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COMMUNITY TIES

Across North America, architects and community leaders are fostering more socially and environmentally sustainable approaches to rebuilding publicly run housing. One unifying principle? Avoid displacement and (almost) never demolish.

WORDS _Stefan Novakovic with Tura Cousins Wilson

The camera pans over a neighbourhood framed by Toronto's skyline. In the foreground, the last of the area's remaining mid-century social housing fans out in a repeating grid. Just beyond, new mixed-income buildings blend into the glass-and-steel horizon. The community is Regent Park, and the film is the video for Mustafa's "Stay Alive," the opening track of the artist's acclaimed 2021 album, *When Smoke Rises*.

"All of these tribes, and all of these street signs / None of them will be yours or mine," he sings. It is a lament for friends lost and for a community in the midst of irrevocable transformation. "Before that flattening, I want to try and

PHOTO BY MIKE SCHWARTZ



OPPOSITE: The amorphous exterior of Chicago's 3,700-square-metre Family Resource Center welcomes visitors from all sides.

ABOVE AND BELOW: Montreal's Habitations Saint-Michel Nord is revived with vibrant orange facades and spiral stairs.

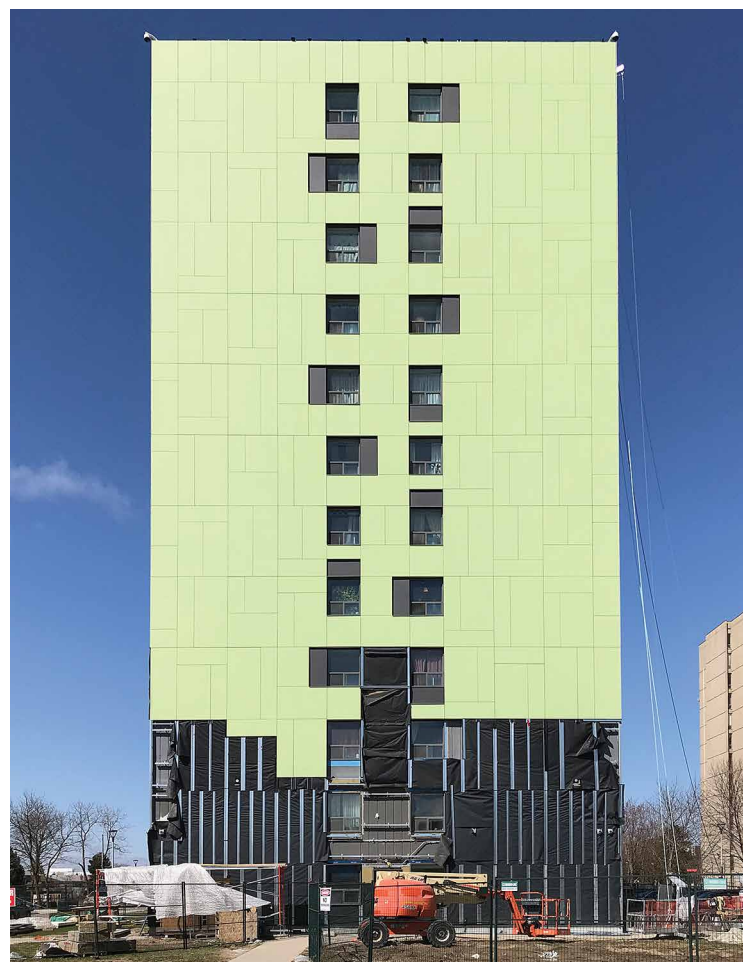
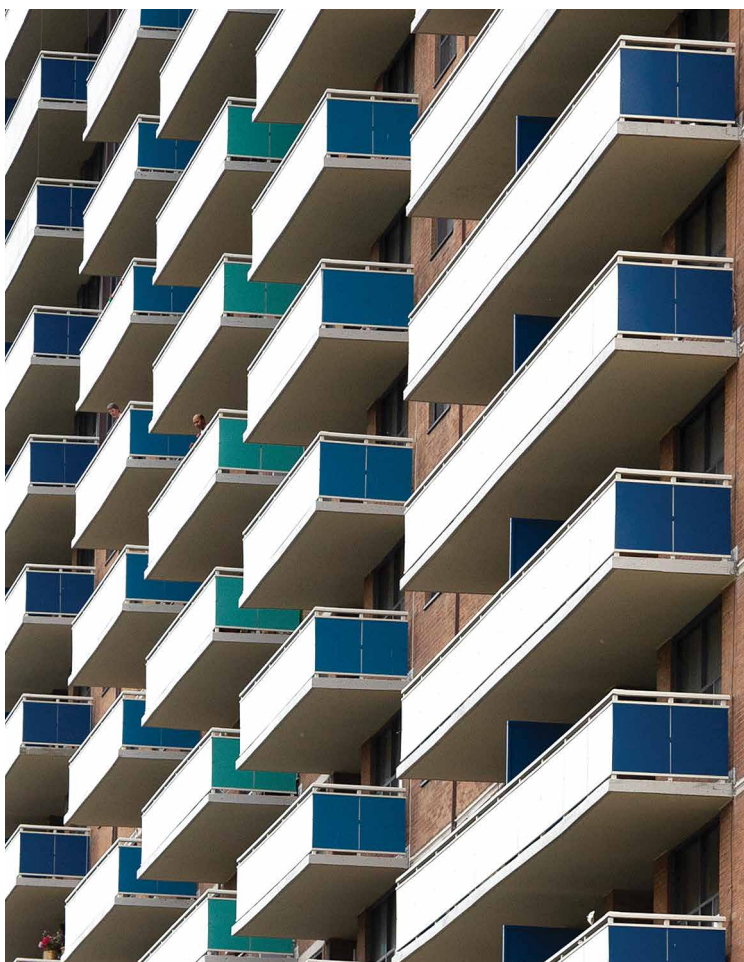


