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## TRANSFORMING THE YELLOWBELT

**Marc Mitanis**

**A** new guidebook is intended to serve as a resource for city-builders working to increase housing options in Toronto by addressing barriers to building the elusive 'missing middle' housing types ranging from laneway suites and secondary suites to duplexes to low-rise apartments—that face zoning restrictions on where they can be built within existing neighbourhoods. The release of the guidebook coincides with an ever-worsening housing crisis and with increasing recognition from city planners that inhibitory zoning rules are constraining the supply of affordable and diverse forms of housing.

Written by **University of Toronto** School of Cities students **Alexander Julian Bimm, Ariana Fernández Chesquín, Chang Xu, Eclipse Atencio-Malixi, and Katarina Oliveira**, ['The City Builder's Guide to Building the Missing Middle'](#) is a guidebook motivated by the necessity of addressing the housing supply gap in Toronto. It provides an

overview of how supportive missing middle housing policies can improve the balance of housing options in the city, and can also address a significant housing need for low- and middle-income households.

"Toronto is often a city celebrated for its diversity, but we don't see that being reflected in the housing stock," Bimm told *NRU*. "As a team, we were tasked with researching how land use planning and the missing middle can address this housing gap. We created the guide to not only support the work of urban planners, but

also for residents and any city-builder interested in creating a more inclusive city."

**Smart Density urban planner, architect, and urban designer Naama Blonder** said the guidebook will help clear up misconceptions about the missing middle, which doesn't include mid-rise residential projects. "The missing middle is not a mid-rise building," Blonder told *NRU*. "The **City of Toronto** defines missing middle as residential buildings up to four storeys [in height], and a mid-rise building as between six to 11 storeys. I'm hoping

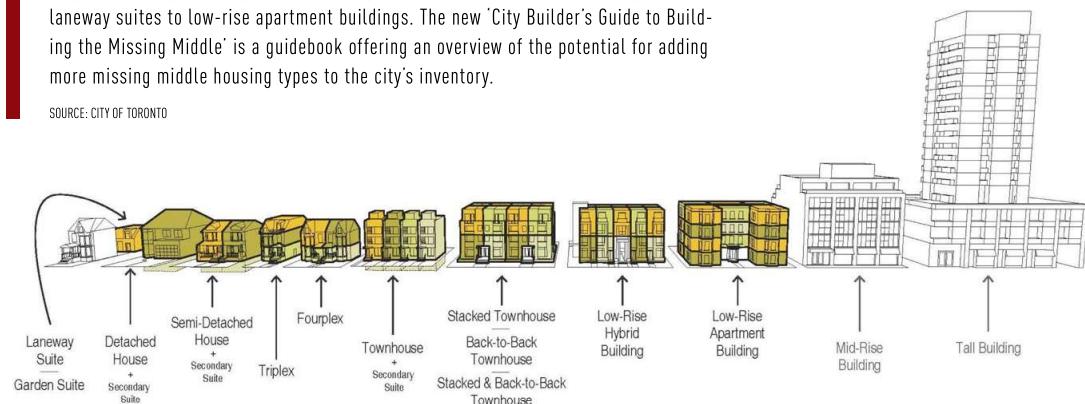
that this guide will reach the wider public, and be a very informative resource of what the typologies are and what the opportunities are."

The colour yellow is used in Toronto's Official Plan land use map to indicate areas of Toronto designated as 'Neighbourhoods'. The 'Yellowbelt' colloquially refers to these areas, which consist of multiple residential zones that permit different housing types under the city's zoning by-law. Development within an area with a Neighbourhoods

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Diagram showing 'missing middle' housing forms (shaded yellow), which range from laneway suites to low-rise apartment buildings. The new 'City Builder's Guide to Building the Missing Middle' is a guidebook offering an overview of the potential for adding more missing middle housing types to the city's inventory.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO



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designation is limited to primarily residential uses in buildings with a maximum height of four-storeys, with new residential development being required to fit within the existing area's "character." In the Residential (R) zone, 'missing middle' housing forms like townhouses, multi-plexes, and low-rise apartment buildings are permitted. In the most restrictively zoned areas—those designated Residential Detached (RD)—only single-detached homes are permitted.

"Despite Toronto being a city known for its diversity and vibrant neighbourhoods, restrictive zoning requirements within the Yellowbelt cause much of these neighbourhoods to be dominated by single-detached homes," said Missing Middle Guidebook co-author Katarina Oliveira. "This results in less inclusiveness and [less] equitable access of the neighbourhoods, as well as diminishing access to the infrastructure and services available within communities."

The Yellowbelt encompasses approximately 35 per cent of Toronto's total land area, and approximately 70 per cent of land in the Yellowbelt is designated under the RD zone. The RD zone comprises approximately 31 per cent of the city's total land area, with

15.8 per cent of the city's total land area consisting of other residential zones, most of which permit a variety of missing middle housing forms.

