

A better TTC. More public toilets. Letting kids vote. A network of cycling tubes. Waterfront caves. A car-free Kensington Market. A roller coaster to the Islands. Laneway housing. Making our own mythology. Guerrilla gardening.

How would you improve Toronto?

In *uTOpia: Towards a New Toronto*, thirty-four Torontonians tackle that question, lauding, lambasting and leading the charge for change in Canada's biggest metropolis. They talk about streetlights and streetcars, about strip malls, about scenesters and sidewalks. They profile exemplary Torontonians, they collect TTC transfers, they explore the architecture of our buildings and our imaginations.

Above all, they ask us, with both playfulness and pragmatism, to look ahead to *Toronto the Could*.

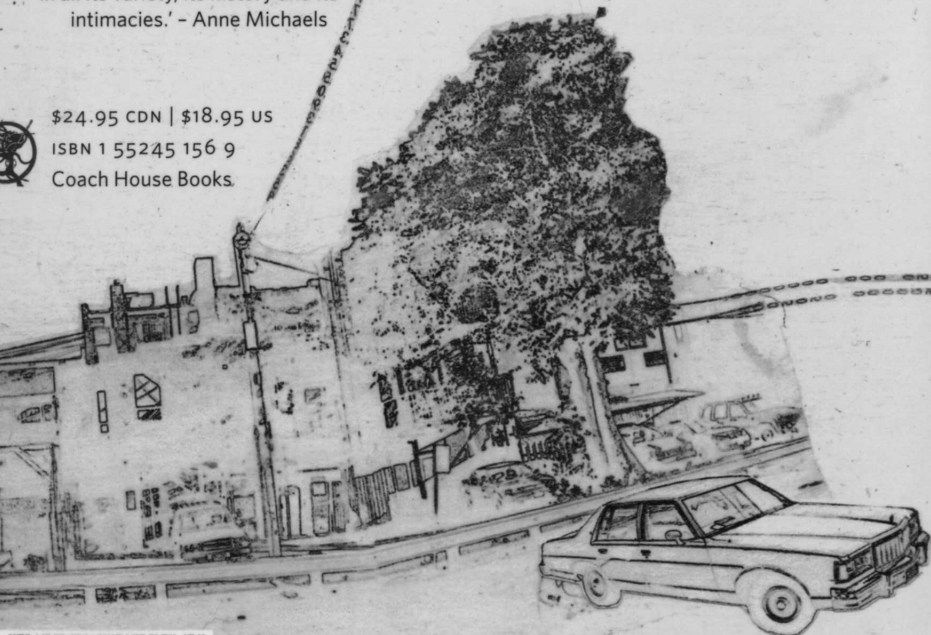
Includes a foreword by Mayor David Miller and two fold-out colour maps of potentially perfect Torontos.

'*uTOpia* - a collection of essays by people who are passionate about Toronto - contributes to a larger conversation that has been taking place in Toronto for decades. It's a frank discussion of the ways the city can best become itself, in all its variety, its history and its intimacies.' - Anne Michaels

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UTOPIA TOWARDS A NEW TORONTO

