

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

The Re-emergence of the Courtyard [Housing on Toronto's Main Streets]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8cj504s8>

### Journal

Places, 7(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Greenberg, Ken

### Publication Date

1991-01-15

Peer reviewed

*Ken Greenberg*

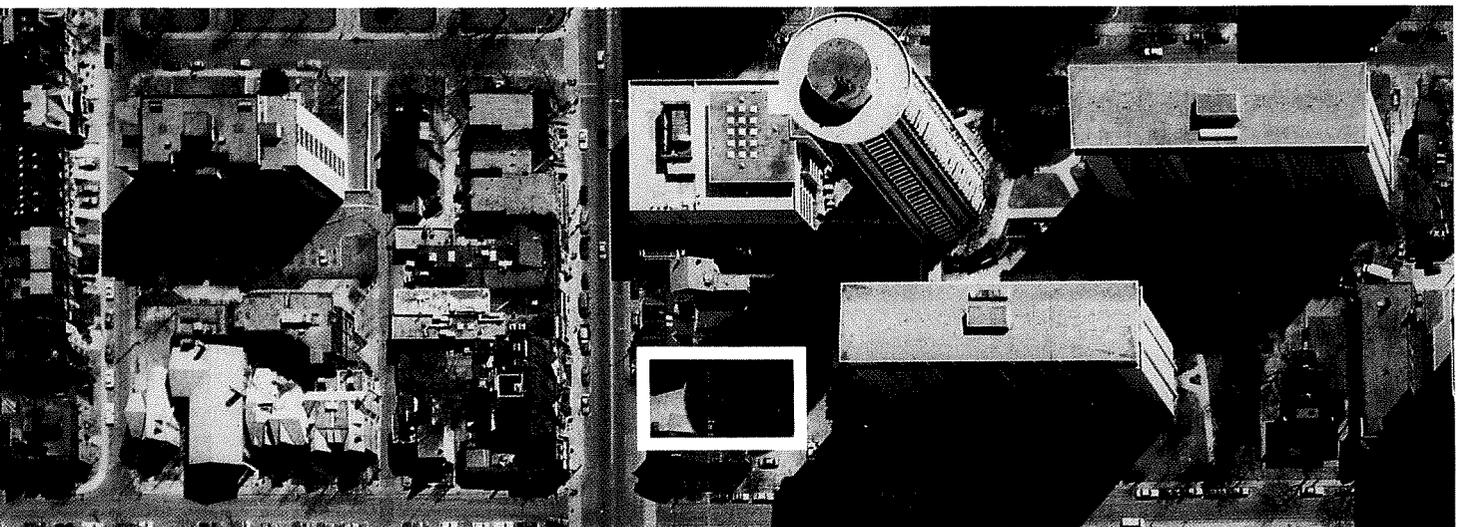


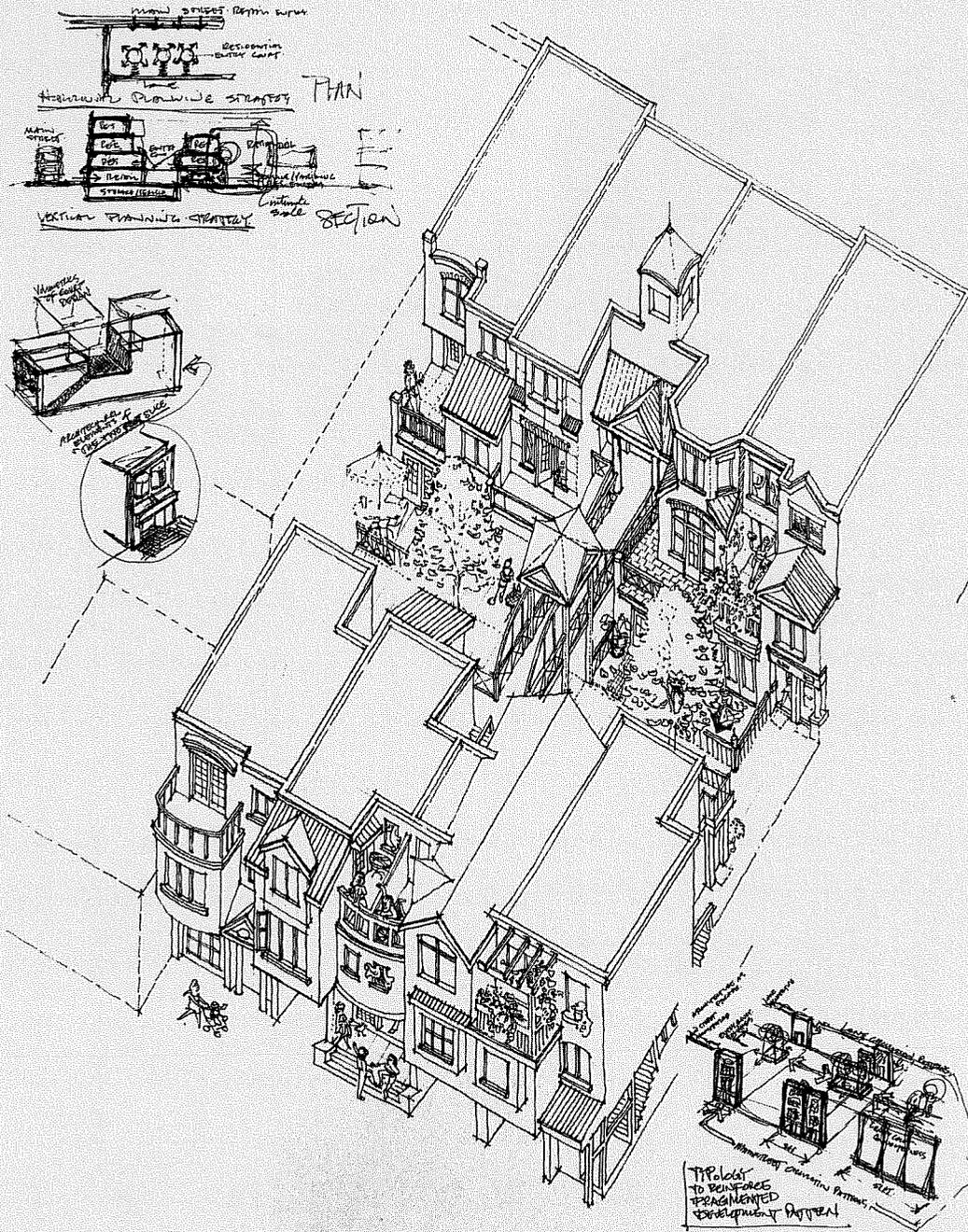
## The Re-emergence of the Courtyard

Ideas in architecture and urban design seem to re-appear periodically, as if they were advanced by a swinging pendulum. Earlier in this century, the Modern movement rejected not only the traditional pattern of streets and blocks as a way of organizing cities, but also the types of buildings — which often incorporated interior courts within the block — that traditionally lined streets. In the quest to provide residents with light, views and privacy, the slab, the tower and the free-standing villa emerged victorious, as objects in open space.