PHOTOS BY JAMES BRITTAIN

beautify it as best as I can," Mustafa told the *Guardian*. "I'm trying to preserve the memories of young Black Muslims [that] deserve to be preserved."

The elegiac tone is a departure from the promise of a revitalization touted as an international paradigm and celebrated as a "model of inclusion" in a 2016 *New York Times* headline. Combining condo blocks with ample public amenities, the ongoing development — initiated in 2002 — is knitting a once-isolated neighbourhood back into the city. What's more, a novel "right to return" policy saw former residents offered homes in the new community.


But as the rebuild progressed, so did the toll of extended relocation. Drawing on interviews with 60 Regent Park residents, a 2017 study by researchers at the University of Alberta and Ryerson University found frayed social bonds and a weakened sense of belonging. According to long-time resident Dyago, a sense of belonging existed even in poor living conditions. "This is my home. When I see it go down, getting teared apart, it hurts a bit," he told CTV. Writing in the *Toronto Star* in 2014, Martine August, a housing researcher and assistant professor in the School of Planning at the University of Waterloo, put it concisely: "For people whose work, childcare, schools, healthcare, friendships and support networks are in Regent Park, revitalization is a disruptive force, not a benevolent one."



ABOVE LEFT: Blue and green balconies hint at the deep retrofit of Toronto's Lawrence–Orton apartment tower.

ABOVE RIGHT: An ongoing facade replacement by LGA Architects introduces a kinetic style to 5 Needle Firway, also in Toronto.

The project was undertaken with the best of intentions. Today, the neighbourhood is served by some of the city's most acclaimed public amenities, including a showpiece MJMA-designed aquatic centre and a multi-purpose arts and performance hub. And in an era of limited public investment, the partnership with private developers meant that all those new condominiums helped pay for improved social housing. It was an innovative model — but one predicated on demolishing dozens of buildings, displacing their residents and erasing the physical memory of a community. It's a pattern of development repeated in large cities across North America. Just 500 kilometres away, however, another way of doing things has gradually emerged in Quebec.

