

Psssst. Modern Toronto just wants some respect.

Queen Victoria and her son King Edward still rule Toronto – the city’s older neighbourhoods are full of houses built in the style of their respective reigns. It’s a comfortable style, and a lot of us live on those streets and in those houses. But an outsider, or even a Torontonian, might be surprised to find out that Toronto contains a lot of buildings built in the modernist era. Some of them are grand and stand out, like the TD Centre, while others are quiet and go unnoticed, maybe tucked away in a cul-de-sac in Don Mills or North York. Even as we make a lot of noise about gingerbread and white picket fences, Toronto is still a relatively new city, and these modern buildings are just as much a part of our civic and geographic ontology as those neighbourhoods we revere because they’re a little bit older.

The mixed bag of architectural styles and the surprises we encounter as we walk through Toronto makes this city unlike any other. Toronto was once described to me as a cyber-punk city because of the way its glass skyscrapers blend in with those Victorian and Edwardian buildings. It’s new and old co-existing, a city built with *Blade Runner*’s production values, minus much of the filth, squalor and darkness. Instead, Toronto is filled with trees, parks and ravines. And while Toronto may not be a leader in historic preservation, the modern city hasn’t completely obliterated the past yet. The old stuff is still around and in use, so the cyber-punk analogy makes sense to me. This was the Toronto I saw on my all-too-brief visits to the city when I was a kid. In particular, I would notice the way bits of modernism stuck out from the older fabric of Toronto. Few things are as beautiful as seeing an Uno Prii apartment building, with curving concrete soaring to the sky, rise above the Annex. Better yet, the proximity of some of these urban, big-city buildings to some of Toronto’s wild and natural ravines makes our city of contradictions all the more striking. If

Toronto is a 'City Within a Park,' then these buildings are Le Corbusier's 'Tower in a Park' ideal writ large – and more exciting and populated than he may have envisioned. We've only just begun to celebrate these places, perhaps because we're not done venerating the pre-war era yet. Because we've focused on the old, we've let some of our truly optimistic places, in the modernist sense, slide into disrepair, neglect and, most shamefully, disrespect.

Toronto's modern 'revolution' sort of snuck upon us. Canada came of age in Montreal with Jean Drapeau, Expo 67 and Trudeaumania. Montreal was our most important city, so that's where the big stuff happened, while Toronto was still a dirty provincial town. But while the nation was focused on Montreal, Toronto built itself up with little fanfare – bits and pieces here and there, scattered throughout the city like little modern utopias.

Certainly the biggest concentration of our optimistic modernism is found at the CNE and Ontario Place. Here our past and present are most at odds. As our values change like fashion, the modernism we built in the 1950s and 1960s is not being accorded the same respect as some older parts of our city. Ontario Place was our answer to Expo 67, but without the cultural importance. I've visited Ontario Place only once in the past sixteen years – and yet I've walked through the empty Expo 67 site numerous times, looking for relics. The white pods suspended over Lake Ontario are certainly the most striking part of the place, yet I'm not sure what they were used for, then or now. Toronto's Ministry of Hopefulness should be housed in them because they look as if they're waiting for just such a noble purpose.

My parents went there when it opened in 1971. The album that held pictures of that vacation was one of my favourites. I thought all of Toronto

must be like this: young, happy, clean, modern and undivorced. In the pictures, the people working there seemed to be very Ontario-proud, decked out in lime-green miniskirts with trilliums on them. A choir sang outside the Cinesphere. I don't think they do that anymore – singing probably isn't in Ontario's present-day budget or sensibility.

Though it's supposed to be happy, Ontario Place is a sad place. The sense of idealism has evaporated as the site is allowed to either fall into disrepair or be used in ways at odds with the original design. The Forum has been replaced by the Molson Amphitheatre, a generic outdoor concert venue, complete with frightening signs warning of 'Disallowed Items.' Toronto folk could see concerts in the round at the Forum, relaxing under the tent-like roof, surrounded by trees, with the city in the background. But what was a casual affair is now an overly regulated, secure, plastic-cup-only experience.

Across Lakeshore Boulevard, the CNE hasn't fared much better. We still have wonderful structures like the Better Living Centre, complete with the multicoloured Piet Mondrian/de Stijl-inspired ornament on top, and the Queen Elizabeth and Food buildings, as well as various fountains and monuments nearby. These buildings – like Gothic churches before them – were designed to lift our spirits and make us think of some kind of higher power (in the CNE's case, peace, order and good government perhaps). The Better Living Centre's north elevation remains as intended, but the south side, with its grand and wide staircase that looks as if it could float up to some Bauhaus heaven, now leads majestically to a chain-link fence and Lakeshore Boulevard's six lanes of arterial traffic. There's no reason to enter or exit here anymore. It's painful to see such design thwarted, either by lack of care or by redesigns that take structures out of their original context.

