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The Imperial Plaza mixed-use condo (above) is revitalizing St. Clair Avenue West with a Longo's market and LCBO at street level and residential condo suites above.

Why mixed-use communities matter

Developments where people can live, work, shop and play are transforming the city

In the 1970s, Mel Lastman, then-mayor of the former Toronto suburb of North York, envisioned his area's own downtown, starting from Highway 401, north of Yonge Street, as far as the eye could see. There would be office buildings, condominiums, parks, theatres and restaurants. People would work, shop, play and, most important, live there.

Fast forward to 2016. For the most part, the former mayor's dream has come true. The restaurants do brisk business at lunch, while the area hums at night as people leave work and seek entertainment. During the day, sidewalks teem with young couples pushing strollers and children heading to school. On weekends, families catch the latest flicks at one of the many movie theatres, then finish the evening with ice cream as they stroll back to their condominiums.

Mr. Lastman called his glittering jewel "Miracle on Yonge Street", but he didn't pull it off alone. The late Murray Menkes and his son, Alan, of Menkes Development Inc., had a big hand in Mr. Lastman's vision with the creation of Empress Walk, one of the first large mixed-use developments in the GTA and Canada. At Yonge Street and Empress Avenue, the entertainment, shopping and residential complex has sparked similar projects along the Yonge Street corridor since its completion in 2001. (Empress Walk is now owned by RioCan Real Estate Investment.)

WHAT IS "MIXED-USE"?

A mixed-use development incorporates residential, commercial, cultural and/or institutional spaces within a single project. Buildings, spaces and services are physically and functionally integrated, and pedestrian connections are provided.

A mixed-use development can be as simple as a building sharing space (say, a flower shop on the bottom with an art gallery above it), a city block (Empress Walk) or entire neighbourhoods, such as the area surrounding the Air Canada Centre and its nearby amenities, including transportation facilities and housing.

"The city has definitely shifted in this direction and it's a good thing," says Jasmine Cracknell-Young, a partner at N. Barry Lyon Consultants Ltd., which conducts feasibility studies in real estate. "A lot of it is driven simply by what people want and how they want to live their lives."

She explains that millennials may not be attracted to living in a sprawling suburb, so a development that offers a health club, restaurant and boutique food store all within walking distance of their homes, may be more to their liking.

It's the same for empty nesters. "It's about quality of life," says Ms. Cracknell-Young. "It's about approaching your day knowing you won't be wasting time travelling. You're retired and your goal is to enjoy life."

Many people living in mixed-use developments don't need cars, thus saving money on gas, repairs and insurance. As well, many residents absorb the walkability of their neighbourhood into their exercise regimens.

Empress Walk remains a fine example of mixed-use, with two 34-storey condo towers atop a complex that includes a four-level retail and entertainment centre anchored by a 58,000-square-foot Loblaws Superstore. There's also a movie theatre, Staples, LCBO and a Milestones restaurant. Not only that, but the complex has direct underground access to North York City Centre subway station.

"The development of Empress Walk represents a pivotal milestone in the emergence of North York City Centre as a distinctive and mature urban node," says Mimi Ng, vice-president of sales and marketing for Menkes Developments. "As a mixed-use development, Empress Walk not only brought new condo residents to the neighbourhood, but it also provided high-quality retail and entertainment services that attracted visitors from beyond the immediate area." Overall, she explains, Empress Walk created an anchor for the community "around which additional shopping, commercial and residential uses could grow."

But will mixed-use work in any neighbourhood? "Who would have thought people would be living right next to the Gardiner Expressway just a decade ago?" asks Ms. Cracknell-Young. "What is acceptable evolves with time and the needs of the city."

Pauline Lierman, director of market research for real estate consulting firm Urbanation says mixed use is definitely the direction our communities are heading and it's good for both people and city. She explains that these developments have rejuvenated rundown areas of the city by adding diversity to services and goods and overall made life easier and more enjoyable for its residents.

Both women agree that in a mixed-use development the infrastructure can be used by many people around the clock for many things. A good example is the Air Canada Centre with its surrounding condos, offices, restaurants, attractions (hockey, concerts, sports) and Maple Leaf Square, where crowds gather to watch sports.

Another project that has embraced mixed use is the 23-storey Imperial Plaza by Camrost-Felcorp Inc. at 111 St. Clair Avenue West. The former headquarters of Imperial Oil was transformed into a 450-suite condominium along with a Longo's food outlet and an LCBO on the main floor.

Joseph Feldman, development manager for Camrost-Felcorp Inc.,

says the project has already enlivened that area of St. Clair Avenue but it's only the beginning. Soon to rise on the compact lot adjacent to the existing building is the 26-storey Blue Diamond condominium and a rental building.

The nearby Deer Park United Church, vacated in 2008, will eventually be

modified for retail use, including a spot for a restaurant. All the buildings will fall under the umbrella of Imperial Village.

"This is really going to change the area," says Mr. Feldman. "We're really thinking that a nice Italian restaurant in the church would be great. This is what people are asking for – a community."

Ms. Cracknell-Young says her firm's research confirms that the residents of the North York core are pleased with how mixed-use has shaped their neighbourhood. "They enjoy being close to transportation and things to do," she says. "They say there are plenty of green spaces and it's just a great place to live."



Empress Walk in the heart of North York is an entertainment, shopping and residential complex that introduced large-scale mixed-use to the Toronto area. It helped bring new residents to the neighbourhood and attracted outside visitors.