But this typology turned out to be a severe case of overreaction. Another generation of architects, planners and citizens has discovered that it is difficult to compose workable, animated and viable public spaces with such constituent elements. As the idea of the street has been rehabilitated and restored to its appropriate place as a key element in the composition of cities, so has the idea of the interior court, its historical and logical companion.

**This mid-block site, a “missing tooth” in an otherwise complete block of buildings, abuts a group of high-density, high-rise residential buildings.**





In this proposal, two rows of housing sit on a podium above retail space, which faces the main street, and parking, which faces the lane behind the lot. The housing is entered either from the lane

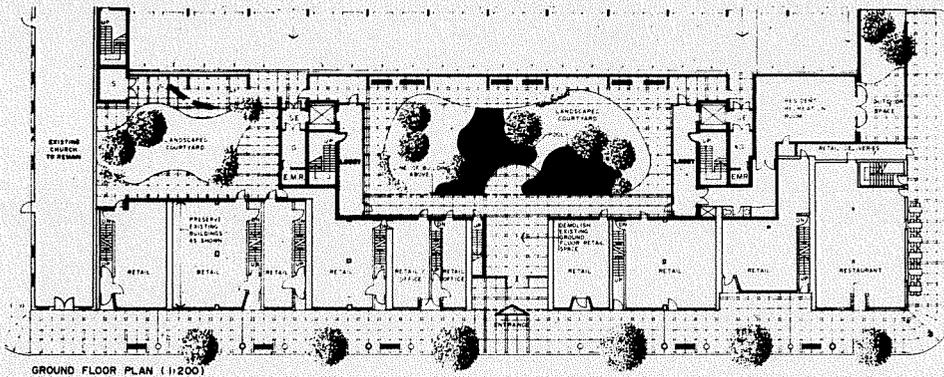
or from a courtyard between the two rows of housing. The proposal, by James Colizza, Jacques Belleau and Jacques Hamel, of Ottawa, was given an Honorable Mention.