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Howard Akler

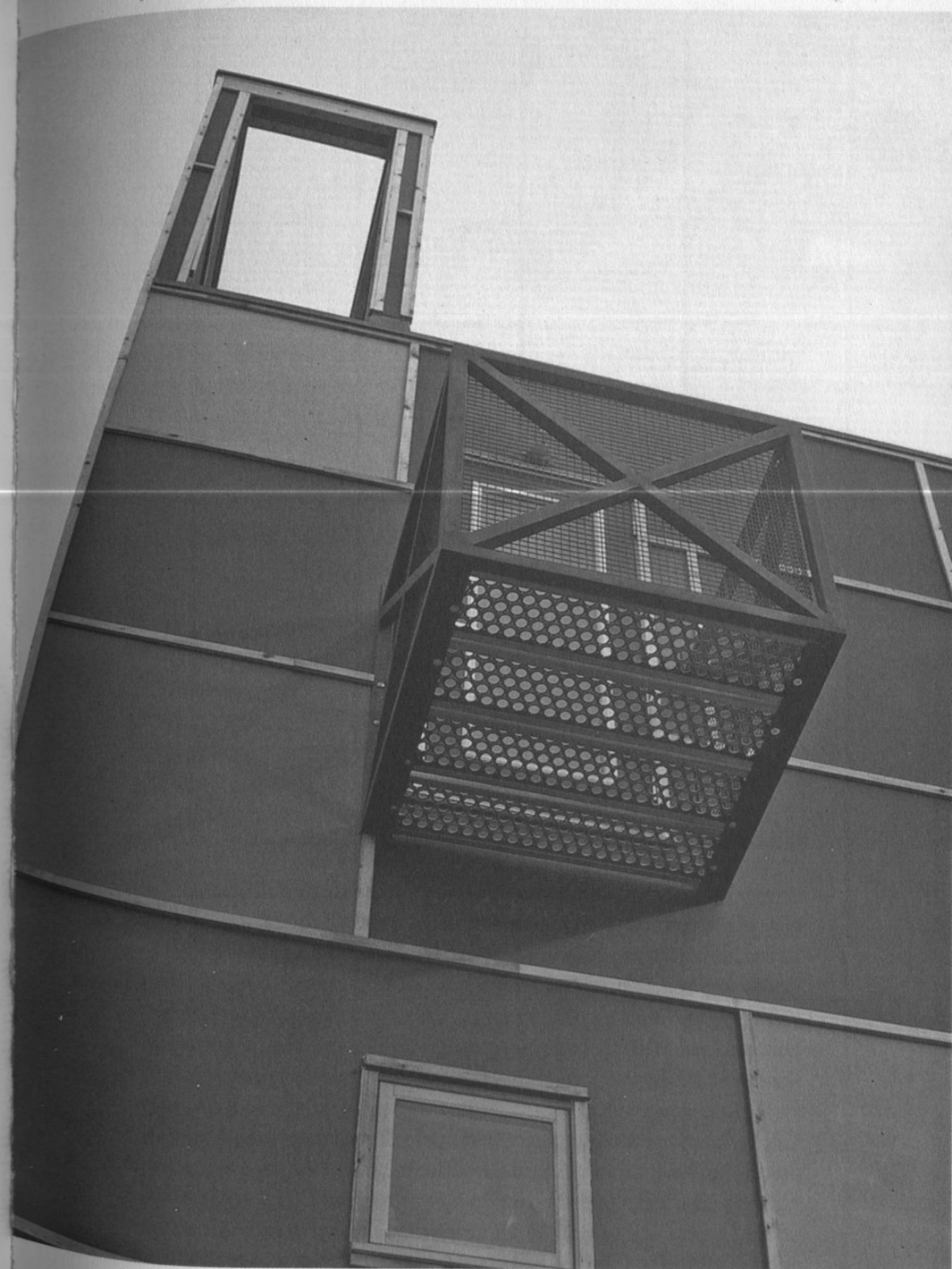
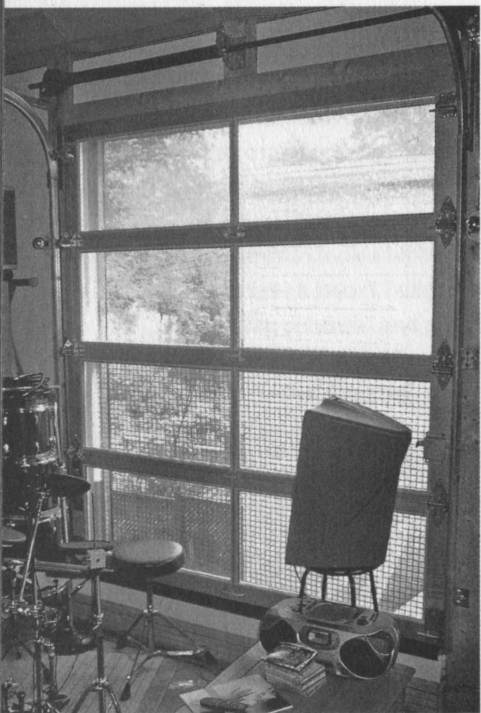
Home improvement: in appreciation of innovative houses

