

Politics, Policy and Architecture: Tower Renewal in Suburban Toronto

The bulk of North American buildings seem cooked long before they reach the architect's drawing board. Most major decisions about how and where to build have been prescribed by a process we as designers know shamefully little about and by people who often know curiously little about design. This is due in part to a perception that these decisions – based on policy or financial issues – are outside the architect's purview. As it stands, such decisions often follow the interests of the private entities who influence them, more often than not resulting in a city wanting for civic space or public good.

This research studio and thesis prep group will explore a political role for architecture. For our purposes, this means studying planning policy issues and real estate practices that determine where in the city to build, what kind of buildings to put there, and how such buildings will be produced. The goal of this work is to embed experimental design knowledge into such messy, real-life conditions of development, and urbanization with the ambition of creating possibilities for civic benefit.

For thesis prep, students will identify a particular planning policy or real-estate practice that effects building production in Toronto. After studying these conditions, students will be asked to critically assess that policy or practice and identify civic needs or desires that they leave unfulfilled. Students will then identify sites in the city that are implied by their analysis, and produce a conceptual design sketch that will be used as a basis for their thesis project in the coming year. Along with this pragmatic assessment, students will complete theoretical readings that define possible political positions for architecture.

The research studio will apply a similar method in a semester long project about Tower Renewal in suburban Toronto. The Canadian government has recently slated \$11.2 billion for affordable housing. More locally, the province is selling land at a discounted rate for the same purpose. Currently, most of Toronto's existing affordable residential units are in mid-century tower blocks located in the suburbs. These sites present opportunities for further affordable housing development, however, Toronto's city planning agency and development community currently lack the tools that would enable the production of new housing there.

Among the challenges to planning and development practices is the fragmented nature of private land ownership that is typical of these sites. The studio will begin with a typological/morphological analysis of existing tower sites, categorizing them according to their ownership and parcelization patterns, proximity to transit, and implicitly, their development potential. Responding to these issues, students will make design sketches for what is possible to build under currently policy frameworks. For the final project, they will select a site and detail new kinds of civic spaces and building typologies. The aim is for student work to suggest alternative ways to approach regulation, financing or construction in order to facilitate high quality affordable housing.

This studio will be coordinated within the [Project Suburb Research Group](#) and will be run in collaboration with Graeme Stewart of ERA who coordinates the [Tower Renewal Partnership](#). We will also collaborate with Paul Hess who is running a parallel studio in

the U of T's Department of Geography and Planning on the same topic. Our work will build on Graeme's research to date, and he and Paul will lecture and sit on reviews. Paul's studio will investigate large scale policy issues related to these sites and we will meet to exchange findings with them. Through these discussions students will be presented with a series of issues to be addressed through both analytical and design proposals, and at the same time, they will be exposed to how experimental design knowledge can contribute to new ways of understanding the political and economic issues being presented to them.