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The greening of suburbia: Markham to blend European piazzas, sustainable ideals

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They call it an Urbantopia: A place where people take precedence over cars, where the buildings complement rather than destroy the environment, and where work blends seamlessly with play.

Here, a typical day might include leaving your super-energy-efficient condo to cycle through a linked park system on the way to the office, a lunch-hour stop at the farmers' market in the square, followed by a quick bite at a sidewalk cafe, then early-evening shopping at brand-name stores and a live music performance at your choice of nightclubs.

Welcome to Markham, circa 2016.

The \$3-billion, mixed-used Downtown Markham development will be the legacy of outgoing mayor Don Cousens, who, for the past 12 years, has steered this booming technoburb away from urban sprawl and toward truly sustainable development.

So much so that in 2003 the venerable alternative U.S. magazine, *Utne*, named Markham as the only Canadian community in its top 10 list of "most enlightened suburbs."

"Municipal officials in Markham have embraced New Urbanism more sincerely than almost anywhere else, working hard to instill a vibrant, bustling feeling to new developments," wrote Peter Katz and Jay Walljasper at the time.

So, you have a region of four separate towns -- Thornhill, Unionville, Milliken and Old Markham -- and the chance to create a city centre from scratch. Where to begin?

"The biggest thing of all is that we just didn't need another subdivision," says Mayor Cousens. "We really had to have a fresh approach to what this community is all about and combine the live/work relationship in a way that makes good sense."

The result is sort of Silicon Valley meets Kensington High Street meets the Piazza San Marco meets Fifth Avenue, right in our own 905 backyard, within a 160-hectare area bounded by Warden Avenue, Kennedy Road and Highways 7 and 407.

"The vast majority of our projects have been on a conventional urban-sprawl basis, but there's been a change," says Rudy Bratty, chairman and CEO of The Remington Group, which is building Downtown Markham.

The project aims to combine the best of European-style human-scale planning with modern green practices.

Starting with a pedestrian-, bicycle- and transit-friendly layout of interconnected parks, piazzas, patios, shops, services and homes designed to get people out of their cars -- and just in time, too, given this month's StatsCan report that puts the average GTA commute at 79 minutes per day. Rudy Buczolits, Remington's vice-president of land development, verifies that in five years of meetings and consultations

with local residents "their biggest concern was traffic, the perception that the traffic is going to increase to a point where it was unbearable -- because it's almost unbearable there now." And Markham's population of about 270,000 is projected to grow by 11,000 more in the next five years.

In Downtown Markham, a community-wide district energy system will efficiently and cost-effectively heat and cool the 4,000 condo residences, the 750,000 square feet of retail space and the 4.5 million sq. ft. of offices, all of which will also qualify for LEED ratings.

Thinking of making the move? Well, the first two condos -- the Rouge Bijou and Rouge Terraces, comprised of 188 townhomes and mid-rise suites between 560 and 1,735 sq. ft. priced from \$185,900 to \$486,900 -- are already sold out. But Toronto's Quadrangle Architects will be responsible for up to 10 more such condominiums, to be rolled out in stages over the coming months.

All will have Energy Star appliances, low-VOC (volatile organic compounds) carpet and paint, and compact fluorescent lighting in buildings with upgraded insulation and low-E argon-filled windows. Individual ERVs (energy-recovery ventilation) give residents control over the climate and air quality within each unit. "Humidity is typically the enemy within a building -- that's why you have vapour barriers," says design partner Roland Rom Colthoff, one of four LEED-accredited staff at Quadrangle. "In this case, we're going to vent the humidity out of the building and capture the embodied energy in the water and return it to the building. It's just that much more efficient."

But to truly fit in with the urbandopian notion, eco-consciousness can't end at the front door.

Construction will utilize a high percentage of recycled materials and as much locally sourced concrete and brick as possible. Landscaping will be characterized by indigenous plants, which require no irrigation or spraying with pesticides or herbicides. There will be a green roof on the one-storey-high amenity space that links the two buildings, while the remainder of the roofs will have lighter-coloured materials to reduce the so-called heat-island effect.

Even the exterior lighting will be selected to eliminate "light pollution" from the building -- a move that's worth a point on the LEED scale.

Still, the development could not have moved ahead without addressing some ecological issues of the land, which has part of the Rouge River system running through it and other natural features, some of which have been degraded due to farming. Remington worked out a preservation and restoration strategy with the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority in the hopes of leaving the area better than they found it.

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