

A project's bow to the new suburbanism

High demand suggests the concept behind Downtown Markham is an idea whose time has finally come

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Goodbye, suburban sprawl, and hello to "the hottest new trend in real estate": the new village.

That's the opinion of senior editor Chris Taylor in an article posted last week to the website of Business 2.0, the magazine he works for. Mr. Taylor tempts readers with the following invitation: "Picture the scene -- it's 2025, and you and your family are living in a beautiful, leafy-green village that seems more 19th century than 21st, even though it has only been in existence for 10 years and is just 20 miles from a major American city."

Make it a major *Canadian* city and make that city Toronto, since any winds that change the face of American suburbia in the next few decades will surely sweep across the Greater Toronto Area. If, in fact, they are not doing so already.

To be sure, the recently launched \$3-billion development by Remington Group known as Downtown Markham isn't exactly what Mr. Taylor is calling a "new village." With a projected population of 10,000, it's too big for that.

But both the new village concept and Downtown Markham belong to the same general phenomenon, which is definitely looking like the next big thing in suburban development. It's about greenfield communities composed of housing, services, places of employment and parks in easy, close proximity to each other, as opposed to big tracts of housing a car trip away from the nearest milk store.

And speaking of cars, the new suburb -- large or small -- will be very much about giving up the century-old North American addiction to driving everywhere, and learning how to walk where we need to go.

As an expression of this new suburbanism, the 243-acre Downtown Markham development, near Highway 407 and Warden Avenue, is striking and very ambitious, while not being *too* futuristic. The clearest example of the developer's caution has to do with the car, which stays as "the principal means of personal and commercial transportation," according to an invitation for bids on the architectural work to be done. Given the time-frame of the project -- just 20 years -- I think it's realistic to assume that cars will still be very much with us when Downtown Markham is finished.

But the development does look forward to a time when driving automobiles will be a sharply less desirable way to get around. A fine pedestrian promenade will bisect Downtown Markham, and the heart of it will be a very walkable retail and entertainment district. Throughout its promotional materials, Remington emphasizes the "European" scale and city-sense it intends: something mid-rise, for instance, with a strong street wall, a pervasive friendliness toward pedestrian traffic and an increased presence for mass transit.

There is also a welcome and unsuburban attitude in these plans toward sustainability: heating and cooling for the entire project, including the employment district, will be provided by a nearby electrical co-generation facility. "We are supplying what people want," Remington chief executive officer Rudy Bratty told me.

"They understand that automobile emissions are not good for the body or the soul. We are providing a quality of life, as well as a lifestyle."

Though the build-out of Downtown Markham has only just begun, it appears to be an idea whose time has come: The 105 condominium units in the first residential

building to go up for sale -- a 10-storey gateway block called Rouge Bijou -- sold out in a matter of hours.

The 82-unit second building, Rouge Terraces, was a similarly quick sell. (Prices ranged from \$185,900 to \$486,900 for suites between 470 and 1,735 square feet in Rouge Bijou and 560 to 1,570 square feet in Rouge Terraces.)

Two of 12 buildings to be designed for the site by the Toronto firm Quadrangle Architects, Rouge Bijou and Rouge Terraces are conventional modernist replies to the developer's call for "place-making" that works its magic through "change, contrast and intricacy of façade, form, colour, or materials." Remington's brochure presents visions of future streetscapes that are more along Victorian lines, with windows and storefronts framed by much masonry.

Quadrangle's scheme, in contrast to all that, features two-storey lofts at street-level, and a standard-issue façade of brick, glass and precast concrete above the lofts. Rouge Bijou is crowned by a short, luminous fin -- a top that's too inconspicuous, perhaps, but one that suits the general modesty of the building.

But will such modesty be the rule in the entire architectural design of Downtown Markham? Or will more daring ideas be coming off the drawing boards? It will be interesting to see if this vast project's architectural expressions ever match the boldness of its overall conception.

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