RESIDENTIAL INTENSIFICATION

CASE STUDIES

Built Projects

HARMONY

Toronto, Ont.

Sheppard Avenue/Meadowvale Road

Developer
Rockport Group
Date completed
1999
Site area
4.8 ha (12 acres)
Number and type of residential units
242 condominium townhouse units
Floor area
91m²–130 m² (980–1,400 sq. ft.) per unit
Gross residential density
50 units per hectare (uph)
Landscaped open space
25 per cent: 1.2 ha (3 acres) semi-private open space and small front and back yards at each unit
Maximum height
Four storeys
Parking
All units have garages, either detached in the lane (1.5 spaces) or attached to house (two spaces)
Non-residential units
None
Pre-development usage
Vacant wasteland parcel, bounded by hydro lines and busy arterials
Selling price
$115,900 to $172,900
(average approximately $150,000)

Figure 1: Harmony from Sheppard Avenue showing the streetscape with street-fronting homes free of garages and driveways

Harmony is a 242-unit, suburban, condominium townhouse development on a vacant site with significant challenges, including adjacent hydro towers. The design is based on neo-traditional development principles with a pedestrian-friendly street frontage and garages located in rear lanes. The units are narrow—4 m (13 ft., 2 in.)—which allowed a very high density for a townhouse development (50 uph gross density).

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Figure 2: Triangular-shaped park in centre of project with hydro line in background

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The project was developed on a 4.8 ha (12 acre) triangular-shaped vacant plot, bounded on two sides by Meadowvale Road and Sheppard Avenue, both busy arterial streets and on the third side by high-voltage transmission lines and a transformer. The lines and transformer presented significant noise issues. Careful site layout and defensive acoustic design were necessary to ease noise concerns.

The project achieved a high level of urban design quality and features extra-pitched roofs, attention to architectural detailing, brick veneer, window detailing and wrought-iron fixtures.

A park in the centre of the project makes use of land that was difficult to develop because of the shape of the site. The developer made efforts to ensure the landscape had good-quality plant material that looks attractive throughout most of the year and residents consider this a valuable asset. There is a total of 1.2 ha (3 acres) of semi-private open space.

The previous owner went through a lengthy process to get an official plan amendment allowing residential development on the site. The decision was appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), an independent tribunal that hears appeals to municipal zoning and land-use decisions, and the owner eventually won the right to develop in 1994. The land was sold to Rockport Group, which redesigned the proposal, especially the parking plans, to make it work for the site.

The three- and four-storey townhouse units range in size from 91 to 130 m^2 (980 to 1,400 sq. ft.). The project features rear lanes (in the neo-traditional style) with detached garages accessed from the lane. This allows attractive, street-facing units not broken up by garages and private driveways.

Two forms of townhouse were developed. The first is a townhouse with a rear lane, where there is a detached garage, on a 26.5 m (87 ft.) deep lot. The second is a townhouse with an attached garage, with open space integrated into the unit in the form of a deck over the garage. The detached-garage townhouses feature 1.5 parking spaces per unit; the attached-garage townhouses feature two spaces per unit.

Unlike many condominium projects, Harmony is accessible to the public with internal roads and sidewalk treatments that invite public access. Front yard and boulevard landscapes provide a transitional buffer between the street and houses and enhance the pedestrian environment. The units were laid

out to relate to each other with "front-to-front" or "back-to-back" relationships. As a result, the project presents a friendly public face and is an important addition to neighbourhood character.

The project is a five-minute drive from the Rouge Valley Park conservation area. Amenities within walking distance include a convenience store, pizza restaurant, gas station and theatre. A larger shopping centre, three miles away, satisfies all other shopping needs. There is a bus stop very close to the project but poorer access to bike trails. There is a school two blocks away.

To reduce the impact of noise, some units were designed without doors and windows on the sides facing the transformer. This has affected views and light penetration for some units. However, most units have reasonable views both internally and externally to the site (although no vistas) and sunlight penetration is generally good.

PROJECT SUCCESS: DEVELOPER'S PERSPECTIVE

> *[to some people] intensification is antithetical to the idea of 'neighbourhood,' which thrives on stability and is averse to change. Therefore, infill and redevelopment is very challenging for developers.* ***Jack Winburg, Rockport Group.***

In spite of a difficult, constrained site that presented considerable risk, and some initial opposition from neighbours, Harmony ended up as a successful project for developer Jack Winburg of the Rockport Group. The units sold fast and resulted in a healthy profit.

Costs and financing

Cost data is not available. The project was financed using conventional bank financing. There was no government financial assistance or in-kind support.

Marketability and profitability

The project proved to be very successful and all units were sold within 21/2 years—March 1997 to October 1999. Targeting mainly families, 156 units were sold in 1998 alone.

