

# Boho goes condo as developers rule on Queen West

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Queen St. W. has always been a shining example of the best of Toronto; now it has also become an example of the worst.

Late last week, the Ontario Municipal Board, that unaccountable, unelected, quasi-judicial body that has final say over development in the province, ruled in favour of three proposals that will alter forever the character of the Queen West Triangle, the area south and east of Queen and Dufferin Sts.

Even the most hard-bitten veterans of Toronto's development wars were shocked by the decisions handed down by the OMB.

"If there's anything to be learned," says internationally respected Toronto planner Ken Greenberg, "it's that we have a truly dysfunctional planning system in this city. And a lot of that has to do with the OMB. It's hard to imagine the neighbourhood could have done anything more than it did. But the OMB rejected all the planning evidence that was presented by the neighbourhood. Unless we change planning in Toronto, the same thing is going to happen again and again."

Greenberg is referring to the fact residents, self-styled YIMBYs (Yes, In My Backyard), actually went to the trouble of hiring planners and this being Toronto, lawyers, to come up with a development plan for the area. The group, which calls itself Active 18, took their scheme to the city planning department as well as Mayor David Miller. Both pledged their support but then did precious little.

As senior city planner, Gary Wright recently admitted, "We fell behind the curve."

In the meantime, the developers, not having heard from the city after the required 180 days after filing an application, appealed to the OMB. Clearly uninterested in working with Active 18, they carried on regardless and to no one's surprise got everything they wanted from the board.

Though the three schemes vary in quality, the larger issue is that each has been planned in isolation from the rest. This means it is virtually a given that they won't contribute positively to the neighbourhood.

Early pictures of one of the three, a condo complex named – without apparent irony – Bohemian Embassy, show a dreary series of buildings, the kind of banal and anonymous architecture that could be anywhere in the world, let alone Queen St.


That's exactly what Active 18 was trying to prevent, of course. This is, don't forget, the Art and Design District – at least that's what the street signs say – and so it would make sense to take advantage of the cultural and social infrastructure.

Indeed, the city commissioned a major report last summer that documented exactly why the area is so valuable to the city. Because of its cheap rents and large spaces, it has attracted artists and creative types that contribute hugely to Toronto, socially, culturally and economically.

One of the three OMB-approved proposals will see the three-storey warehouse at 48 Abell St., an artistic hub for years, replaced with two condo towers, 18 and 14 storeys.


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"It's already started to have an effect," laments Margie Zeidler, who has led the charge against untrammelled development. "Three art galleries have moved out in the last year and now the Theatre Centre has been kicked out of the Great Hall (at Queen and Dovercourt).

"It couldn't be worse. The OMB gave the developers everything they wanted. This isn't going to be a nice place to live. The people who buy those condos will be looking into somebody else's windows. There are no public streets between the towers; people are starting to talk about St. James Town. It could even be unsafe."

Interesting, too, that the city did make the effort to prepare its own development plan. Active 18 members didn't like it because of its high densities. And although city council approved it, the OMB rejected it anyway.

As Zeidler says, "It makes you wonder why the city even bothers to plan."

Local councillor Adam Giambrone calls the OMB decision "disappointing."

"We did get a road we wanted," he says. "We got a mews and a park. But the big issue – housing for artists – still has to be decided. We think it's too much. There's no doubt that five towers, some as high as 18 storeys, will have an effect on Queen St."

Like a growing number of Torontonians, Giambrone believes the OMB should be abolished except, he says, "in extreme cases of abuse of power."

No question about that. More than anything, the sorry story of Queen St. W. makes it clear the time has come to abolish the OMB now. No other province in Canada has such a body, a 19th-century anachronism that has no place in the modern world. It serves no purpose but to render civic planning irrelevant and impotent.

At a time when Ontario cities are fighting to keep pace with urban centres around the world, the OMB is one obstacle we can do without.

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