

# Opinion: A public housing tower gets a daycare, and a new lease <sup>[1]</sup>

City-run daycare designed by Toronto architects SvN, with renovation of the tower with ERA Architects, captures the challenges that such projects present.

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**Source:** The Globe and Mail

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 23 Jun 2021

## AVAILABILITY

Access online (subscription-based) <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

HandoutSlab. That's the word used to describe midcentury apartment buildings in Canada, and the social housing tower at 3947 Lawrence Avenue East in Toronto certainly fits the term. It stands in a beat-up parking lot and rises 20 storeys, clad in brown brick and metal siding.

But that relentless geometry changes when it hits the ground, spilling outward with a new one-storey edifice of shimmering white brick topped with sedum plants. This is a city-run daycare centre beautifully designed by Toronto architects SvN. The architecture sends a clear message: This place matters.

That assertion of quality is rare within the underfunded field of social housing. But this **Lawrence-Orton project** <sup>[3]</sup> – part of a larger effort by Toronto Community Housing Corporation – suggests how aging public housing could be renovated to be more efficient, more comfortable and more dignified.

Story continues below advertisementNot that it was easy. The daycare, combined with a partial reno of the tower with ERA Architects, captures the social, technical and architecture challenges that such projects – sometimes called “tower renewal” – present.

I visited the site recently on a hot afternoon with Liana Bresler of SvN, who led the design of the project. As we stood in the shade of the daycare's canopy, next to a small fern garden, she pointed to the ground. “A lot of effort went into the structure of the building before we could even begin dealing with the aspects that people can see,” she said.

In this case, she was referencing the underground parking garage beneath our feet. The architects, along with structural engineers Entuitive, had to reinforce the concrete structure, grafting on a new steel frame to support the 650-square-metre daycare's five classrooms.

The original garage reflects the insensitive planning put into buildings such as this one. When the apartments were constructed in 1970 by the Ontario government, here on the edge of Metropolitan Toronto, parking was seen as a critical amenity. For social housing tenants, the reality was and is different: “Most of the residents are walking and taking the bus,” Ms. Bresler said, gesturing across a steep driveway to a transit stop.

The **54-space daycare** <sup>[3]</sup> extends outside the walls into enclosed play areas.HandoutSvN responded sensitively to this real issue. The 54-space daycare extends outside the walls into enclosed play areas. As the outdoor spaces were being rebuilt, they also created an accessible pathway right next door that leads to the bus stop.

But the building itself is the showpiece. Because of COVID-19 it still hadn't opened when I visited, yet it stood fully stocked with infant beds, board books and blocks. A generous hallway widened into a play area; through a pass-through, appliances gleamed in a new kitchen that stood inside the original building's footprint. In the toddler room, windows down at the floor level opened up Lawrence Avenue to a small child's sight line.

Outside, the daycare provided a new street face for the tower. “We get a lot of comments from visitors,” says Lorna Colquhoun, a long-time resident who was involved in the renovation project. “It makes a big difference to how people see the tower.”Story continues below advertisement

SvN and ERA Architects also carried out a partial renovation of the building, replacing windows and balcony surrounds. Now, if you look at the tower sideways, it shows pops of vivid green and a deep blue. These are inexpensive but meaningful interventions.

The project began in 2015 under the direction of Sheila Penny, who is now the acting chief executive officer of the Toronto Community Housing Corporation. The process was unusual. TCHC created “community design teams” of tenantswho got to choose the architects and meet with them throughout the project. Ms. Colquhoun played a prominent role. “We told the architects, you need to spend a lot of time listening; you need to give respect in order to get it back,” she recalled.

The 50-year-old structure had surprises. “There were many technical issues on site that hadn't been identified,” said Drew Sinclair, who like

Ms. Bresler is a principal at SvN. These included numerous failures in walls and roofs – “and the path to identifying those,” he added, “came through speaking with the residents.”

SvN is now renovating the lobby and adjacent courtyard, in conjunction with ERA. Then the tower’s exterior cladding will be replaced as well. Handout The work isn’t done yet. SvN is now renovating the lobby and adjacent courtyard, in conjunction with ERA. Then the tower’s exterior cladding will be replaced

as well. This project was done piecemeal as funding became available. Today, TCHC would have done all the work in a co-ordinated fashion, says Noah Slater, TCHC’s director of capital planning, design and engineering. Thanks in part to a \$1.3-billion commitment from the federal government in 2019, the agency has a fully funded plan for building and renovations through 2027. It is a good sign that they’ve engaged socially conscious and competent architects, such as SvN, to do this work.

“We are very cognizant of our communities,” Mr. Slater said. “Our goal is to minimize the disruption for our tenants and take a holistic approach to these buildings.” Retaining the concrete bones of these structures is complex but, he argues, doing so is both cost-effective and critical to meeting Canada’s climate goals.

Story continues below advertisement won the prestigious Pritzker Prize this year for their work renewing social housing towers. The Lawrence-Orton project is fine architecture in the same vein: competent work that gives people what they need, and adds a dab of soul to a slab.

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[4]</sup>

**Tags:** social policy <sup>[5]</sup>

public management <sup>[6]</sup>

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