

Expert advice on building the city of the 21st century

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Toronto's Gardiner Expressway, currently undergoing massive repairs. (Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail)

Canada is an urban country. Though the national mythology speaks of canoes and ancient forests, the daily reality for most Canadians is defined by SUVs and traffic jams.

Last week, 18 of Canada's city leaders got together in Toronto to demand a new national agenda that reflects this reality. The specific asks were familiar: more money and more power for the governments that closely serve the daily needs of Canadians.

But if cities were to be given such clout, what should they do with it? Some of the answers are clear: fix infrastructure, build transit, provide housing and soft services to the growing population being left behind by economic growth. But that isn't where the challenges end.

Cities in Canada are undergoing profound change that requires new thinking in terms of architecture, urban design, planning and governance. For the moment, about two-thirds of us live in auto-oriented suburbs, according to research from Queen's University. But younger and older Canadians are showing a desire to go car-free and embrace life in neighbourhoods that are densely built and conducive to walking, cycling and transit.

How do we update our buildings, blocks and neighbourhoods to serve this next generation?

At the same time, how do we ensure that less-affluent zones – often the very suburbs that represented the future 30 or 40 years ago – can find a prosperous next chapter?

These questions are being asked across the Western world. And so The Globe and Mail, in turn, has asked prominent urbanists, architects and scholars to tell us what things Canada's mayors should be considering: the tools, policies and ideals that will build the city of the 21st century.

Make people, not cars, happy

Jan Gehl, founding Partner of Gehl Architects; former professor at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts; author, most recently, of [How to Study Public Life](#)

Some of the principles that have worked so well in Copenhagen and now New York could be applied in Canada: a people-oriented, humanistic city-planning model. Copenhagen has worked for 50 years to improve the people landscape. There is an overriding strategy to improve the streetscape and improve conditions for public life; a lot of things are done to make the streets safe and appealing for people to walk and bicycle. The city is here to make the people happy, not the cars.

Plus, Copenhagen has woven in sustainability goals, is working to be carbon-neutral, and there are goals around health: People are invited to walk and bicycle in their day-to-day lives. It's about people moving about naturally.

Decrease speed limits

Gil Penalosa is chair of the non-profit [8-80 Cities](#) and former commissioner of parks, sport and recreation for Bogota

A pedestrian is hit by a car every four hours, on average, in Toronto – and those are the incidents where the police are called. We should lower the speed on neighbourhood streets to 30 km/h or less. When you're walking and the cars are going by at 20 or 30 kmh, you feel at ease; if they are going faster, it's not an enjoyable walk. So the community is much more walkable. It's good for mental health and physical health; it's good for economic development, because if you walk, you buy local. And it doesn't cost anything. It's just a question of changing the laws and changing the culture.

This is not just an issue for bigger cities. In a city such as Parry Sound, Ont., the population is getting older and driving less. More than half of pedestrian deaths are people over 60. They're

not distracted or talking on their phones; it just isn't safe for them to cross the street. They're not distracted or talking on their phones; it just isn't safe for them to cross the street.

Empower city governments

Richard Florida, director of Cities at the Martin Prosperity Institute at U of T's Rotman School of Management; founder of the [Creative Class Group](#)

Canada has 80 per cent of its population in 2 per cent of its land area. The country has to wake up to the fact that cities are our future and they need the substantive power and the fiscal power to build infrastructure and rebuild the urban middle class. Right now, they are hamstrung.

If highways were the infrastructure of 20th-century industrial capitalism, then transit, high-speed rail and better airports are the infrastructure of 21st-century capitalism. In Toronto, you see it; we have fallen so far behind on building the infrastructure, we need to move our people around, it's terrifying. Giving cities the power to do that would be a step in the right direction.

Leverage density*Brent Toderian, urbanist and former chief planner of the City of Vancouver*

Canadian cities are getting denser, and that's a very good thing – supporting sustainability, public health, diversity and creativity. A huge part of doing new density well is ensuring that, on top of great urban and architectural design, cities achieve public amenities and housing diversity to help make them livable and lovable for everyone.