 **For Montreal's Saia Barbarese Topouzanov Architectes (SBTA),** the preservationist approach to social housing is almost 30 years in the making. It started with Benny Farm: Built for returning Second World War veterans in Montreal's west end, the mid-rise "garden city" was slated for demolition by 1990. But the community — and architects — protested. In 2003, SBTA won a competition to reimagine the area by adding to it, rather than taking away. SBTA collaborated with a range of designers (including Laverdière Giguère Architectes, L'OEUF and landscape virtuoso Claude Cormier) to introduce new greenery and a more intimate network of zig-zagging courtyards and to retrofit apartments with efficient envelopes and mechanical systems. The complex was a relatively early example of sustainably driven mass housing.

Almost two decades later, SBTA has brought new vitality to another of Montreal's aging housing projects: the Habitations Saint-Michel Nord, a cluster of 27 two- and three-storey buildings with 185 apartments between them. Although the spacious and well-ventilated suites were thoughtfully designed, the drab grey and brown buildings, relics of the 1970s, were in a state of disrepair; some apartments were so derelict that they could no longer be safely occupied. And in typical Le Corbusian fashion, the original

site plan was a maze of cloistered inner courtyards that made many residents feel unsafe. "I walked around alone, I spoke to no one. I was scared because there were gunshots, there were screams," recalls long-time tenant Monique Sauvageau. Informed by a rigorous tenant consultation process led by Montreal's housing agency, SBTA got to work. "We wanted to preserve the low height, high-density environment," says architect Vladimir Topouzanov, praising the community's intimate scale.

The firm came up with a bold yet sensitive solution. It did entail some demolition (several mid-block buildings were levelled), but this resulted in a pedestrian-oriented *woonerf*, designed in collaboration with Vlan Paysages, that spans the block. Clad in permeable paving that memorializes outlines of the former buildings, the promenade provides improved access for fire and garbage trucks and introduces a new community centre and restaurant. SBTA reintegrated the homes lost to demolition in an ingenious way: By adding a third level to eight of Saint-Michel's two-storey buildings, they maintained the gentle density but gave the renovated buildings a whole new character. Exterior spiral staircases inject a sculptural drama that reflects Montreal's picturesque vernacular, while a palette of earthy tones that progresses from burgundy to beige proudly defines the brick facades, framed by preserved mature trees. The complexity of the project did require tenants to leave for three years, but in 2020 they returned to a neighbourhood still identifiable as the one they remembered.

Back in Toronto, the challenge of renewing social housing while allowing tenants to stay is one that the heritage specialists at ERA have been tackling for over a decade — and at the high-rise scale. Led by designers and housing advocates Ya’el Santopinto and Graeme Stewart, ERA’s non-profit Tower Renewal Partnership specializes in retrofitting older apartments, both market-rate and affordable. It has even developed an evolving field guide of best practices, which was tested out at Ken Soble Tower in Hamilton, a 70 per cent vacant building that the firm revived as a public seniors’ residence that meets Passive House standards.

“One key question,” Stewart says, “is ‘How can we retrofit while people are in their homes?’” To that end, ERA is taking a holistic approach, combining sustainable and human-centred design standards with resident outreach, as well as contractor training to minimize disruption to tenants.

In Toronto’s East End, ERA is collaborating with architecture firm SvN to gradually bring new life to the Lawrence–Orton social housing community. They have already beautified a 20-storey tower with a ludic interplay of blue and green balconies and expanded it to include a new daycare at its base. Overseen by Toronto Community Housing, the renovation process kicked off with tenant-led “community design teams.” The tower’s residents were actually in charge of choosing the architects, with whom they met throughout the process to highlight evolving priorities. For the design team, it’s a welcome collaboration. “People are experts at telling you the story of where they live,” says Santopinto.

At the same time, Toronto’s LGA Architectural Partners is poised to retrofit Lawrence–Orton’s surrounding apartment blocks. For LGA’s Danny Bartman, the project is one of several ongoing social housing adaptations, including 5 Needle Firway, a 12-storey building in the city’s northwest end, as well as the 220 Oak Street high-rise just outside Regent Park. He feels that demolition would be a waste. “Think of all the existing concrete already in place ready for transformation,” he says. “Think of all of the existing mature trees and gardens. Think of all of the connections already in place to support a healthy community.”

