

ANOTHER IDEA



Lana Hall

An Ontario Association of Architects (OAA) SHIFT Challenge entry reimagines a public housing development in a way that prioritizes nature in an urban context, something the project team says is critical as the City looks to build more public housing while simultaneously grappling with solutions to protect local wildlife habitat.

The SHIFT Challenge is an annual design competition that encourages architects to explore sustainable design solutions that address the challenges posed by climate change and social shifts. The theme of this

year's challenge was 'Reshaping Communities.' One of this year's winning entries, "Swansea Park: A Development Concept for the Former Swansea Mews," comes from **David Peterson Architect**, who envisions the Swansea Mews' redevelopment as entailing the construction of a series of pre-fabricated mid-rise residential buildings on the site with a naturalized park at its heart.

The Swansea Mews housing complex consists of a series of now-condemned **Toronto Community Housing Corporation** (TCHC)-owned buildings comprising 154

rent-geared-to-income (RGI) units. Located at the corner of Windermere Avenue and The Queensway, the complex has been slated for demolition since 2022, following a ceiling collapse in one of the buildings. In the wake of the collapse, engineers deemed the entire complex unsafe for habitation, and its tenants were relocated. All buildings on the 5.3-acre site have since been vacant, and the site is slated for redevelopment. When redeveloped by TCHC, the new Swansea Mews will accommodate a mix of up to 700 affordable and market-rate units, including replacement

of the 154 RGI units (*See: "Rebuilding Community", NRU Toronto, Friday, May 2, 2025*).

But **David Peterson's** Swansea Mews proposal imagines the redevelopment a little differently. He envisions a centralized park on the site, which would socially anchor the new development and would promote biodiversity through the creation of a natural wildlife habitat. A "public porch" located along The Queensway would serve as a threshold for the Swansea Mews complex, while potentially being used for recreational activities

CONTINUED PAGE 8 ■

Rendering of the reimagined Swansea Mews community housing complex. A design proposal for the publicly-owned housing complex was named as one of six winning selections in the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA) SHIFT Challenge. The proposal reimagines the redevelopment of the Swansea Mews community housing site as having approximately 400 residential units in a mix of rent-geared-to-income and co-op housing tenures, with a spacious naturalized park at its heart. Following a ceiling collapse in 2022, the existing Toronto Community Housing Corporation-owned Swansea Mews complex was condemned and is slated for demolition and redevelopment.

SOURCE: DAVID PETERSON ARCHITECT



ANOTHER IDEA

■ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

and special events by the community at large.

Peterson's proposal emphasizes the retention of mature trees on the site, which would not only help maintain the character of the High Park and Swansea neighbourhoods, it would serve as an important natural habitat for wildlife in the ecologically sensitive area. New tree plantings within the centralized park would provide privacy for the proposed residential blocks that would look inwards, towards the new park. Peterson envisions the park as embodying a "naturalized landscape," with native grasses and a more diverse ecosystem than is typically seen in city parks.

"It's not manicured. It's not maintained in the same way. When a tree falls, it's actually habitat for a bunch of animals, so we let it stay there."

Peterson's SHIFT 2025 proposal comes in the wake of increasing conversations about urban wildlife in Toronto and the future of human/animal co-existence. The **City of Toronto** was recently forced to euthanize two coyotes that had been causing conflict in the Fort York and Liberty Village neighbourhoods, likely after being displaced from their forest habitat by construction at nearby Ontario Place. Shortly

before that, the City reported an increase of 8.5 per cent in reports of injured wildlife or wildlife cadaver removal since 2022. Peterson says this conflict is an obvious fallout of development that doesn't take wildlife habitat into account amid a scramble to build new housing.

"The City of Toronto has done a great job with ... making sure birds don't crash into our windows," he says. "But are we doing enough to create habitat? We're trying to do that by saying it would be a shame if the city could no longer have Blue Jays, robins, all these kinds of creatures."

Though the City has estimated the Swansea Mews site could accommodate up to 700 dwelling units, likely in high-rise or mid-rise form, Peterson envisions the site containing primarily mid-rise housing, built in modular, prefabricated style. In his proposal, the RGI units would be demolished and replaced as planned by TCHC, but the bulk of remaining housing on the site would be developed as co-op housing targeting what he calls "middle-income" earners. By his calculations, this configuration would allow for approximately 400 units on the site, which he says is closer in density to what the Swansea

secondary plan recommends.

"[The city is] moving towards 6.6 [floor space index]. It's aggressive."

Though not explicitly mandated, the Swansea secondary plan suggests a density of 2.6 - 3.0 floor space index for new developments within the secondary plan boundaries.

The combination of lower-density, modular housing and a co-op model, would allow for more affordable housing to be built on the site economically at scale, not to mention allowing for a wider breadth of developers to partner with the City of Toronto, says Peterson.

"The City wants development partners ... but when they choose development partners who are used to making high-rises, then it's very likely that that's the pro forma that they're going to use for developing the site," he tells *NRU*. "Really we're saying, let's use pre-fab, modular buildings, and then we're asking for a different scale of developer that participates."

The final element of Peterson's proposal involves a deconstruction strategy as part of the demolition process. This would allow for the reclamation of construction materials on the site—such as brick from the homes that would be demolished—to be re-used in the new development, reducing the amount of construction waste.

SHIFT jurors praised the many layers of Peterson's design, including its emphasis

on ecology, social connection, and the economics of building affordable housing.

"Beyond illustrating the importance of public housing and outdoor green spaces, there are so many layers here to appreciate embedded in the framework—an understanding of ecology, the need for vibrant social life, and the presentation of a significant process that empowers individuals and neighbourhood communities to build," read one juror comment.

"When you do something well enough times, it becomes mainstream. As a jury, we wanted to push creative projects like this to up the ante in housing of all typologies, but especially affordable public options," said another.

For Peterson, his design shows how something practical like a modular housing project can also take urban ecology into account, the kind of innovation he says is badly needed in affordable housing development.

"[The City] should like it because it helps grow and innovate inside of housing."