Cities like Vancouver have shown how “density bonusing” and “value capture” tools translate to great neighbourhoods: new parks and people places; rental and social housing; and many other public benefits.

This is how density bonusing works: When more density is proposed by developers, if it is considered reasonable, cities then negotiate additional public benefits as well. In value capture, if a city invests in something like public transit, it can apply a charge on development around that transit, reflecting how public investment has increased nearby land value. Cities around the world have used these techniques.

Embrace the science of big data

Anthony Townsend, researcher at NYU's Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management; author of Smart Cities: Big Data, Civic Hackers, and the Quest for A New Utopia

Throughout history, cities have either evolved organically, with little oversight; or been planned from the top down, often without evidence [to back up the planning]. In the coming decades, all that will change as the seeds of a new quantitative science of cities begin to bear fruit.

Already, mobile-phone-location trails have vastly improved our understanding of daily commuting patterns and the spread of epidemics. In the future, massive new streams of data about urban life, produced by smart infrastructure networks and our own personal devices, will

allow us to predict how different designs for neighbourhoods and buildings will affect traffic, carbon emissions and quality of life.

And as the foundations of a rigorous understanding of cities take shape, we'll understand the fundamental forces that determine why some cities grow and others decline. Cities will still hold many mysteries, but our urban planners will finally be able to shine a light on much of what makes them tick.

Mix residences and workspace

Vishaan Chakrabarti, principal of SHoP Architects; professor at Columbia University

We should be reinventing the nature of the urban building. Think of a model where an individual can rent a private room, but where there are shared amenities, including communal kitchens, work spaces, child care. I think younger single people and also empty-nesters aren't interested in having all that infrastructure for their private residences; and they're also looking for shared experiences. If there's communal space, you begin to interact with people differently. Ideas come out of that, and new experiences.

This applies also to blocks and neighbourhoods. If you can create living and working environments that are more proximate to each other, you cut back on commute times. People used to walk to work. People used to bicycle. There's nothing new about that. Imagine that the city is a quilt of living and working. Entrepreneurialism comes out of that; a lot of affordability comes out of that. It doesn't work for everyone, but there is now a population of people that forms a market for a different kind of living.

Turn streets into destinations

Janette Sadik-Khan, principal at Bloomberg Associates; Commissioner of New York City's transportation department from 2007 to 2013

To see where smart cities are headed, don't look up at the newest skyscraper; the answer lies beneath your feet. Those that succeed in this urban age will be the ones that design sustainable mobility into the streetscape. Dedicated bus lanes can help speed transit; a safe bike-lane network and a bike-share system located near transit can help expand the reach of buses and trains into more neighbourhoods.

City residents are hungry for better streets. Improvements, from plazas and parklets to benches and well-designed sidewalks, help turn them into destinations. These aren't just quality-of-life improvements; they're investments in our economic future. As we saw in New York and now in cities worldwide in our work for Michael Bloomberg, better streets mean better business. I often say, if you want to save the world, move to a city; if you want that city to be a safer, vibrant, more efficient place to live, start by building a bike lane.

Redevelop the inner suburbs

Ellen Dunham-Jones, architect, author of Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs; professor at Georgia Tech in Atlanta

The biggest challenge is to connect affordable housing with affordable transportation. Americans in the lower half of all incomes are paying more on transportation than on housing.

We should look at suburbs – and retrofit older commercial corridors with more housing and more access to buses, so that you can drive but you have the alternative of taking transit. Many of our aging suburban properties are underperforming: strip-mall retail, office parks. This is underused property, yet it has terrific infrastructure and a relatively central location in a now-expanded metro area.

If we can redirect growth to those areas, in a sustainable pattern, it's a great opportunity to solve the problems of affordability, and it always helps the larger community more to redevelop an existing dead property than to tear down trees.

These interviews have been condensed and edited.