

B.M.R. COMMENT



BUREAU OF
MUNICIPAL
RESEARCH

BETTER GOVERNMENT THROUGH RESEARCH

Suite 406, 4 Richmond St. E., Toronto 1, phone 363-9265

September, 1971 -- #128

A PILE OF RUBBLE?

The Need for Comprehensive Control of Demolitions

Redevelopment is an ongoing process in centre-city neighbourhoods of many large urban areas. A major component of the redevelopment process, of course, is demolition of existing structures.

But demolitions are not always undertaken simply as the routine first step of the construction cycle. This is particularly true in the case of residential redevelopment.

Strategic demolitions -- tearing down one or more residences scattered throughout a relatively stable, low density residential neighbourhood -- results in neighbourhood deterioration in obvious physical terms. The physical deterioration, in turn, encourages residents to seek other neighbourhoods in which to live. Local shops and services, their market reduced, are forced to relocate or close altogether. The deterioration is no longer just physical; it now includes the element of community disintegration.

Our present planning process encourages the use of strategic demolition as a lever for redevelopment. The process requires the developer to assemble the land, then submit a proposal for redevelopment -- very often requiring a change in the zoning by-law to increase the allowable density of the development. The more people encouraged to leave the neighbourhood, the easier it is to acquire the necessary properties. The fewer people remaining in the neighbourhood, the less opportunity for strong neighbourhood opposition to the redevelopment. The more properties torn down, the fewer the alternatives for the neighbourhood other than the redevelopment proposal. Neighbourhood planning becomes increasingly a matter of tinkering with decisions made privately regarding the area's future. An important element in instituting comprehensive neighbourhood planning would be a greater control of demolitions, requiring them to be approved only after consideration of their total effect on the neighbourhood as it presently is and as the community wishes it to be in the future.

In the City of Toronto, regulations governing the issuance of demolition permits do not presently require that they be considered in the light of comprehensive neighbourhood planning. Many of the concerns

expressed above that are the potential results of uncontrolled demolitions, have been brought to the fore by the activity now underway in the South of St. James Town area in the City of Toronto.

The area was described by a recent report of the City planning staff as:¹.

"...typical of many inner city neighbourhoods; narrow tree lined streets fronted by low scale attached and semi-detached homes with small setbacks walk-up apartment buildings and commercial and institutional uses combined to form an urban pattern of pleasing quality. Yet, the pressures of change have brought an increasing degree of deterioration poorly maintained or vacant and boarded up homes and large land assemblies. The effects of the decline are evident throughout the area but in 1971, 88% of the remaining homes are still considered possible for rehabilitation."

The area is under considerable pressure for redevelopment by the Meridian Group, a private development company presently owning some 140 of 400 houses in the area. In 1970, twenty houses were demolished. The developer has recently applied for permission to demolish fourteen more, eight of which are semi-detached houses whose other half are occupied.

The planning staff report was presented to the planning board on September 28, 1971. In addition to describing the area as it is presently, the report outlined alternative development futures for the area, grounded on the principles of community participation in the planning process, utilization of existing structures where possible, and careful integration of new structures with the existing neighbourhood.

The recent application for permission to demolish fourteen houses -- and possible future applications to demolish others in the area -- may in fact be compatible with the development of a comprehensive neighbourhood plan guided by the principles set forth by the planning staff. Or they may not. In the absence of a system that requires demolition applications to be approved after consideration of their impact on the neighbourhood, a proper evaluation of the compatibility of the demolitions with the future design and fabric of the community is impossible.

¹. City of Toronto, Don District Guide Plan, South of St. James Town Area, p. 21.