

# THE RIGHT ANGLE

JOURNAL

a refreshing look at architecture and the everyday built environment



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# WHY I DON'T DO CONDOS

by ANTHONY PROVENZANO, OAA, MRAIC

In the first 20 years of my career, I amassed a lot of experience doing multi-unit housing. Since founding my own practice in 2013, I have avoided it, despite the fact that, on at least four occasions, I've been approached by other architects wanting to tap my experience in the field. Frankly, I've had my fill of condos and, more important, they're not something I believe in, as they currently work.

Of course, as a sole practitioner, I have a business to run and people to support, so I can't rule out condos completely. But I have certain conditions, and there are many talented architects who can provide a wonderful service without those conditions. So I've happily resigned myself to projects that are not multi-unit housing.

## Why I Have Avoided Multi-Unit Housing (to date)

**There is also a predominating belief that the "the Market" is intelligent; so it tells us what it wants or does not want, and the Market can tell us what is successful and what is a failure. This also extends to architecture, development and consequently, the city.<sup>1</sup>**

– David Chipperfield

As a society, it is clear that we are in a *market-driven consumer economy*. Architecture and our cities are a part of that, as is everything else.

**As a whole, we have given over the shape of the city to the forces of the market. We have, knowingly or not, surrendered any notion of shape and form (collective ideas) to become the consequence of individual investments and actions.<sup>2</sup>**

– David Chipperfield

In the last 20 years, the City of Toronto has been shaped more by the Market than by society's idea of what a city should be. What has happened in Toronto since the late 1990s is that the slightly deregulated City development has been very financially successful. In other words, looser regulations have encouraged development, which brings money, and therefore everyone believes that success has been achieved. But that really depends on how you measure success and who is the biggest beneficiary.

## The Developers

The developers who are effectively shaping the city by their investment and development abide by all the current rules. They are the ones who assume the development risks and reap the potential successes and profits. The developers would appear to be the chief fiscal beneficiary, and the City has seemed to rely on them for its growth.

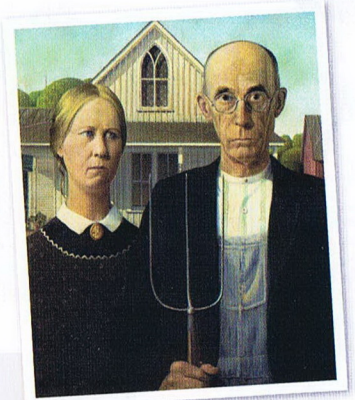
Overall, it seems as though the City, with its limited resources, has been overwhelmed by the amount of development, while it attempts to administer an Official Plan. For all its latent paradoxes, somehow, this all works.

In *housing* terms, the developers are defining and responding to the Market. In other words, developers tell the consumer what it wants and then deliver it. Of course, there are niches within the Market, but, overwhelmingly, what the consumer wants is affordability – the most value for the dollar – so obviously costs are a prime concern for everyone.

But let's be clear: the Market does very little – if anything at all – that does not directly benefit itself.

## The Crux of the Problem

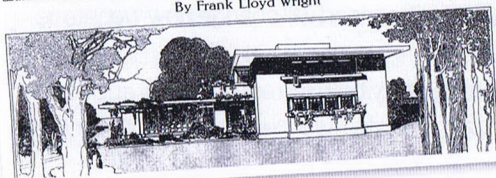
The problem is that in condominium development, the owner of the project during construction – the developer – is not the same as the owners after completion – the buyers. Effectively there are two sets of owners. Some of the greatest problems with contemporary development are the result of that owner/builder-owner/occupant turnover once the building is "complete."



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### Project Costs & Construction Costs

No one begrudges developers maximizing profits. They accomplish this by managing Project Costs – land, construction, financing, consultants, etc. The largest single component of the Project Cost is the Construction Cost, but the most deplored costs are Financing Costs, because they are a function of time. So the owner throughout the building process (i.e., the developer) is primarily concerned with two things: Construction Cost and Construction Timeline.

It seems logical to be concerned with time and money. Who wouldn't be? There is, however, a responsible way and there is a mildly sinister way to do it, in addition to all the variables in between. Ultimately, if you own (or even pretend to own) a building that's not intended to last 60–90 years when you're building it, your construction will reflect this, since they are bound to lean towards lowest Construction Cost and fastest Construction Time. Considerations such as durability, efficiency, performance, sustainability and Life Cycle Costing are not at the top of the discussion.

### Conspicuous Absence Number 1

Perhaps the most conspicuous absence from the discussion is Life Cycle Costing, which is of little interest to the owner/builder, since it only affects the building's performance, and not its initial cost. But it's a huge factor in what the development actually costs and may be (nearly always is) unknown to the end user who will bear the brunt. Only recently has Life Cycle Costing become a topic of discussion and, because it is not in the Market's best interest to let us know what it costs to own, this discussion is muted.

In my experience, an owner who builds a building and plans to own it makes different choices than an owner who intends to sell after construction is completed. Why would the latter be concerned with a roof lasting 10 or 40 years when their only concern is which roof is cheapest to build? The fact that over the life of the building, the cheaper Construction Cost means much higher Life Cycle Costs is of little concern to someone chiefly concerned with maximizing profits by Project Managing Construction Cost and Construction Timeline.

Most residential condominiums are built with poured concrete structural frames, nearly always with shear walls. These buildings are capable of lasting for centuries, but they are largely clad with window wall systems that are heavily reliant on surface seals that can quickly deteriorate. So a bargain window wall system may only last 15 years, while a better system, such as curtain wall glazing, at roughly twice the construction cost, may last 30 to 40 years with a significantly more favourable Life Cycle Cost.

### Conspicuous Absence Number 2

Another conspicuous absence is any discussion of true sustainability. There are certainly mandates and incentives for using high efficiency appliances, but what about *true* sustainability?

If this same concrete condo structure can last for 250 years, how can we ensure that it will be useful for that length of time? Adaptability is the key. It's exceedingly difficult (nearly impossible) to adapt a shear wall concrete building for another use; it's hard even to connect two adjacent residential units in the same building. A columnar plan solves the problem. If the same shear wall structure were built using columns, adaptability would be built in, and more enduring means more sustainable. That's precisely why commercial office towers are built with gridded columns – they are easily adaptable to multiple uses. Warehouse buildings, which are constantly being readapted for different uses, all have columns. The over-reliance on shear walls and the simple absence of columns in current residential developments has greatly restricted (nearly obliterated) their long term adaptability and therefore, true sustainability.

The difference in cost between concrete-column and concrete-shear wall construction is approximately 25 per cent in concrete costs. Columnar construction takes slightly longer and costs slightly more, so it's rarely done. It's a small decision that can save the building from becoming landfill long before its time.

### My Food Analogy

Speaking as possibly the only architect whose website includes a "Recipes" section, food is important to me, and our current relationship with food provides a poignant analogy. Mass food production is being pushed towards the synthetic. There is an industrial desire to make