Urban planner **Sean Galbraith** thinks that needs to change. He says Toronto needs a single low-rise residential zoning category, and that missing middle housing forms like duplexes are already common in low-density neighbourhoods primarily populated by single- or semi-detached homes.

"We don't need to reinvent

the wheel. Toronto has the solution, or at least a lot of the solution already in place for a chunk of the city. If we could expand that city-wide, that could be truly transformative," Galbraith told NRU. "We have the problem. We have the solution. We just have to be brave enough to allow that solution to happen."

The city is currently exploring ways to facilitate low-rise, missing-middle housing in residential neighbourhoods through its 'Expanding Housing Options in Neighbourhoods' initiative, which city council endorsed in July 2020.

Priority projects currently underway include developing a garden suites policy [See 'Home Suite Home' December 11, 2020 NRU Toronto edition], allowing

more residential units in forms "compatible with existing houses such as duplexes and triplexes", and changing zoning regulations to allow more low-rise housing options on major streets within the Neighbourhoods designation.

Blonder said that the city's plan to upzone major streets is "extremely wise". She said that changes to zoning rules would allow potential missing middle projects to bypass the cumbersome rezoning and minor variance processes, and since most low-rise residential developments that are less than four storeys in height and include fewer than five

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Graphic showing the share of Toronto land area zoned for residential development. Under the existing zoning by-law, 47.1 per cent of Toronto's total land area is zoned Residential, with 31 per cent of Toronto's total land area zoned to permit only single-detached houses. Other low-rise residential buildings like duplexes are permitted in only 15.8 per cent of Toronto's total land area.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO



Photos showing examples of laneway suites in Toronto. Laneway suites, a type of missing middle housing, are self-contained residential units located on the same property as a single-detached house, semi-detached house, townhouse, or other low-rise residential building. Since July 2019, the city has permitted the construction of laneway suites across the city on residential properties that share a property line with a public lane.

SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO SCHOOL OF CITIES, SMART DENSITY, AND THE KEHILLA RESIDENTIAL PROGRAMME

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parking spaces are exempt from site plan approvals, a missing middle housing developer would be able to apply directly for a building permit.

City of Toronto planning staff are also working on a missing-middle pilot program in the Beaches-East York area to determine potential sites for low-density housing [See 'Expanding the Spectrum' January 29, 2021 *Toronto edition*].

But **Spacing Magazine** co-owner and senior editor and **Toronto Star** columnist **Shawn Micallef** says the pilot has been done—there are already successful examples of missing-middle housing nestled within

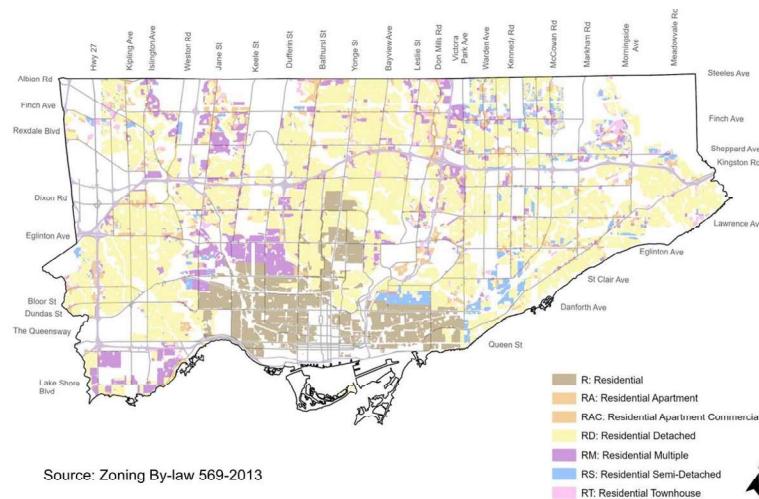
mature single- and semi-detached neighbourhoods.

"I like to walk around the old City of York, north of St. Clair, which had a lot looser zoning than the old City of Toronto back in the day,"

Micallef told *NRU*. "When you walk there, you find these missing middle walkup apartments and duplexes on residential streets, and it all just kind of works. There's no disaster, you almost don't even notice it is a three-storey apartment building in the middle of a block of single-family and semi-detached homes. We've done it before and it's fine. The pilot project has already been done."

