frontiers | Frontiers in Sustainable Cities

TYPE Perspective
PUBLISHED 04 July 2023
DOI 10.3389/frsc.2023.1196428

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 29 March 2023
ACCEPTED 14 June 2023
PUBLISHED 04 July 2023

CITATION
Bunce S (2023) From "smart growth" to "frontier" intensification: density, YIMBYism, and the development of garden suites in Toronto. *Front. Sustain. Cities* 5:1196428. doi: 10.3389/frsc.2023.1196428

From "smart growth" to "frontier" intensification: density, YIMBYism, and the development of garden suites in Toronto

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Toronto's official intensification policy has directed increased density primarily through residential development over the last 20 years. Recently, new intensification efforts have focused on increasing density in existing residential neighborhoods through so-called "gentle density" and "missing middle" built form, as a new "frontier" of intensification. These efforts have included a focus on the production of garden suites on residential properties. In this short intervention, I suggest that Yes-In-My-Backyard narratives, that celebrate intensification, raise problematic arguments under the guise of sustainable urbanism and liberal progressive politics which foreclose important critiques of intensification. I argue that increased YIMBYism and new intensification efforts in Toronto are entwined with homeownership wealth-building and market-oriented property development.

KEYWORDS

urban intensification, YIMBY, "gentle density", politics of intensification, urban planning and policy

Introduction

Toronto has always been one of the densest cities in North America with 20th century urban policies favoring more compact and largely low-rise residential development, site specific urban renewal projects, and downtown walkability. Toronto's municipal government has, since the early 1990s, explicitly designed and supported policies and policy discourse that have supported increased densification primarily through residential and commercial development (Lewinberg et al., 1991; Relph, 2002). In the late 1990s, Toronto's municipal policies were constituted by two seemingly oppositional directives. The first being a neoliberal economic development focus on generating global city status through domestic and foreign investment (Keil and Kipfer, 2002), and the second, an emphasis on "smart growth" urbanism as a way to mitigate regional urban sprawl through sustainable planning and design within the political boundaries of the city (Bunce, 2004). Toronto's municipal *Official Plan*, approved in 2002, laid out a planning agenda of intensification for the next 20 years that would tie together an agenda for the city's economic growth through a reliance on market-led development with urban intensification as a policy strategy to create sustainable and "liveable" city spaces (Bunce, 2004, 2018). The social and physical manifestation of the *Official Plan*'s intensification focus has been most visible in the reproduction of the city's landscape through mid and high-rise condominiums and condominium communities, primarily developed in the downtown core and along major streets (Lehrer and Wieditz, 2009; Rosen and Walks, 2015). This built form reliance on the condominium as the most consistent symbol of densification in Toronto has contributed to both a lack of affordable housing and a glut of uniform market-rate housing that has raised critical questions around the lack of housing affordability and diversity of housing options and a growth-oriented focus on housing supply.

Over 20 years later Toronto is in its latest phase of intensification with policy actors now seeking land outside of the usual development areas and putting forward a public discourse of YIMBYism in order to enable the insertion of "gentle" densification into older established neighborhoods. Toronto's 2002 Official Plan designated protection from new low-rise to high-rise condo developments for the city's established and largely single-family residential neighborhoods and instead directed intensification toward the central waterfront, commercial centers, and major arterial streets (City of Toronto, 2002). Planning concerns about Not-in-My-Backyard (NIMBY) opposition to increased densification in low-rise residential neighborhoods across the city underpinned this strategy. However, while intensification has been largely posited as a housing strategy, the question of land is often less foregrounded by planners and policy-makers. Land in Toronto is frequently construed and taken for granted as an infinite resource that is ever available for development or redevelopment, particularly for intensification. This assumption has been increasingly complicated in recent years with less land being available for new development. I suggest here that it is land development constraints that have forced Toronto politicians and planners to search more strategically for new terrain for intensification in the city. This points to a new (and neo-colonial) form of "frontierism" in intensification strategy—an imperative to enter into new areas and scales of intensification. Recent Toronto municipal planning policy changes such as *Expanding Housing Options in Neighborhoods* (2022) and by-laws supporting increased garden and laneway suite development contribute to the entire city now serving as an intensification zone. However, existing residential neighborhoods will entertain a "gentler" form of low-scale and incremental intensification in the form of what is commonly referred to as the "missing middle" of housing—smaller units, homeowner-built apartments, and other low-rise housing.

