



The original design by Kirkor Architects and Planners for NY Towers, left, called for two sets of narrow twin towers, 25 and 35 storeys high. But under pressure from area residents and politicians, they were reduced to shorter, but wider towers of 20 and 28 storeys.

# Design with a point

Developer says North York height limit restricts creativity  
Towers offer density and pedestrian life, by Albert Warson

Toronto architects and developers are reaching for the sky, but residents and city planners are holding them back.

Just ask Mitchell Cohen, president of The Daniel Corp., which is developing the NY Towers condo project on Sheppard Ave. near Bayview Ave.

Designed as two sets of towers, 35 and 25 storeys high, the project was lowered to 28 and 18 (later 20) storeys by North York community council in response to pressure from area residents.

"There is some lingering feeling that tall is bad," said Cohen. "Toronto is only starting to move toward understanding that height is not bad, that height is good because it frees up the ground plane, if it is dealt with properly."

He believes tall buildings are the best way to achieve density and create good, liveable neighbourhoods, particularly when they have active space at ground level, with pedestrian life. Otherwise, they tower over what amounts to a "dead zone".

In North York, which has its share of anonymous-looking apartment buildings, height has been restricted to 28 storeys along the entire Sheppard subway corridor between Yonge St. and Don Mills Rd. The buildings can be as fat, or as slim, as developers like, but no taller.

The limitation prevails even at major transportation nodes – precisely where the city's new official plan encourages intensification and high-rise development to take advantage of mass transit.

Apart from their imposing height, many of Toronto's new generation of high-rise condos

have something else in common. They are "point towers" – tall, sleek buildings with floor plated of 6,000 to 10,000 square feet, rising from retail / residential / recreation podiums or townhouses.

"Point towers have people walking in and out of doors in townhouses on an active street," said Cohen. "There are front doors, doorbells, mailboxes, safe streets and connectivity between people."

NY Towers are point towers, although shorter and bulkier than originally designed by Kirkor Architects & Planners. The original plan called for two 35-storey towers facing Highway 401 and two 25-storey towers facing Sheppard on the 2.8 hectare site.

It was not to be. Area residents raised concerns about shadows and traffic, and concessions were made. The original plan included an internal private road (like a grand avenue) and a central parkette. Daniels agreed to shift the road to the perimeter to make it accessible to the public, and moved the parkette to the edge of the site, connecting it to an existing park.

But the sticking point was the height. Council enacted an area development context plan that imposed the 28-storey height restriction on the Sheppard corridor.

Daniels bowed to heights of 28 and 18 storeys (later upped to 20 through density swaps), rather than slugging it out at great expense before the Ontario Municipal Board. Two eight-storey buildings on site, one a senior's condo residence and the other a rental apartment building, breezed through the approval process.

"We had to make some compromises with a

design we felt had great architectural merit," Cohen said. "We don't fully understand the resistance to the height originally proposed, because there wouldn't have been any shadow cast. Nor would more people or traffic have been added because the overall density was the same at either height. Often, architecture suffers as a result of the process."

Cohen said the compromise was mainly motivated by costs.

"When you buy a piece of expensive land, the clock is ticking. You can put your best architectural foot forward, but the project has to work within a business context," he said.

"You have to move through the development approvals process in a timely fashion, otherwise the process becomes less viable. Waiting a few years can kill a project. We wanted to proceed with NY Towers with some degree of certainty and speed, so we agreed to a lower height than was originally conceived."

Daniels sold all 1,200 units at NY Towers faster than any development it has built in nearly 20 years.

Cohen hopes to see more tall buildings in Toronto, arguing they're better than long low-rise apartment buildings that create darker streets.

"The political situation hasn't changed that much. Ultimately, taller buildings at the OMB will likely get approved, but do we want to have a battle over height?"

Architect Clifford Korman said height is always a planning issue in Toronto.

"It's a proven formula but still hard to sell," he said. "(NY Towers) ended up as a decent product, even with all the compromises, and three of the towers sold out even before we had a building permit and a shovel went into the ground. But they were thinner and the tops were taller."