Director of **Ryerson University's Centre for Urban Research and Land Development** **David Amborski** said that there is no silver bullet to address the dearth of missing-middle housing in the city. But he says something more immediate than the pilot project is needed. He says there are missing middle opportunities along Avenues—major streets in Toronto

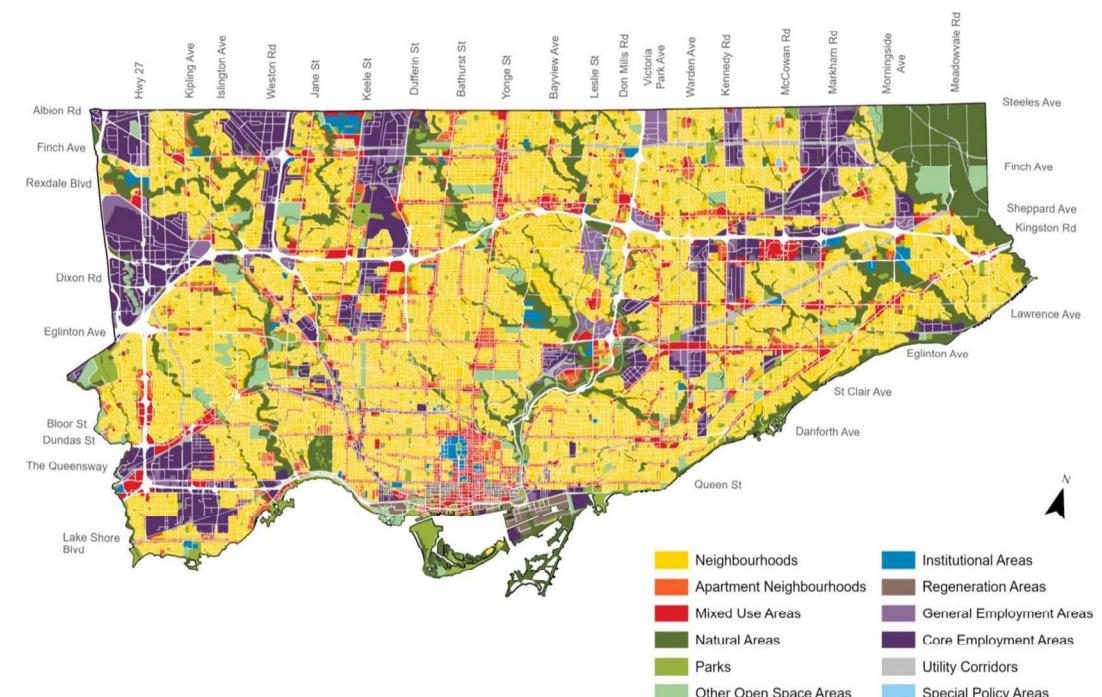
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## Building Types Permitted in Residential Zones

	R	RM	RT	RS	RD
<b>Detached house</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Semi-detached house</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<b>Townhouse</b>	✓	✓*	✓		
<b>Duplex</b>	✓	✓*			
<b>Triplex</b>	✓	✓*			
<b>Fourplex</b>	✓	✓*			
<b>Apartment Building</b>	✓	✓*			

\*permitted in the RM zone subject to conditions



Above right: Map showing the areas in the City of Toronto zoned for residential use. The RD: Residential Detached zone (yellow) covers 31 per cent of the city's total land area, and permits only single-detached houses, while the R: Residential zone (brown) permits missing middle housing forms, including townhouses, multi-plexes, and low-rise apartment buildings.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

Right: Map showing land use designations in the City of Toronto's Official Plan. The term 'Yellowbelt' refers to the areas of land designated as 'neighbourhoods' in the city's Official Plan. Approximately 70 per cent of the Yellowbelt is zoned RD: Residential Detached, which only permits the development of single-detached houses.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

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targeted by the Official Plan for residential growth.

"There is less public resistance to build on the Avenues," Amborski told NRU. "I think there's a lot of lower density, two-storey buildings along the Avenues that might have an opportunity to be recipient sites for the missing middle."

Galbraith says the city's missing middle initiative signals that they're willing to allow "baby steps" on expanding housing forms in the Yellowbelt. A single low-rise residential zoning category where all missing-middle housing types are permitted would allow single-detached homes to be converted into low-rise apartment buildings, Galbraith said.

Advocates for missing middle housing say their presence in a neighbourhood could have revitalizing effects on the community. Figures collected from the national census have shown that populations in the majority of neighbourhoods in the city are either stagnating or declining. Growth in many of these neighbourhoods is constrained by restrictive zoning permissions. Galbraith said it's unhealthy for these neighbourhoods to be "shrink-wrapped and suffocated,"

adding that missing middle housing projects have the power to transform unstable neighbourhoods in ways that are entirely positive.

"Neighborhoods need to be able to breathe—inhale and exhale. They need to be able to expand and allow more people to move in," Galbraith told NRU. "Right now, the zoning is extremely strict, and it doesn't allow for experimentation, it doesn't allow for evolution. It allows for one thing and one thing only in a good chunk of it."

University of Toronto student and Missing Middle Guidebook co-author Chang Xu said generally, missing middle housing types are friendly to groups like young professionals, who can be lured to a neighbourhood with relatively inexpensive housing. "If a reasonable strategy is used to attract new residents to the area, missing middle housing can contribute to the revitalization of the neighbourhood and help build a more diverse demographic," Xu told NRU.