In many existing social housing enclaves, it’s precisely those kinds of connections that are lacking. Chicago’s Altgeld Gardens, like Benny Farm, was built for returning Second World War veterans and their families. But unlike the Montreal community, which was predominantly white and eventually absorbed into the urban core, Altgeld Gardens — built for Black families — remains on the post-industrial fringes of the city’s Far South Side. Over 1,500 townhouses are spread across 64 hectares and divided into smaller blocks distinguished by the stepped parapets that cap their gabled roofs.


The isolated location may have shielded Altgeld’s residents from some of the daily discrimination faced by the city’s Black population, but the toxic surroundings — including a sewage treatment plant, landfills and a polluted river — constituted environmental racism. The area had Chicago’s highest rates of cancer. And while the environmental problems have gradually ameliorated and the once-brown water now runs clear, there was still the geography of detachment to overcome.

Then, in 2021, the community’s cultural landscape was rejuvenated with the completion of the Family Resource Center (FRC). Designed by Chicago’s KOO, the building appears as an amorphous presence. It integrates a child-care centre and library branch into a multi-purpose hub that hosts everything from community meetings and music production to youth counselling and outreach services — all in a series of bright, interconnected rooms. Its sloping roofline is punctuated by the declarative blue of sweeping aluminum extrusions that contain a pair of sheltered inner courtyards.

“We wanted to create a contextual architecture, but one that also subtly subverts the context,” says KOO’s Dan Rappel, describing FRC’s fluid frontage, which is intentionally designed to appear equally welcoming from all sides — a stark counterpoint to Altgeld’s inward-facing townhouses. In effect, FRC subtly weaves the isolated community back into the city. The expressive form is mediated by a cohesive materiality, its brown brick facade visually melding with the older surroundings. Inside, the diverse mix of services and amenities offers both a support system and an invitation into the city’s cultural milieu, with FRC already a hub for young rappers. It’s a new building, but one that reaches out to an older community without disrupting everyday life.

RIGHT: At Chicago’s FRC, indoor courtyards create safe but dynamic play zones for the Altgeld community’s kids.



 **For all the progress**, mid-century tower blocks and housing projects still carry remnants of profound stigma. As a postwar era of public works gradually gave way to neoliberal austerity and disappearing industrial jobs, conditions in many of North America's social housing communities rapidly deteriorated. Many were demolished. Most infamous was St. Louis's enormous Pruitt-Igoe complex, which spanned 33 towers and comprised almost 3,000 homes; it was imploded in 1972, only two decades after the final buildings were completed. Architectural theorist Charles Jencks called this reckoning the day modern architecture died, pinning Pruitt-Igoe's failure on the language of modernist design — in its unwavering faith in density, placeless aesthetic, "tower in the park" site planning, skip-stop elevators, ill-conceived social spaces and more.

As the shortcomings of Le Corbusier-inspired design became more apparent — particularly in high-rises — Jencks's theory gained widespread acceptance. Social housing projects across America, including Chicago's Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor Homes, were detonated in short order. But the design-focused criticism was deeply myopic. Dubbed "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth" by historian Katharine G. Bristol, the dominant narrative overlooked the institutional racism and socio-economic shifts that led to neighbourhood decline. These isolated communities, whose racialized residents faced shrinking job opportunities and were living in buildings with woefully inadequate maintenance, owed their demise to much more than architecture.

Today, we know better. Beyond the alarmism, the lived experience of the residents of these old housing blocks often tells another story. Many are vital and vibrant places to this day. And yet we see more and more revitalization master plans that all but obliterate their precedents. Even as Regent Park's revamp enters its closing stages, another downtown Toronto community faces the wrecking ball. Completed in 1968 by architects Jerome Markson, Klein & Sears and Webb Zerafa Menkès Housden, Alexandra Park is making way for a denser mixed-income model that underwrites the replacement of social housing units via private-sector condo development. The completed first stage saw townhouses and apartment blocks replaced by handsome new buildings. But was demolition necessary?