Perhaps the greatest blow to this optimistic age was the 1985 destruction of the Bulova Tower (originally the Shell Oil Tower), the first example of a welded steel and glass structure in our city when built in 1955. It was in the way of the Molson Indy. In fact, Molson paid the \$150,000 it cost to demolish it. Many didn't see an architectural value in it, including then mayor Art Eggleton, who told the *Toronto Star*, 'I think the money could be better spent on the other fine old buildings on the site.' Though Eggleton speeds towards the dustbin of history now, we're still without our tower and stuck with the Molson Indy. It's because of the Indy, and the need for empty space for its grandstands, that there is so much empty, treeless, underused space at the CNE.

Exhibition Stadium used to fill up some of that parking lot. Just to the east of the Better Living Centre is a plaque in the ground that outlines the

footprints of the old grandstands, as well as some of the old seats from the stadium. In 1988, on our Grade Eight class trip to Toronto, the bus dropped us off in this spot. We sat in the outfield, right behind George Bell. The Jays lost that day, but I was in awe of it all. The whole site is a landscape of our collective memories, the best days of all of our lives, memorialized in a parking lot.

As much as I would miss it, I almost think it would be better to tear down this wonderful stuff if it isn't going to be treated right. In 1893, Chicago built a magnificent 'White City' of pristine Beaux Arts buildings for the World's Fair. As the fair came to a close, people began to wonder what might happen to these buildings; the fear of letting them fall into disrepair was a worry even then. In *Cosmopolitan* that December, after the fair came to a close, Norwegian-American writer Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen wrote: 'Better to have it vanish suddenly, in a blaze of glory, than fall into gradual disrepair and dilapidation. There is no more melancholy spectacle than a festal hall, the morning after the banquet, when the guests have departed and the lights are extinguished.' I felt that melancholy in full one quiet night last year, when a friend and I were wandering around the empty grounds after the CNE was over. We climbed up the back of the Music Building, an older building with a glass dome. We sat on the roof for a while, looking at the city rise above the empty land, listening to the hum of the Gardiner.

I'm not ready for a blaze of glory here. For me, the lights at the CNE, or even Ontario Place, haven't been extinguished yet, but I wonder if it's just my imagination filling in the blanks, and my love of these buildings, that causes me to feel good when I'm near them, even while they are being treated so poorly.

These modern utopias are scattered throughout our city. When our crown jewel, the new City Hall, was opened in 1965, it was one of the indications – maybe even the exact moment – that the city was evolving from its uptight 'Toronto the Good' reputation to something else – something Victoria or Edward could not have dreamed of. Even as heavyweights like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe built the TD Centre, Toronto architects were quietly filling our city with new buildings. Peter Dickinson built structures like the Benvenuto Place apartments at the top of the Avenue Road hill, the Continental Can Building on the southwest corner of Bay and College, and the Juvenile and Family Courts building on Jarvis. John B. Parkin Associates designed the Ontario Association of Architects building at 50 Park Road, Don Mills Collegiate Institute and the Sidney Smith Hall at the University of Toronto. Unsung Toronto modernist Peter Ethington

designed the bank building on the southeast corner of College and Spadina (now home to a generic Burger King — but notice how its cornice matches the rooflines of the older buildings to the south). The O’Keefe Centre, both New and Massey Colleges, the Colonnade on Bloor and apartment clusters around places like Davisville were all part of Toronto’s modern building boom that took place in Montreal’s shadow. Even the Pavilions on the Toronto Islands were well done in the modern style, winning a Massey Medal in 1964.

I got to live in one of our unsung modern utopias when I first moved to Toronto in 2000. My roommate, Heather, and I lived at 40 Pleasant Boulevard, one block south of Yonge and St. Clair. We moved from Windsor together, her to be near her boyfriend, me to live in the city I had always wanted to live in. A high-rise tower wasn’t where I expected to live; the image I had had of my Toronto life was somewhere in the Annex, maybe on Brunswick Avenue, on the third floor of some old house, with a claw-foot tub and other quaint stuff. But in 2000 we were having trouble finding a house like that because it was the height of a tight rental market, just before the condo glut started opening things up. As a result, we saw mostly apartments in buildings, not in cute little houses.