Bimm said the lack of affordable housing options is preventing individuals and families from accessing restrictively zoned neighbourhoods, and missing middle housing could result

in an increase in student enrolment in underserviced schools, better access to housing, and more walkable neighbourhoods in areas near transit.

It's impossible for Toronto to accommodate its current pace of growth through a one-family-per-lot land use model, Blonder said. She points to Montreal's walk-up apartments as examples of missing middle housing that wouldn't be permitted in most of the Yellowbelt in Toronto. Across North America, Amborski said other jurisdictions are beginning to reduce the tightness of zoning regulations.

"In the Obama administration, the Council of Economic Advisers actually made reference to the lack of affordable housing because of zoning restrictions in cities," Amborski told NRU. "The Obama White House came out with a toolkit for municipalities on how to properly zone areas and how to have [zoning] more flexible with higher densities. And that's led to a lot of movements across the US, particularly in **Minneapolis**, **Seattle**, and **Portland**."

However, local opposition to gentle density could paralyze any efforts to enable missing middle housing in neighbourhoods with no existing examples of these housing forms. City planning launched a survey in February 2020 inviting feedback from community associations about increasing housing options and planning permissions within

Neighbourhoods. The plurality of respondents (48 per cent) supported the idea, but 40 per cent were opposed. Those opposed cited the potential loss of the physical character of their neighbourhoods and inadequate local infrastructure as their main concerns.

Galbraith said residents concerned about intensification in their neighbourhoods need to understand what's in it for them.

"It's not on homeowners to have to consider why this triplex should be allowed next door, and why it should be allowed to be the size of the house. It's up to the city and advocates to explain to people what's in it for them and for neighbourhoods—aging in place, supportive local retail, expanding the tax base, better use of infrastructure, stabilizing communities that have declining populations, better population for schools, allowing more kids and families to enter a neighbourhood. Change is scary and planning is about managing change, and part of that is education to help people show what's in it for them."

The guidebook points to case studies and walking tours as potential ways of educating the public about the benefits of missing middle housing. Galbraith added that once people understand the value of the missing middle, it could inspire them to think about their own properties differently, and could even push

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residents to develop garden suites or laneway suites of their own. City council voted in July 2019 to expand laneway suite permissions city-wide, and as of June 2020, building permits for 74 laneway suites have been issued. Micallef said the expansion of laneway suite permissions could be a harbinger of things to come.

Amborski said an education program and a public relations campaign could drum up more widespread understanding and

support for missing middle housing. "I remember when developers used to come in wanting to build condos in places like Leaside and they said the public didn't like the density of these condos," Amborski told *NRU*. "Once they were approved, some of the first people buying them were senior citizens from the neighbourhood who wanted to age in place in their community."

To start gaining acceptance

of missing middle housing, Bimm said the conversation needs to be shifted away from density and intensification and to emphasize the importance of place-making. "We need to ask important questions about what we want the future of our neighbourhoods to look like," Bimm told *NRU*.

Raising awareness is key, said Missing Middle Guidebook co-author Ariana Fernandez Chesquin. "I think it's really about presenting to the public [the fact] that implementing missing middle housing types isn't a new concept and that these housing types already exist around them within Toronto's urban fabric," Chesquin told *NRU*. "[There

needs to be] discussions with residents explaining that their support in missing middle housing will not only provide more housing accessibility but will serve to provide housing opportunities for their children and [for] future generations."



## PREMIER

HIGH DENSITY DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

CBRE's Land Services Group, on behalf of The Briton House, is pleased to offer for sale 0.52 acres at 214-226 Soudan Avenue and 19-21 Brownlow Avenue in Midtown Toronto. A Zoning By-Law Amendment (ZBLA) application has been submitted by the vendor to permit the development of a 24-storey residential building with just under 182,000 sq. ft. of total GFA and 208 units, allowing purchasers the opportunity to develop condominium or purpose-built rental product. The vendor appealed the application to the LPAT in 2018 based on a non-decision from the City and a Case Management Conference (CMC) was held in March 2021, with the next conference scheduled for July 2021 and settlement hearing scheduled for January 2022.

The Yonge-Eglinton node has witnessed unprecedented growth and development over the past decade, benefiting from the significant investment in infrastructure along the Eglinton corridor. Situated steps from Mount Pleasant Road and Eglinton Avenue, the site provides an unprecedented opportunity for high density development in one of Toronto's most highly sought after neighbourhoods.

[VIEW BROCHURE & CA](#)

OFFERS DUE: MONDAY, MAY 17<sup>TH</sup> 2021 BY 4:00 PM (EST)

214-226 SOUDAN AVENUE & 19-21 BROWNLOW AVENUE, MIDTOWN TORONTO

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