

Toronto developer takes on outside-of-the-box project by turning house into six condominiums

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Matthew Cohen and Brian Torry have big plans for 44 Wilson Park Road in Toronto.

INCOMMON PROJECTS

Finding the site – a large 50-by-135-foot lot with a stately Victorian home and a rear laneway – was something akin to a planetary alignment, according to developer Matthew Cohen, given what he and his business partner, Brian Torry, have in mind for it.

Through a new venture called InCommon Projects, Mr. Cohen and Mr. Torry want to transform 44 Wilson Park Rd., in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood, into a missing-middle-

type cluster of six condos. They'll do this by adding a floor to the main house, creating seven units, an internal courtyard and a laneway suite.

“We got a little lucky in the sense that there’s many elements about the lot, and the building itself, which really lends itself beautifully to our proposal,” Mr. Cohen says.

As important, however, was the polyglot nature of the neighbourhood’s housing stock – a quirky, very “Parkdalian” confection of detached homes, rooming houses, walk-ups and apartment buildings. The mix, at least in theory, should make the project an easier sell with the City of Toronto’s planning division, which polices new projects to ensure they conform with the “character” of the neighbourhood.

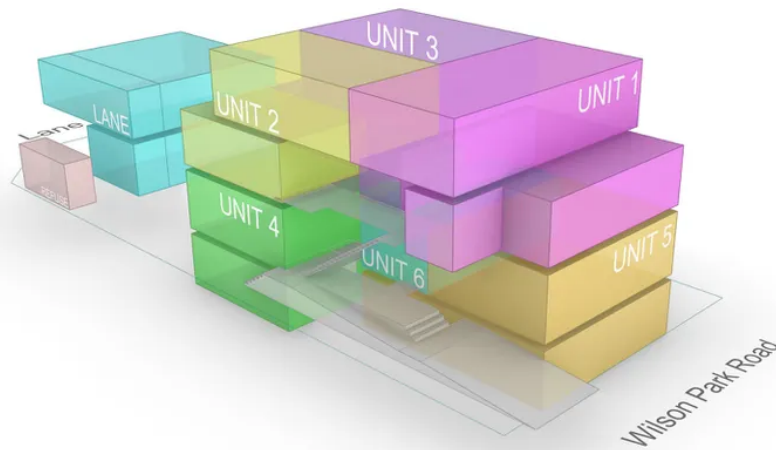
The InCommon proposal is definitely not garden-variety infill, but the partners say this kind of small-scale intensification fills a need. “The idea is introducing a new scale of housing to the city that we feel is necessary in bringing more families and households into established downtown neighborhoods,” says Mr. Cohen, whose father, Howard, owns Context Development, one of the city’s biggest builders.

The Wilson Park application lands at an opportune moment in terms of how the city is thinking about intensifying neighbourhoods. For years, low-rise residential areas in Toronto were basically off-limits to any kind of redevelopment except teardowns. Even more modest ventures, such as replacing a single-family home with a triplex, could face high hurdles.

In the postwar suburbs, preamalgamation zoning rules expressly forbids anything except detached homes. In older areas in the core, the mish-mash of housing types in some pre-Second World War neighbourhoods such as Parkdale – where duplexes, triplexes or walk-ups may share blocks with single-family homes – was grandfathered into postwar zoning rules.

But rising land prices, investment trends, gentrification and neighbourhood opposition generally conspired to prevent the construction of more small-scale multiunit projects. A similar venture to InCommon’s, a 12-unit infill in Deer Park, has received much publicity and drawn the ire of the local residents association. Even luxury townhouse infills can trigger intense local battles and lengthy challenges at the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal.





The plan for 44 Wilson Park Road in Toronto would turn a house into a cluster of six condominiums.

INCOMMON PROJECTS

Yet the city's planning policies – and in particular sacred cows such as the principle of protecting “stable” neighbourhoods – are evolving bit by bit. Last year, council adopted a report, “Expanding Housing Options,” which cautiously puts forward the notion of permitting missing-middle-type projects, such as garden suites, to go up in low-rise residential areas.

In October, the planning department launched a public consultation survey on allowing multiplexes, and the city is in the process of looking at related moves, such as intensifying “major streets” (which, like parts of Mount Pleasant Road, for example, are a step down from arterials), and approving small-scale commercial uses in neighbourhoods. Yet council recently pushed back on one related policy, allowing rooming houses across the city.

Other North American cities, such as Seattle and Portland, as well as the state of California, have pushed forward with more aggressive planning reforms allowing greater intensification in neighbourhoods, Ryerson University planning professor David Amborski notes. “It’s really moving at a snail’s pace in Toronto.”

The InCommon plan for 44 Wilson Park is certainly more ambitious than the city’s definition of a multiplex, which is two to four units. Mr. Cohen says the seven units will

vary in size from one 430-square-foot studio to variously configured two- and three-bedroom units, with sufficient space for a family.

Four will have more than 1650 sq. ft. of interior space, and all but the studio are designed to include a private outdoor terrace. “We really are trying to create family spaces for the most part, so our three-bedroom units also have a family room or an office, a living room or dining room,” adds Mr. Torry, who is also a real estate broker with PSR and a long-time member of a local residents association. (The team hasn’t yet released its price points.)





From left, Brian Torry, Matthew Cohen and architect Timothy Mitanidis.

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As for built form, the most unusual feature, in terms of Toronto's vernacular, is that the complex will envelop an internal rear courtyard, which will have landscaping and possibly an amenity such as a shared sauna or an outdoor kitchen. "I did some work with the Center for Social Innovation earlier in my career," Mr. Cohen says, "and they talk about creating 'collision points,' where you bump into your neighbour and you maybe weren't necessarily planning on it."

Larger townhouse complexes often have communal backyard space, but these plots tend to be large and open. The internal courtyard of the Wilson Park project will be more akin to the kinds of enclosed backyards that are created by the construction of a laneway suite.

According to InCommon architect Timothy Mitanidis, a principal of Creative Union Network, the project is heading off to the Committee of Adjustment in November. He points out that it would be possible to tear down the house and build a very large replacement without going through this process. But the InCommon plan requires several variances on height and parking, even though it won't exceed the lot's allowable density. The zoning bylaw states that 45 per cent of the interior space – about 4,000 sq. ft. for the proposed expansion – must belong to a single residence. Mr. Mitanidis says he didn't think this particular regulation will undermine their case.

Mr. Cohen and Mr. Torry, who once helped corral local opposition to a condo on Roncesvalles, say they canvassed the neighbours and decided to add more parking than the city required, at least in part to make the units attractive to people with children.

Ultimately, their longer-term plan is to use this venture, if they can get it off the drawing board, as a kind of template to develop other smaller-scale condo projects on larger residential lots initially developed for a single home.

One challenge, they concede, will be finding properly scaled lots in neighbourhoods where there are already missing-middle-type buildings.

The other, of course, is figuring out how to navigate community and regulatory naysayers. Although the city is looking at precisely this kind of intensification, InCommon's team concedes it's difficult to anticipate what will happen at the Committee of Adjustment, which has shot down more innocuous projects. As Mr. Cohen says, "It's a crap shoot."

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