Toronto has not always had good press – not least from Canadians themselves. But even the locals have to admit that the place they love to loathe is having a moment. Mark Jones reports on how the city is being rebuilt, and meets key figures in this renaissance. Photographs by Lorne Bridgman
Explorations / Toronto

Clockwise from below
On neighbourhood watch: Toronto resident Richard Florida; a landmark hotel is reborn: the Four Seasons; its lobby gets creative

Richard Florida is perhaps the leading urban theorist of our time. He defined the Creative Class and described how inner cities are being transformed by the highly mobile workers of the knowledge economy. In his latest book, *Who’s Your City?*, he argues that certain personality types are drawn to certain cities and neighbourhoods. Richard Florida chooses to live in Toronto.

Jane Jacobs was perhaps the greatest urban theorist of the late 20th century. Her 1961 book, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, argued that tower blocks and expressways were strangling neighbourhoods. She took to the streets to stop the zealot planner Robert Moses from doing just that to her Greenwich Village home. She won. She saved New York. Then she moved to Toronto.

Isadore (‘Issy’) Sharp is perhaps our greatest living hotelier. The Four Seasons group he founded has 90 hotels in 36 locations. Its first property was a downtown motel in a seedy district – in Toronto. Its latest property is an 81-storey hotel – in Toronto. When Bill Gates and Prince Alwaleed bin Talal took a controlling stake in the Four Seasons as it went private in 2007, Sharp insisted on a clause that the head office should stay where it was as long as he was around – in Toronto.

Yet Toronto somehow escapes the list of the world’s great cities. Other Canadians can’t stand the place, suspecting their commercial centre gets far too much attention and money. One journalist who spent a year there wrote that ‘its streets were clean, its residents polite, and its public amenities were in perfect order. Nonetheless, I wouldn’t care if I never laid eyes on the place again’.

The Welsh travel writer Jan Morris, meanwhile, said living in the city was like ‘capturing second place in the lottery of life’. Second place. What a curse. A dynamic eastern seaboard town, but not New York. A shining city on a lake, but not Chicago. A very liveable, progressive place to be, but not Vancouver.
Now the curse is lifting. Maybe the good guys are coming first. Sharp’s new Four Seasons, in Yorkville, is just the latest landmark new hotel to open. The Shangri-La and Ritz-Carlton both opened in 2012. Toronto is having a moment – building up rather than boarding up. There’s a boom in creative architectural projects that’s transforming its utilitarian city centre and once ordinary suburbs.

As we talk, we gaze out of floor-to-ceiling windows, which look down on the golfer’s as they pace the manicured fairways. Yet Sharp doesn’t see Toronto’s success as measured in the acreage of steel and plate glass; or his own as a fight against an entrenched Anglo-Saxon elite. This is its reward.

Issy Sharp lives, as even the super-wealthiest Torontonians do, in an expansive but not overly ostentatious house. His is in a northern suburb of Toronto overlooking the Rosedale golf club. In the winter, of course, this got covered with snow and everyone could use it, says Issy Sharp. I’d come up here after school and do the jump, and have a ski lesson or two. I’d ski to the bottom of the hill. Then I’d walk back to the clubhouse and sunbathe – a great time.

Toronto protected itself from the worst of the financial crisis by those unglamorous – I’m almost tempted to say ‘Canadian’ – virtues of prudence and common sense. This is its reward.

The lobby, with its very expert cocktail bar, is already one of the places to be. The shangri-la was a huge hit in Vancouver – expect it to re-create the success here. From £295. shangri-la.com/toronto/shangriila

The FOur seasOns

The five-star group reopens in the land of its birth with its most contemporary look yet. From £320. fourseasons.com/toronto

The Trump InTerna TIOna TIOna TOWeR & hOTeL

extravagant in every respect, the Trump heralded the new gold rush in Toronto upscale hotels with its grand opening last April. British Airways offers three nights at the Trump International Hotel & Tower Toronto from £1,129 per person.* ba.com/toronto, +44(0) 844 493 0758

The rITz-CarLTOn

Plush and businesslike with maybe the best spa in town and a sexy outside terrace. Positively ancient in modern Toronto terms – opened in 2011. From £959. british-airways.com/toronto

And for a change from all that marble… The gladstone

Funky Victorian red brick with 37 rooms designed by different artists serves as a gateway to Toronto’s hippest district (or it was last week). From £120. gladstonehotel.com/hotel

Book by 27 June

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‘Toronto has always been a city of great diversity,’ he says. ‘There’s very little discrimination. It’s a city of minorities: Italian, Portuguese, Jewish, Chinese. In fact, where I grew up, a Jewish ghetto, is now dominated by Chinese – but it retains its own character. As the immigrants are welcomed, they each form their own community.

‘We have a multipurpose city, with business, commerce and neighbourhoods coexisting. It’s never lost its neighbourhoods.’

One of those neighbourhoods is Queen Street West. A couple of miles from the swishness of the new downtown, this is the kind of neighbourhood development Richard Florida and Jane Jacobs’ books celebrate and champion: the organic kind.

You start at the Gladstone Hotel, where an owner with an art obsession has created an oddball place with a studenly café (its fish tacos, by the way, are the best I’ve ever had anywhere), theatrical public areas and 37 rooms designed in different styles by 37 different artists.

Turn left out of the hotel and you have art galleries, dime stores selling reconditioned washing machines, cafés and bars, and dozens of funky vintage shops. You wander off the main drag through laid-back residential streets to Ossington, where the fashionable bars and...
restaurants have been springing up so fast the city has had to impose a moratorium on new ones opening.

And that seems to me to be a very characteristic Toronto play. Don’t push it too far. Stay wary and self-critical. You hear it when people say Sharp’s new hotel is too tall and shiny—out of character for Yorkville. You hear it when they’re arguing about the next landmark project in the theatre district—a new art gallery and condo hub by Frank Gehry in his signature collapsed-cardboard-box style on King Street West.

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