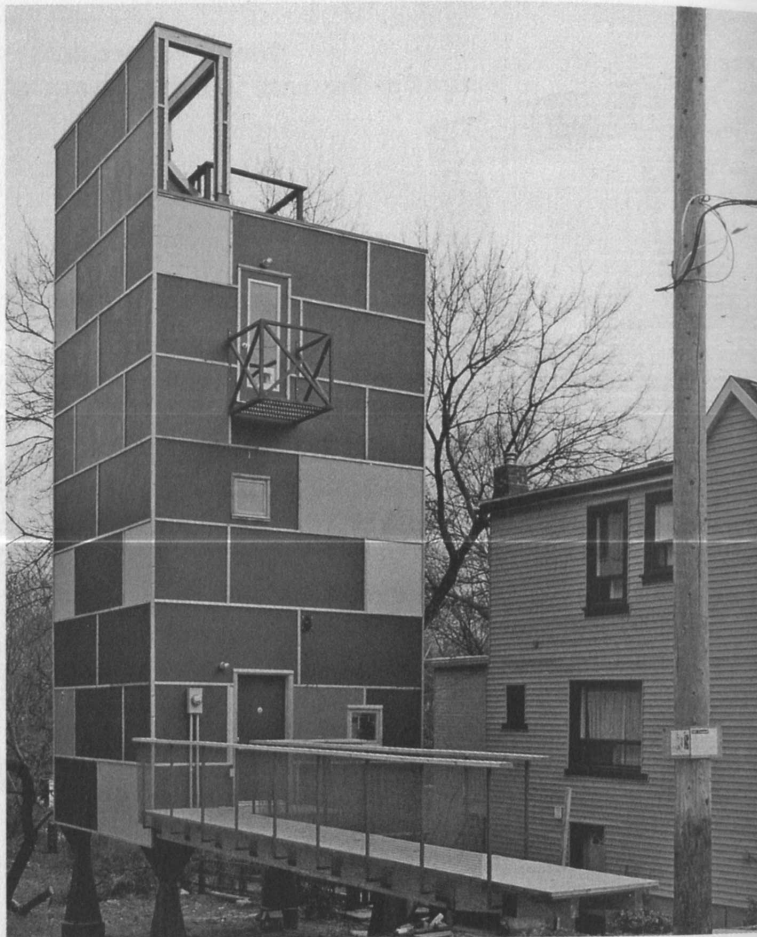
Take a stroll down Coxwell Avenue. See the monotonous reign of Victorian homes and cheap storefronts and then – surprise! Smack in the middle of this bland east-end stretch is the most distinctive house in the city: 157 Coxwell is built on stilts. And it's clad in squares of coloured plywood, a fanciful collage that remains strangely faithful to the surroundings. The leafy greens, flat

reds and twilight blues all come from the southern Ontario landscape; the house is a holistic fit even though the topography suggests a financial sinkhole. The site sits on a former creek bed. Trees and plant life grow like crazy, but only one developer was nuts enough to buy it. Rohan Walters, an independent building designer with an eye for marginalized land, ponied up \$50,000 back in 2001.

'We're not growing land in this city,' he argues. 'We need to make better use of our resources.'

So he built a house on stilts. Helical piles, forty-seven feet deep, provide secure footing in the soft, marshy ground east of Coxwell. A cedar catwalk connects the sidewalk to the front door and also discreetly carries phone, electricity and cable lines. Walters clad the house in resin-impregnated plywood, less expensive than brick or vinyl siding, but equally tough. The three-storey, 800-square-foot





house cost \$138,000 and still receives visits from curious neighbours and impressed architects. 'There's this feeling of quiet admiration,' he says. 'Because I had the balls to put my money into something so sketchy.'

Sketchy maybe, but the challenge is certainly clear: Toronto grows by 100,000 people each year. The city, already short on space and suffering an annual summer energy crisis, has countered with twin mantras of increased density and energy efficiency. In other words, we need fresh ideas.

Walters has plenty of ideas. His first major project started with an odd, triangular lot at College and Lansdowne. The owner, Mediacom, had plopped a billboard in the middle of the location, and no conventional builder was willing to meet the \$86,000 asking price. Walters scooped it up for \$17,000 and rose above the problematic space, building a house on stilts. A garden and parking pad sit underneath the 700-square-foot home.