In addition to the built form manifestations of this policy shift, I suggest that it is augmented by discourses of intensification that still retain a "smart growth" rationale and which rest on the assumption that increased intensification within the political boundaries of Toronto will mitigate the need for sprawled residential development on agricultural land.[1] However, I argue here that the "city intensification vs. regional sprawl" argument that has justified much of the Toronto municipal government's intensification planning since the late 1990s and defined intensification as a sustainable urban practice has been more recently augmented by discourses of YIMBYism. Yes-in-My-Backyard (YIMBY) proponents in Toronto have activated policy and media claims for encouraging "gentle" density and "missing middle" development in this new frontier of intensification. YIMBYs have enacted a similar "either/or" foil, which suggests that Toronto will continue to suffer housing challenges without the densification of existing neighborhoods. YIMBYists support city-wide densification and insertions of gentle density into established neighborhoods under the umbrella of sustainable urbanism and progressive liberal urban reform that, at the same time, favors urban growth and development. Here, quite literally, YIMBYist narratives claim residential backyard, garden, and laneway spaces as the new frontier for intensification; spaces that can be redeveloped by existing homeowners and smaller scale residential developers for more housing supply. Despite accompanying liberal calls for affordability, YIMBY arguments favor housing supply, a reliance on residential property ownership to generate new housing, and homeowner-friendly "gentle" density that reproduces the dominance of market-geared housing in Toronto.

Through an exploration of recent scholarship that interrogates YIMBY discourses in urban development and an analysis of the Toronto's recent municipal Garden Suite by-law, this article offers a short intervention on the impacts of YIMBYism on the future of urban intensification in Toronto.

YIMBYism, urban development, and intensification

YIMBY discourses have emerged in North American cities in recent years in part as a response to Not-In-My-Backyard community calls to keep out "unwanted" and encroaching development in certain areas of the city. Historically, there have been two very strongly oppositional characteristics of NIMBYism in North American cities. First, NIMBYism has long been utilized in racist and classist urban politics to mitigate or stop urban developments that benefit racialized and low-income communities and has reproduced socio-spatial segregation through planning practices (through, for example, "racial covenants" and racist redlining practices). Second, NIMBYism has been leveraged by racialized, classed, and other marginalized communities to keep out unwanted development that threatens the social and physical fabric of these communities, makes them more vulnerable to displacement, and engages as social and racial justice activism. This second definition aligns with community-based activism that has confronted anti-Black racism in order to protect Black communities from neighborhood disinvestment and displacement, such as the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, and Saul Alinsky inspired NIMBY community-based activism that has protected low-income urban residents from social and physical displacement. These intensely opposing aims of NIMBYism, the first one being deeply racist and problematic, point to a complicated presence of urban NIMBY politics. These oppositional purposes of NIMBY pry open a space for YIMBY narratives that are liberal and middle-grounded in their political formulation. The YIMBY position is not overtly racist and classist like the aforementioned first iteration of NIMBYism and would vocally oppose these practices, yet it is also a position that raises challenges to the second iteration of NIMBYism that focuses on social and racial justice and anti-displacement activism. Curran (2022) underlines the contradictions of YIMBYism by suggesting that YIMBYs are not saying "yes" to the siting of unwanted land uses like waste disposal or shelters. These uses are some of the common targets of NIMBYists who want to protect their property values and who are not progressive in their political orientation. Curran argues that YIMBYs, in her study of Chicago, are saying "yes" to certain types of high-end, high-rise developments that redevelop,

1 This discourse has very recently re-emerged in response to the Conservative provincial government's *Bill 23, Build More Houses Faster Act* (2022) that aims to retract protected agricultural land from the regional greenbelt in order to open up land for new housing development.

densify, and maximize the profit potential of new housing (Curran, 2022, p. 297). Tapp (2021, p. 1515) similarly underlines the profit aims of YIMBYs by situating YIMBY imperatives squarely within the financialization of housing and "market-based supply side housing policy," based on a yen for more housing supply. She notes that YIMBY also supports a blindered commitment to the notion of filtering; a belief that more housing supply will somehow trickle down to create more affordability for renters and first-time homebuyers. This type of support for supply-side housing policy, such as intensification policy that actively courts high rise, multi-unit market-rate housing, also relies on regulatory changes that YIMBYs support. Teresa notes that the aims of YIMBYism dovetail well with urban neoliberal pursuits of deregulation that support increased development (Teresa, 2022); as well as the production of new regulatory practices that reduce supply-side constraints on development.