The project was divided into phases of 99 units and 144 units. In addition to standard marketing approaches, an incentives-based referrals approach paid existing owners and new owners $1,000 each if a referral resulted in a sale.

Obstacles

This was a very difficult project for a number of reasons. Noise, esthetics, phasing issues, shape of site, arterial roads and objections from neighbours played a part in adding complexity.

Noise issues resulted from the high-voltage transmission lines and transformer on the site. Units had to be located—and some designed—to ensure that noise levels were below Ontario Ministry of Environment thresholds for residential development. In some cases this meant that there would be no windows or doors facing the hydro lines or transformer. The developer installed extra panes of glass in other units, and included warning clauses about noise in purchase and sale agreements.

The noise made selling some units difficult and the developer decided to change the original phasing plan, which made sense from a physical layout and access point of view, but would not work from a marketing point of view (that is, difficult to sell the most unattractive lots first.)

An original design proposed underground parking, but market research quickly showed that it wouldn't work on this site. In addition, the water table was too high to make this option feasible. The project was redesigned with rear lanes and private, at-grade garages. This revision required going back to the City for a zoning bylaw amendment.

An adjacent owner of a dog kennel objected to the project on the basis that residents would complain about the noise of dogs barking.

Municipal support

Several City policies encouraged the project, including energy conservation, urban design and family housing policies. Working with Toronto City officials, the developer was able to craft a proposal that was eventually accepted by City Council.

Lessons learned

The unique problems of infill development seem to require a developer who is less risk-averse than those who concentrate on greenfield development. The success of infill projects really does come down to careful planning and the developer's expertise at presenting a good design to the community and pointing out its merits.

PROJECT SUCCESS: RESIDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

The project has a pedestrian scale to it…a feeling of a more urban style…and a child-friendly environment. ***Resident***

Affordability

Harmony has a range of unit styles and sizes. Selling prices ranged from $115,900 for the smallest townhouses (91 m^2–980 sq. ft.) to $172,900 for 130 m^2 (1,400 sq. ft.) townhouses. Condo fees are about $100 month for a 91 m^2 unit. The average selling price for resale townhouses in the former municipality of Scarborough in 1999 was $172,521.[1]

Those residents surveyed consider the units good value for money.

Design features: Unit size, character, open space, etc.

We are very happy with the character of the place and the architectural detailing. When buying the place, the artist's rendering was bang on…it is visually pleasing to drive by. ***Resident***

Residents surveyed were happy with the size of the units and especially liked the character of the neo-traditional style buildings.

While the private yards are small, residents are generally pleased with the amount of open space and they like the sense of openness created by the park in the centre of the project.

The views are considered reasonable considering the urban location and sunlight penetration is good as a result of window placement and orientation of the units.

The neighbourhood and transportation

The project is 40 km from Toronto's downtown core, which is a 30- to 60-minute drive by car or a 90-minute public transit ride. A bus stop is less than a block away.

The project is not close to amenities although there is a shopping centre 3 km away. Entertainment (restaurants and movie theatres) is further away. Consequently, residents report travelling by car for almost all trips.

PROJECT SUCCESS: MUNICIPAL PLANNER'S PERSPECTIVE

Harmony was successful in meeting urban design objectives—defining and enhancing public streets at an appropriate scale… [and] produced a high-quality living environment for the residents. ***Katrien Darling, Planner, City of Toronto***

Neighbourhood opposition or support

The project was generally well received and viewed as successful from the municipality's perspective. One of the most notable aspects is the public face it presents to the community. The project has an enhanced street presence, achieved in part by locating buildings close to public space and placing garages in the rear lane.

There was some early opposition before the official plan designations were approved. Once Phase 1 was completed, however, there was strong support from most stakeholders. The main concerns were density, increased traffic on already congested streets, parking in the neighbourhood, snow removal and safety issues.

Most of the original concerns seem to have been addressed during the approvals process, although the condominium corporation continues to work on addressing minor issues internal to the project.

Parking standards had to be met even though this was problematic for the developer because of the narrowness of the units. Street lighting design for the project was approved in consultation with urban design staff.

Planning objectives

The project meets family housing policies that encourage a mix of unit types and sizes, on site amenities, quality streetscapes and good transit access. All residents have easy access to the bus system located within a short walk of their doorsteps. It also meets City of Toronto objectives for residential intensification.

Does it fit into the neighbourhood?

The project provides a pedestrian-oriented streetscape through the use of street-fronting townhouses, free of garages and driveways along the street, which incorporate traditional residential elements such as sloped and gabled roofs and high-quality architectural detailing.

[1] CMHC, Ontario Market Analysis Centre

Parking was placed internally on the site in an effort to reduce street impact. The townhouses were designed to reduce the amount of front yard parking by concentrating parking in garages in the lane.

