the IwB’s Renovate Your Neighbourhood presentation—complete with 3D elements, a film cataloguing the year’s project development and an interactive demo of each template renovation project—won “Best Student Booth” at Toronto’s 2009 Interior Design Show.

It has also put postgraduate students like Ayla Newhouse on the path to their careers. A graphic artist on the neighbourhood project, Newhouse has just accepted a position as designer, writer and strategist with the Toronto start-up studio Normative Design. Says Newhouse, “The project gave me a live opportunity to work with talented designers inside and outside the school in a collaborative way, and to learn how to bring good ideas to the table.”

Ultimately, the success of the IwB students’ proposals for new ways of living in the inner suburbs will hinge on inspiring communities to launch pilot projects drawn from the catalogue, with support from organizations like Habitat for Humanity and Evergreen. To that end, Renovate Your Neighbourhood has already caught the attention of the United Way, People Plan Toronto and the Toronto Community Foundation. Along with Evergreen and Habitat for Humanity, they are considering taking various pieces of the comprehensive plan forward.

The Renovate Your Neighbourhood publication can be downloaded at http://www.worldhouse.ca/re_neighbourhood.