A key underpinning of YIMBY is the discourse that is leveraged to strategically package and rationalize what is, at its core, a pro-market development and supply-oriented logic (see Wyly, 2022). The language of YIMBY makes overtures to sustainable urbanism and a progressive stance on equitable development. This is primarily done through the reliance on the idea of filtering to suggest that increased housing supply, for example through intensification strategies, will inevitably create more equitable forms of affordable housing. Concurrently, YIMBYs equate opportunities for increased densification with the type of compact city development that promotes sustainability through closer live-work geographies, more reliance on walkability and other forms of carbon-free mobility, and a purported enhanced neighborhood vitality through increased population activity. Referring to the "YIMBY celebration of high-density living" (Rice et al. in Curran, 2022, 298), Curran draws on Rice et al.'s arguments to suggest that high density developments do not necessarily translate into sustainable practices. They point to the wealth and fossil fuel-based consumption activities of inhabitants who frequently reside in new urban (market-rate) housing as an example of this problematic narrative.

In alignment with the sustainability emphases of YIMBY is a focus on discourses and on-the-ground practices of coalition building and community activism that, on the surface, appear to be liberal, socially democratic, and progressive. Tretter et al.'s (2022) study of YIMBYism in Austin, Texas, for example, underlines the complex alliances between progressive organizations and coalitions, environmentalism, and YIMBYists who support housing provision. In YIMBY discourses and on-the-ground practices in Toronto, the contradictions between increased density and a reliance on market-rate housing supply and progressive ideas of civic engagement are left unacknowledged. Instead, and to gloss over and conceal these contradictions, a celebration of increased density is understood as a progressive resistance to what are considered by YIMBY supporters to be the narrow-minded and parochial sentiments of NIMBYists who resist development intensification efforts. In the cultivation of this narrative, NIMBYism is understood to be negative and a "killjoy" of intensification and development imperatives. In this way NIMBY becomes a straw man that absorbs YIMBY critique but also helps to produce the "either/or" argument that YIMBY politics relies upon. In Toronto, YIMBY supporters conceal a pro-market intensification emphasis through the production of a moral logic that suggests that YIMBY is deeply urban, progressive, and future-oriented (all of which are posited as being on the vanguard of "good urbanism"), whereas NIMBY is presented as being provincial and small-minded. Hence, this logic puts forth the notion that if Toronto residents do not support densification then their perspective is neither urban nor socially progressive, even when there are legitimate concerns about the pro-market aims of intensification and a resultant lack of affordable housing generated by intensification.

I suggest that this type of argument, which posits that *either* densification continues apace in Toronto *or* the city remains "stuck in a rut," old-fashioned, or "not urban," is troubling for three key reasons. First, it has core similarities with neoliberal and global city narratives of "progress" and competition through capital investment and development that have been consistently perpetuated by pro-growth elites and coalitions in Toronto (Keil and Kipfer, 2002; Boudreau, 2007; Joy and Vogel, 2015). Such growth coalitions are not new, as Logan and Molotch pointed out in 1987 in their analysis of the urban growth machine, but are repackaged here with current pro-development narratives and imperatives (Logan and Molotch, 1987). Second, a manufactured congruence is noticeable between increased density and progressive urbanity and urban planning. In other words, YIMBYs argue that density is "naturally urban" and a "good city" is one that has continued intensification of its built environment. Third, this dualistic narrative forecloses nuanced dialogue and critiques of the form and outcome of intensified residential development, including the social consequences when intensification does not produce necessary affordable housing. Indeed, an array of YIMBY actors have come together in Toronto to promote these storylines, which include sustainable urbanist organizations such as *8–80 Cities*, supporters of so-called "15-min city" planning,[2] community organizations such as *YIMBY—Celebrating a Culture of Yes in Toronto*, as well as local planning and architecture critics and local politicians. Together, these actors form a new assemblage and "growth coalition" of quite vocal and powerful pro-development, pro-intensification advocacy in Toronto.

