



PHOTO COURTESY TVM GROUP
TVM Group is redeveloping the St. Joseph Hospital site in Peterborough's East City area, turning a campus of five buildings into a mix of rental housing and condo units near the Trent River.

IS THIS THE DAWN OF A NEW HIPSTURBIA?

MATTHEW HAGUE

Toronto real estate agent Scott Ingram recently found himself wondering if people self-isolating in diminutive downtown condos were sick of it yet — spending their days in a cramped shoebox 30-storeys up in the crowded core. He wondered if those residents — who tend to be younger in age and stretch themselves financially for their accommodations — were hearing the call of the suburbs, where housing is bigger and cheaper, and the relative lack of trendy restaurants and cafés matters less in an age of social distancing.

To appease his curiosity, Ingram put out a Twitter poll in late May. He asked his 3,800 followers whether they believed that demand for downtown real estate would remain high post COVID-19. Of the 516 people

who replied, 62 per cent said they didn't. "Clubs, sports events, social events, partying, beaches, working DT, restaurants, tourism ... COVID killed all of that," wrote one respondent: "Condos DT are doomed."

Though Ingram's sample size was small, his poll's results are backed up by trends that surfaced even before the COVID-19 lockdown took hold. On March 5 this year, Ipsos Reid and the Ontario Real Estate Association (OREA) put out a study showing that while 31 per cent of millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) wanted to live downtown, 34 per cent preferred the suburbs. In part, that's because the prime consideration for millennial buyers is price. According to Statistics Canada, Toronto had a net outflow of residents to other parts of the province between 2018 and 2019, particularly among thirtysomethings with toddlers.

[See HIPSTURBIA on PH6](#)



PHOTO COURTESY THE MINTO GROUP

The stacked townhouses in Whitby's Ivy Ridge development, starting under \$500,000, are popular with young buyers defecting from the city.

Suburbs of the future will bear little resemblance to those of the past

Is this the dawn of a new hipsturbia — where a younger generation flocks to smaller bedroom communities to raise their kids and leave city life behind?

Some signs say yes. Take Guelph, less than an hour from Toronto. Since the onset of COVID-19, real estate prices have slid in Toronto, while resale prices have gone up 11 per cent in Guelph, according to the Guelph & District Association of Realtors. In 2018, Point2, a real estate trend watcher, called Guelph the most millennial-friendly city in Ontario, noting its balance of lower average home prices (\$406,800, less than half the average home price in Toronto) and high salaries — close to \$83,000 a year, over \$15,000 more than in T.O.

“Guelph has had a steady run of in-migration from the GTA since around 2017 and, if I had to guess, I could see an uptick in 2020 and beyond,” says Guelph realtor Kelly Caldwell. Guelph real estate agent Adam Stewart is also anticipating continued growth post-COVID-19. “My sense is that the new norm will effectively see more

people working from home two to three days of the week,” he says. “And people will react to that and look for new and more affordable living options on the outskirts of the Golden Horseshoe.”

Even places as far afield as Peterborough are seeing an uptick in urban escapees. Ten years ago, developer Amit Sofer, president of TVM Group, bought the old St. Joseph Hospital site in Peterborough's East City area. At the time, he had plans to turn the campus of five buildings into a mix of rental and condo units, and expected a demographic of retirees to move in; the site is both peaceful, near the Trent River and its network of walking trails, and lively, near a commercial strip of shops and restaurants.

“We were wrong,” says Sofer. The first several phases of rental buildings of the TVM Apartments, now complete, are home to mostly twentysomethings, and the condos, which are just hitting the market now in pre-sales, are being bought by young professionals in their 30s. “The new 407 connection to Peterborough helps people feel as though they are still connected to Toron-

to,” he says. “The trip takes an hour; I drive it every day.”

“We also paid a lot of attention to having work-from-home amenities such as meeting areas and fibre optic, high-speed internet,” says Sofer's architect Jonathan King of BNKC Architecture + Urban Design. “Remote work was growing before COVID-19, and people don't necessarily want to work in their suites — a trend we expect to continue.”

But not everyone is convinced the future is suburban. “Humans have evolved to be social species that like to live near one another,” says Matti Siemiatycki, interim director of the University of Toronto School of Cities. “There are going to be changes in the face of the pandemic. We are going to have to redouble our efforts to prevent overcrowding of sidewalks, overcrowded or non-existent bike lanes and overcrowded public parks. But I believe the city will build back better.”

Siemiatycki also points out that part of what makes areas outside the core more appealing isn't just price, but the same things that make Toronto attractive, including walkable neighbourhoods and transit. Guelph is “not a

and transit. Guelph is “not a stop along the highway,” says Caldwell. “We’re a small city of really interesting neighbourhoods and pockets.”

In the inner suburbs, there has also been a big investment in transit. Suburbs such as Markham and Mississauga have committed to transit, ramping up GO Service, offering rapid buses in dedicated lanes and building LRT lines like the one under development between Port Credit and Brampton.

Those infrastructure projects are critical. A key way to set up any locale for an influx of new residents “is to do urbanism well,” says Siemiatycki. “That doesn’t have to mean super tall buildings. It can mean mid-rise buildings. The important thing is to have equitable access to amenities. Who doesn’t want to live a one-minute walk or a five-minute to all the things they need?”

The suburbs of the future may only have a passing resemblance to the suburbs of the past. Ten years ago, Mike LaPlante, vice-president of land development at Minto Group, lived in the Pringle Creek area of Whitby. Though he now lives in Etobicoke, he’s currently developing a site near his old home called Ivy Ridge. Popular among young buyers moving out of Toronto are its stacked, back-to-back townhomes.

“Ten years ago, no one would have wanted stacked, back-to-back townhomes in Whitby,” he says — dominated by large McMansions with sprawling yards. “It’s a pretty eye-opening change.” In part, the shift is because Pringle Creek is near the 401, the 407 and the Go Line — and a wetland, which means a nice balance between urban convenience and leafy respite. But it’s also because the townhomes start under \$500,000 — a price range that doesn’t exist downtown.

But the pendulum swings

both ways, Ingram says. The argument about downtown versus the suburbs “gets a bit circular, because if demand for suburban places goes up and downtown goes down, the price gap would likely shrink,” he says. “If the gap gets small enough, then downtown becomes more desirable again.”

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