

NEWHOMES

Motor city is on the move again

Long-time Oshawa resident wants to set the record straight



MARTIN SLOFSTRA
EDITOR'S
NOTE

It's unfortunate, but too often, our cities and towns get stigmatized, and their reputation remains tarnished long after change is evident and despite what local residents and businesses have to say.

Case in point is South Oshawa, located on the eastern edge of the GTA, which I visited recently and is a big part of that city's transformation story. (See also our Cover Story).

And while Oshawa's northern end — with the expanded 407 and newly built homes — is a story perhaps more well-told, it's South Oshawa, while 'grittier' than other parts of the city, that should be considered as attractive to new home buyers and where affordable lakeside living is still possible.

My recent visit to South Oshawa included stopping by the Oh! Townhomes sales office. (Starting at \$505,990 for 1,626 sq. ft up to \$540,990 for 1807 sq. ft., developed by Graywood and Falconcrest Homes.) But more than just look at new homes, I got to visit the residents and businesses that give this area its appeal.

THESE VISITS INCLUDED:

- Canlan Ice Sports, home to two NHL-size rinks and North America's

largest recreational hockey league; • Lakeview Park, plus got to enjoy a coffee on-site at "The Jube;" • Oshawa Museum, plus tour of two beautiful heritage homes; • Tommy's, an iconic lakeside stand known for its homemade French fries (which tasted awesome); and, • Eat My Shortbread, a local favourite specializing in baked treats.

My visit concluded with a walk around downtown Oshawa before dropping by the Ontario Tech University to meet with Amanda Robinson, a historian, professor, and life-long South Oshawa resident.

It really was a lot to pack into one day, but it was fun, and what better way to end it but to meet with Robinson, a passionate booster of the city. Far from its "sleeper suburb" reputation, she describes Oshawa as rich and vibrant, with a lively arts and culture and restaurant scene.

Oshawa, she says, offers a little bit of everything and has something for everyone. "Oshawa is great because there are so many demographics. You have the established beautiful historic neighborhoods but you also have mid-century bungalows," and, of course, new home construction.

Not in any way to diminish the economic impact of the GM closures and layoffs, but I ask Robinson if she feels Oshawa is in decline.

"It's a really interesting question, but it's not accurate. The city has diversified its economic base and has for a while." And while Oshawa has long



With Lisa Terech from the Oshawa Museum. Our tour includes this beautiful Dutch Colonial home.



Trisha Bower, owner of Eat My Shortbread, featuring treats that are homemade in small batches. The store is a local favourite.

lived in the shadow of General Motors, "that is no longer the narrative."

Despite the GM closure, Robinson says 300 technology jobs were kept, and "we have other industries. Oshawa is a burgeoning high-tech hub, that is our brand."

"Born and raised here, I feel like it is a base, human emotion that you want to celebrate where you are from. But I guess for me there is also such a deeply rooted history here, and GM is a part of that. We can celebrate the grittier aspects of living here and it's working class, but also look forward to the future," she says.

"Oshawa is resilient, Oshawa is industrious, Oshawa is a great place to raise a family," she adds. "It's awesome and you should come here."

Let's look to our Nordic friends when it comes to urban design



DAVE WILKES
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I wrote about the lessons learned from BILD's Housing Tour of Tokyo a few weeks ago in this space.

Recently, our friends at the Ontario Home Builders' Association (OHBA) conducted their own housing tour in Copenhagen, Denmark and Malmö, Sweden with an objective to cross-pollinate innovative ideas in terms of sustainability, urban design and architecture.

Here are some of the key learnings from their trip. Don't be afraid to make mistakes when it comes to innovation. Cities are for people, and be daring and creative when it comes to architecture and infrastructure.

Taking risks must be part of the Nordic DNA as both the public and private sector in Copenhagen and Malmö are quite innovative when it comes to planning and design. Innovation does not occur from doing the same thing repeatedly.

The Danes and Swedes are not only unafraid to make planning or design mistakes; they practically welcome them as part of the evolutionary process of city building.

When the city of Malmö introduced cycling and pedestrian focused infrastructure, they didn't have a debate, they didn't run a pilot, and they didn't get bogged down in red tape. They just did it. If it worked, it worked. If not, they'd try something else.

Pioneering urbanists like Jan Gehl have helped lead a 50 year transformation of creating cities for people. Gehl believes in sustainable cities in which, through their public spaces, people are invited to have a unique and diverse life.

In a visit to New York in 2016, Gehl talked about three main components that would achieve this goal. People should walk more; spend

more time in public spaces and get out of their "private cocoons".

Now, Copenhagen is the most pedestrian and cycling friendly city in the world. The transformation of the urban landscape was a deliberate result of planning, urban design and architectural decisions where people, rather than cars were put first in every decision.

Infrastructure like stormwater management isn't very interesting, but the Swedes are changing that. Stormwater management practices help minimize the impact of rain and snow runoff flowing into lakes and streams.

Typically, in the GTA we see hard concrete culverts, sewers, and in newer suburbs, large stormwater management ponds. An emerging trend in Sweden is a natural green infrastructure through "low impact development" to deal with stormwater runoff.

These features were clearly well thought out and incorporated as part of the design, and ultimately presented as a public amenity across newly built communities.

On the public sector side of the equation, an abundance of urban design guidelines are often treated as 'regulations' rather than 'guidelines' and strict zoning by-laws can literally shrink-wrap a site in terms of very specific set-backs and heights, thereby limiting creativity.

Many of the most interesting buildings visited would not likely be proposed by a private sector developer here, and even if they were, they would never make it through the approvals process without being completely watered down.

Let's be bold and take the lead from our Nordic friends and bring some innovation, creativity and flair when it comes to architecture and urban design.

Dave Wilkes is President and CEO of the Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD).

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In its first phase, OH! Townhomes is an enclave of 27 three-storey townhomes in south Oshawa just steps from the shores of Lake Ontario.