Toronto's garden suite policy: densifying existing neighborhoods

In the search for a new frontier of intensification, Toronto's municipal government has recently turned toward existing residential neighborhoods as terrain for new housing development. In particular, Toronto's new Garden Suite by-law, adopted by Toronto City Council in February 2022 (Zoning By-law 569-2013), encourages homeowners in low-scale neighborhoods to construct a new "secondary" residential unit on their property, primarily in the form of a small structure built in their garden/backyard. Garden suites can be freestanding structures that do not have to be adjacent to a laneway or street, thus homeowners have flexibility in terms of where a garden suite can be built on their property (Valyear, 2022).

2 Coined in 2016, this planning idea supports the notion of city residents living a maximum of 15 min apart from work and other services.

As part of the City of Toronto's *Expanding Housing Options in Neighborhoods* policy, the Garden Suite initiative consists of two processes that financially incentivize property owners to build a garden suite as an income generating unit. The first provides a deferral on municipal development charges, assuming that once the garden suite is constructed that property owners will be able to pay for development charges retroactively through rent generated from the new unit. The second arm of the program is an attempt to ensure affordability of new units through the provision of a "forgivable loan" of up to $50,000 CAD for the construction of a garden suite, whereby property owners do not have to pay back the loan if they adhere to municipal average market rent guidelines over a 15 year "affordability period" (City of Toronto, 2023). While this is certainly a nod toward acknowledging the need for affordable rental housing in the city, the current municipal market rent affordability guidelines (2023) range between $1,500–2,100 per month for the size of a 1–3 bedroom rental unit. These average guidelines can, of course, can move higher with annually increasing rental prices in Toronto, which are currently the second highest in Canada after Vancouver and have increased by 22% since March 2022 (Rentals.ca, 2023). Even very recent changes to municipal affordability guidelines based on income rather than monthly market rates still makes it unaffordable for many Toronto residents with lower incomes and those requiring space for larger families. Such municipal incentives for property owners to build garden suites do not necessarily translate into all property owners utilizing these incentives. Other loans such as home equity lines of credit as well as homeowner savings and inheritances can finance the development of garden suites without property owners needing to adhere to municipal incentive requirements. At the center of this, regardless of the financing route taken to construct a garden suite, is an over-reliance on the role of the individual property owner as a new central actor in fulfilling municipal intensification policy and galvanizing new housing supply in Toronto.

This new frontier of intensification downshifts housing production to individual property owners who have much to gain from the construction of garden suites. I suggest here that garden suite production is entwined with the investment practices and wealth building of individual property owners, allowing homeowners to generate more capital from market-rate rents that are gleaned from tenants. The earnings accrued from renting out garden suites to tenants can be used for mortgage payments, for additional property ownership, and to invest in home renovations. All of these suggest a financial boon to the property owner who, in addition to reaping financial benefits now becomes a landlord with the associated power imbalances between landlord and tenant and heightened potential for conflicts based on these imbalances, particularly in such close spatial proximity. In addition to these advantages to the property owner, intensification through garden suite creation also benefits connected services such as architecture and building firms. Since the by-law was approved, architects and design/build companies have quickly directed attention toward working with property owners in the design and build of garden suites (Murtrie, 2022). These connections suggest a more elite and design-oriented directive for garden suites rather than a practical form of affordable housing and are entwined with property wealth-building.

I conclude this short intervention by underlining the growing relationship between what I have called frontier intensification and the cultivation of YIMBYist discourse in Toronto. In the context of the "gentle density" of existing neighborhoods in Toronto, these processes are deeply connected with property ownership and wealth-building desires of homeowners in a housing market that is one of the most expensive in the world. As such, intensification retains its long-standing and problematic connection with market-led, pro-growth urban development.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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