A conceptual design exercise by Toronto's Studio of Contemporary Architecture (SOCA) — co-founded by Tura Cousins Wilson — explores another way to think about the project's next phase. Maintaining the homes, social spaces and greenery of a mature community, it envisions a cluster of towers strategically placed on the neighbourhood's shoulders, increasing overall density while nurturing street-level ambiance. The notional plan accomplishes many of the same goals of densification and revitalization, but with an emphasis on avoiding displacement and disruption.

As a design philosophy, SOCA's proposal channels the very same principles that Markson laid out during Alexandra Park's initial 1960s development. Before construction began, the forward-thinking architect championed a "repair and replace" model that would have integrated the site's former Victorian architecture with new modernist housing. Nourishing cultural memory and preserving a sense of place, Markson's prescient vision recognized the value of 19th-century architecture at a time when such buildings were deeply unfashionable. The lesson seems to have been forgotten.

 **When Paris firm Lacaton & Vassal** received the 2021 Pritzker Architecture Prize, it cemented its preservationist philosophy within the architectural canon. It affirmed to the world that to renovate and revive well is to practise design at the highest level. The firm's work on the Grand Parc housing complex in Bordeaux, for instance, transformed a high-rise community of 1960s slab towers while allowing tenants to remain in their homes. The overall approach celebrated the neighbourhood's social and physical character and avoided the enormous carbon costs of demolition and new construction. The French duo's body of work — and their "never demolish" ethos — is now an axiom for the climate crisis and for architects' role in it. And the buildings they create, or recreate, are beautiful.

Yet if design is a convenient scapegoat for broader socio-economic issues — as it was with Pruitt-Igoe — it risks becoming an equally facile panacea. Discussing Altgeld Gardens, Rappel eschews the self-congratulatory optimism with which designers often position their work in this realm. "The Family Resource Center is an important step," he says, "but it isn't everything." Describing a neighbourhood where economic opportunities are scarce and the nearest supermarket is a 40-minute bus ride away, the architect stresses the limits of a good building. In the *Chicago Reader*, architecture critic Zach Mortice observes that FRC, while successful, "illustrates how far politics at the drafting desk can take you, and how far it can't."

Similarly, Habitations Saint-Michel's graceful *woonerf* doesn't address the underlying socio-economic conditions that made so many residents feel unsafe in the first place. In Toronto, an increasingly stratified city, the same goes for revitalized towers. More broadly, the fundamental problems faced by North America's largest social housing providers are rooted not in a dearth of design innovation but in a basic lack of public investment.

At the end of 2020, the New York City Housing Authority faced a staggering 483,275 outstanding work orders, with an average response time of 225 days. In 2018, Toronto Community Housing reported a repair backlog of \$2.6 billion. Even after a \$1.3 billion infusion of federal funding the following year, the agency faces an urgent battle to maintain basic quality of life for its 60,000 households. And while the Tower Renewal Partnership offers a vital



PHOTO BY ROGER JOWETT (CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES)



OPPOSITE: An archival photograph of Toronto's Alexandra Park, depicting a variety of building types and sociable, kid-friendly public spaces.

ABOVE: SOCA reimagines Alexandra Park to make room for new density while preserving existing buildings and ecologies.

design toolkit, fewer than two dozen projects have been completed over the past decade. When the elevators aren't running and the balconies become unusable from pigeon infestations, architects are more crucial as public advocates than as designers.

Yet design still matters. Across the continent, the highlighted projects differ vastly in scale and context, from high-value downtown Toronto real estate to a post-industrial corner of Chicago. Though varied, the approaches are united by the principle of preservation over erasure. If they use demolition as a last resort rather than a first step, architects can drastically reduce embodied carbon costs while maintaining the social fabric of vulnerable communities. Compared to the utopian promises of modernism — and even the market-based optimism of more recent revitalizations — it is a seemingly modest paradigm. But in transforming the architect from a design visionary into a steward of community and culture, it is as radical a change as any. **AZ**