

## DEVELOPMENT

# Buildings designed to feed life into the city

Vancouver-based Amacon brings in famed former city planner Larry Beasley to give the heart of suburban Mississauga a jolt



**JOHN BENTLEY MAYS  
THE PERFECT HOUSE**

[jmays@globeandmail.com](mailto:jmays@globeandmail.com)

Larry Beasley, Vancouver's planning czar until two years ago, and a key player in his city's famous (and controversial) downtown revitalization, remains one of the most influential urban thinkers in Canadian public life. Now in private practice, he is travelling around the world preaching the same message no matter where he goes.

This is the "new fashioned" gospel of what nearly all planners nowadays consider good urban design.

"Density, mixed use, finding kinds of development where the car is not so important, pedestrian orientation: These are important issues," Mr. Beasley said in a telephone conversation last week. "While we're pretty good at building cities in our country, we have to be moving on to different models in the future." The previous urban planning models encouraged suburban sprawl and monocultural building whereas multiple-use buildings are better for neighbourhoods than communities in which residential and shopping areas are widely separated, he explains.

But one Canadian town that's getting its urbanism right, in his view, is the huge Toronto satellite city of Mississauga. Mr. Beasley was an adviser to Mississauga's city government when it was drawing up its ambitious scheme for intensifying the suburb's central district, around the Square One shopping mall and the Civic Centre.

"Mississauga is starting to think of itself as more than an adjunct to Toronto – the place



A rendering of Amacon's \$2-billion mixed use Parkside Village development slated for downtown Mississauga. Sales start next month. AMACON

where the airport is – and potentially its own place, with its own identity and separateness. What has been problematic is getting the diversity of urban activities happening there. You see some housing, but not many people on the street, and the big mall in the centre, but that doesn't put many people on the street either."

The people will start livening up the downtown Mississauga streets, however, when the \$2-billion mixed-use project, which Mr. Beasley considers the city's best and brightest, opens for business.

Scheduled to go to market in June, it's called Parkside Village, and is the handiwork of the Vancouver-based Amacon development company. When fully built out, Parkside Village will have about 6,000 residen-

tial units, from townhouses to tower apartments, and a population upward of 15,000.

Though he has no professional relationship with Amacon (which has named a Vancouver tower The Beasley in his honour), Mr. Beasley is an ardent admirer of the firm and especially its decision to lay down sophisticated, precise guidelines (devised by the Toronto firm Urban Strategies Inc.) for its Mississauga work.

"Look closely and you see mixed-use buildings that feed the sidewalks and streets with activity, with safety, with urban qualities that we associate with successful cities. That's unusual in the development frame of Mississauga. Amacon has done a very good job at articulating a scheme that is very dense, very mixed-use, and

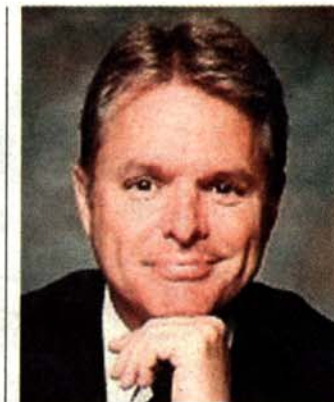
that has a lot of public endowments, from significant open space that links up with other open spaces to bikeways. They've gone with a block size that's very livable, compatible with the blocks that already exist within the community."

"I'm not saying it's perfect," he adds. "They might want to put in more social diversity and add more community facilities. But it's a positive urban contribution, with retailing, workplaces and offices, a lot of housing that doesn't keep people separated from the street. It's an agenda for urbanism I wish were on every city's agenda."

Mississauga did not demand an affordable or low-income housing component at Parkside Village, an Amacon spokeswoman told me, and

the company did not see fit to provide one. If the project is not perfect in Mr. Beasley's eyes, this absence of social diversity is one key reason why. "I take a philosophical view," he said, "that a more successful city is one in which you mix people of all kinds of income."

But even when cities put in place vigorous policies intended to keep revitalizing downtowns affordable for low-income people – as Vancouver did on Mr. Beasley's watch – large new investment in an urban centre inexorably drives up housing prices and drives out the less well-heeled. This is certainly what has happened in Vancouver, largely as a result of the strong inner-city intensification Mr. Beasley did so much to encourage.



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Urban planner Larry Beasley

"It is absolutely true, not because of our housing policy, but because of the very proactive policy of revitalizing downtown Vancouver," he said.

"It's very true that it's producing affordability problems now. We haven't paid enough attention to middle-income housing.

"Our policies, by virtue of opening up supply, held off the issue for many, many years.

But now, the overall attractiveness and value of the city is putting pressure there. I don't feel it's some kind of failure that we happened to revitalize Vancouver and took it up by billions of dollars in value. But it does mean that the coming planning generation must address that."