Both the public boulevard and private property were landscaped, resulting in an enhanced pedestrian environment.

Regulations and approvals

The overall approvals process was quite lengthy and involved an Official Plan Amendment to allow this use on the site. This amendment was appealed to the OMB and the former owner did not receive approval until May 1994. Public opposition focused on Phase 1 of the project.

A zoning bylaw amendment required for Phase 2 of the project submitted in October 1998 was not appealed to the OMB and was approved by Council two months later.

LESSONS LEARNED

Harmony shows that despite a difficult site and early public opposition, a medium-density project designed on new urbanism principles can be successful in a suburban location. Success required thoughtful planning and project phasing and the creation of attractive landscapes and streetscapes. Careful site layout and the use of acoustical barriers were necessary to solve a difficult noise problem.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information can be obtained from:

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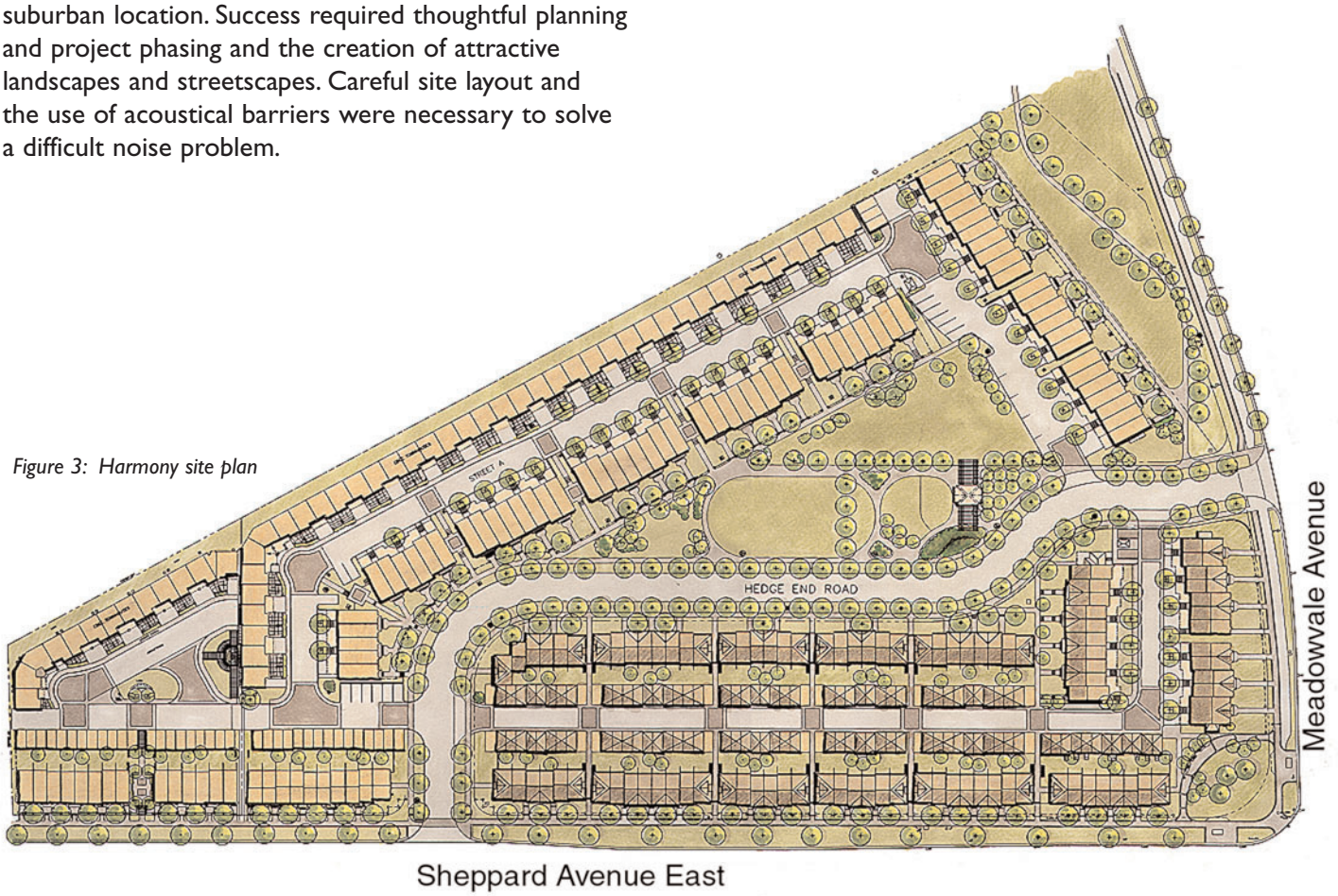

Figure 3: Harmony site plan

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