So we looked up, riding the elevators of some of Toronto’s finer mid- to low-end buildings. On an overcast day we went to see a place in the horrific-looking building that sits in the wedge of land at Vaughan Road and Bathurst, just south of St. Clair. Though it’s an ugly building, the view from the apartment we saw was stunning. People who disdain apartment buildings forget that the view from the top is often pretty good. With the open vistas and sprawling views, it’s almost like living in the country.

We had one more place to see, but Heather and I agreed we would take this place if the next one wasn’t better. That place was 40 Pleasant, the left half of two connected buildings called Commonwealth Towers. The thin white buildings, built in 1968, rise from one shared eight-storey-high rectangular parking garage podium. On the eighth floor, in between the two buildings, there is a grassy park with little earthen mounds and paved paths. In the middle, there’s a small swimming pool.

The Serbian superintendent showed us the apartment on the nineteenth floor. After we saw the place, we went to the Timothy’s on the corner to figure out what to do. In the bathroom, I decided that this was the one to take. It wasn’t an old house or in the Annex, and it was sort of expensive, but I couldn’t say no. It was that childhood vision of modern Toronto, and it seemed like what big-city living was all about.

The building became home, and I got a kick out of showing off some of the features to visitors. The lobbies of 40 and 60 Pleasant each have

an identical fountain that looks like a Sputnik spraying water into its own little pool. Urban-planner types now call this sort of thing a 'water feature,' an underwhelming term for a wonderful thing. Unfortunately, they are behind locked iron fences, so I called them the 'caged Sputniks.' I still bring people by the buildings when we're in the neighbourhood to look at the fountains behind the glass.

The area around the elevators has big rectangular couches underneath square wooden tubes with lights installed in them; the lighting is directed down so it's soft and low. The colours are various shades of dark brown. It's all vaguely Japanese, or what I think of as 1960s Japanese: the kind of place where Kurosawa would have shot one of his modern epics. On a completely different cultural note, one of the walls has a Mayan-like concrete mosaic. It's exotic ethnic appropriation at its best. This place must have really been swinging when it was built, so much so that people wouldn't worry about the mixed metaphors used in the design. That our building was attached to the St. Clair subway station made it seem extra cosmopolitan – as if the building were part of the infrastructure of the rest of the city. I could count the steps from my bedroom to the subway platform.

The apartment itself was standard building fare, but there was lots of glass and we could see the CN Tower, the lake, and even St. Catharines on the few smog-free days Toronto gets. In fact, with the doors open, the bathroom had a clear view of the tower – the mark of any good Toronto home, I figure. It could have met the sidewalk in a better way – there is too much parking garage there now – and the rooftop park is private rather than public space, but the demographic is still fairly heterogeneous, making it an interesting place to live.

There is a cluster of similar apartment buildings in the area, built in the same era as our building. A fine place to see it all was from the Rosehill Reservoir Park, just to the south. The reservoir has been covered over with grass and reflecting pools. The grass is often soggy because the soil isn't deep enough to absorb big rainfalls. The park is surrounded by buildings on two sides, with trees around the other two. I would sometimes walk the dog in the park and watch the sun set behind those buildings, casting long, perfect shadows across the grass. In the middle of the park is another space-age fountain – this time a big atom-like structure. There are plaques around dedicating it to the anniversary of Confederation in 1967.

To the east of the park is a deep ravine. There's a path off Avoca Avenue that descends quickly into the ravine. The sounds of the city disappear, replaced by cool humidity and mosquitoes. I would often go running through the park, under the road and railway bridges high overhead, along the stream that flowed beneath the Rosedale mansions perched

at the top of hills. Abruptly, the stream disappears into a culvert, reappearing on the other side of Mount Pleasant, on its way to the Don River. Toronto is firmly in control of nature here.

There's something particularly magnificent about the way clean modern lines rise up out of both the natural and older parts of the city. I'm glad this was my first Toronto apartment. I think I'd have always wondered what it was like had I not lived at a place like 40 Pleasant. And maybe I understand, or appreciate, a place like Ontario Place better for having lived in a building of that era. Where you live affects the way you view the city. Right now I do live in one of those three-storey Annex homes on Dupont. I can hear sidewalk conversations from my kitchen window as people walk by. When I lived up in the air, I didn't get such a street-level show, but I felt a little more connected to the city in a wider sense. I watched thunderstorms cross the city from west to east, and on Victoria Day I saw hundreds of backyard fireworks displays in one glance.

I like that our modern experiments remain with us, and if some of us choose to, we can still live in them, or visit on occasion. We have a complicated relationship with these buildings; I feel as if we've let them down for the time being. But when fashion comes around and we decide these are valuable parts of Toronto, we'll take down the chain link fences and give them new coats of paint worthy of the utopian visions that created them.