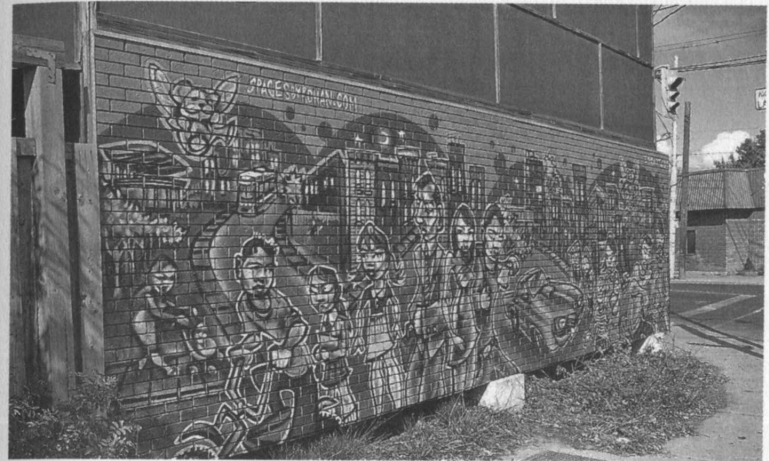
And the tab? Only \$80,000, a price that's even more attractive when the operating costs are added on: one hundred dollars a month, because the house is far less reliant on conventional heating and cooling methods than other homes. Large south-facing, triple-glazed windows make maximum use of solar energy and minimize heat loss. Sunlight is collected through the windows and absorbed by the thermal mass of concrete walls, which retain and slowly release warmth during cooler nighttime. A radiant heat system pipes warm water beneath the light concrete floors. In summer, window shading helps keep the heat out so the concrete floors stay cool. A well-planned air flow hustles out excess heat. No matter the weather, the house stays comfy at half the cost of a standard, similarly sized home.



Despite these savings, however, progressive home design is still slow to catch on. Why? Walters shakes his head. 'Archaic ideas drive me nuts.'

He's not alone. In 1999, architects Peter Duckworth-Pilkington and Suzanne Cheng paid

\$50,000 for an unserviced laneway lot near Gerrard and Jones. 'We started with a perfectly rational idea,' says Duckworth-Pilkington. 'We wanted to build a sustainable house. But there's an entire bureaucracy that seems designed to prevent that.' First, the couple had to haggle over a zoning law that makes laneway homes illegal. Then neighbours, resistant to the idea, appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board. The couple won but soon waded into a sea of hassles big and small: garbage pickup, mail delivery. The house was too far from the nearest fire hydrant so they had to dish out \$5,000 for a sprinkler system. They hoped to go off the grid with water collection and sewer treatment; the house's entire water supply would have come from rain and snow collected on the roof, and the water purified and stored in an underground cistern. Waste water, normally dumped into the sewer, was to have been treated in a home system using aerobic micro-organisms to duplicate the natural filtration process of soil. 'The technology is there,' says Duckworth-Pilkington. 'But the building codes don't allow it.' One and a half years and seven zoning variances after first applying to build their house, the couple finally started construction.



This is the great irony in our city: the official plan of 2002 stresses density and sustainability, but bureaucratic entanglements tend to counter any sense of innovation.

'There hasn't always been a sense of cause and effect in Toronto,' says Martin Kohn of Kohn Shnier Architects. In 2004, his firm asked for minor zoning variances to build a laneway house on Croft Street. They got a major headache. A four-month detour through the Committee of Adjustment resulted in a rejected proposal. Overdevelopment on the site, they were told. 'We were under the allowable floor area,' Kohn responds. They rejigged the plan and, in June 2004, completed a striking, 600-square-foot, two-storey house. 'They don't make it easy for you,' he sighs.

That might finally be changing. Linda McDonald, a downtown city planner, says there is interest in building laneway homes behind old working-class streets like Harbord, Niagara and Roncesvalles. Although laneway construction is still technically illegal, the city is trying to streamline the rezoning process with a checklist of favourable conditions, such as width of the lane, emergency access and parking. 'We're all for this type of intensification,' says McDonald.

Imagine: a city that doesn't simply sprawl or rise, where planners, builders and home buyers all agree on smart, sustainable growth and where reclaimed derelict sites add millions of dollars to the municipal tax base. 'It's time to make better use of what we have,' says Walters. 'Not just laneways but railway lands and valley lands.' He speaks with infectious enthusiasm; it spreads. 'Solutions sometimes scream for something original.'