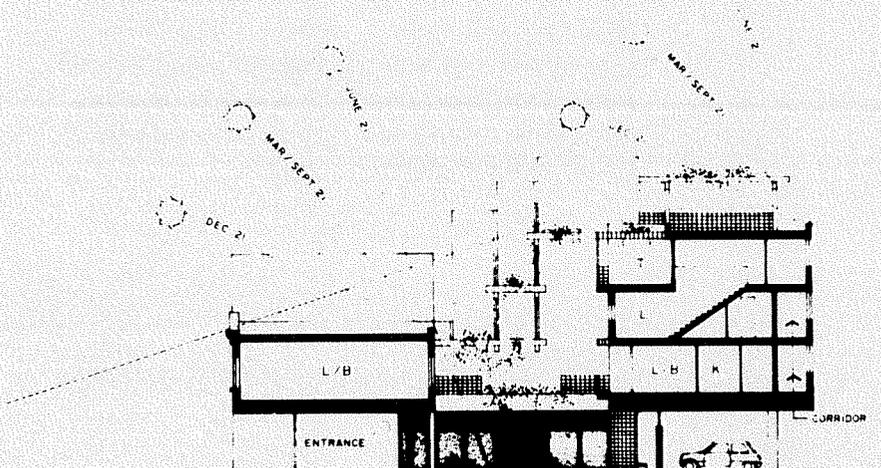
This proposal would keep most of the two- and three-story buildings already on the site and erect townhouses behind them. The residents would share a courtyard between the two rows of buildings.

The proposal, by Mandel Sprachman Architects, of Toronto, was awarded an Honorable Mention.

Project team: Mandel Sprachman, Ernesto Bianco, Mark Brooker, Robert Trowell.



GROUND FLOOR PLAN (1:200)



A type of space that cities — particularly those in North America — have failed to produce in recent decades, the interior court is a private or semi-private outdoor space that enables people living very close to highly public areas to withdraw either by themselves or with others who share their dwelling place.

The interior court can be found in ancient cities (for example, courtyard houses in Rome), and has been carried forward in many urban traditions, especially in Latin countries. Present in the early stages of Toronto's growth (though rarely as part of any coherent and widely utilized building types), it now appears to be making a comeback.

This kind of intermediate space can compensate those people living in the areas with increased density that we are seeking in Toronto, letting them enjoy a kind of shared privacy that is rarely attainable in much current urban housing stock.

There were many ideas generated by this competition, and because they were so diverse it is hard to characterize them in an economical way.

Many of the individual prize winners, as well as the Grand Prize winner, displayed considerable ingenuity in utilizing the depth of the parcels. Rather than think of a main street as a single facade fronted by a linear wall of building, a great number of the designers were able to distribute units and building mass perpendicular to the street facade, vastly expanding the amount of exposed wall area while at the same time creating very congenial interior court spaces shared by smaller numbers of people. The winners also clearly demonstrated the almost infinite variety of interesting ways of breaking down simple building forms into more complex parts.

The principles demonstrated by these schemes will be very challenging for the city to evaluate and, where desirable, codify in new zoning ordinances. What makes them both interesting and at the same time difficult to deal with in a regulatory sense is that they are highly dependent on the quality of the architecture and the open spaces produced. Their very tightness as design paradigms means that they have to be executed with the greatest of skill.

Another theme that emerged in the competition was that of a "multiplicity of styles," or a diverse means of architectural expression, ranging from various forms of vernacular to a number of historically inspired styles including different periods of Modernism.

The non-architect members of the jury and some of the architects tended to view any of the schemes that seemed to suggest a Modernist revival with a certain hostility and skepticism. There was a tendency to impute guilt by association, that is, to suppose that Modernist schemes must also be exhibiting the anti-urban tendencies of much early Modern

work. Yet in Toronto, a large number of younger practitioners and architectural students are working in Modernist idioms and are actively trying to redeem the more appealing qualities of Modernist expression and to imbue them with a new urban sensibility. In many cases they have been quite successful.

Some of us jury members began to refer to such schemes as exhibiting a "critical Modernism." Others insisted that such schemes be examined seriously and not rejected *a priori*. All the jurors considered a diversity of architectural expression — rather than imposing a single aesthetic — highly desirable and an appropriate symbol that the intensification of main streets should involve many land owners and many architects working independently on relatively small parcels.