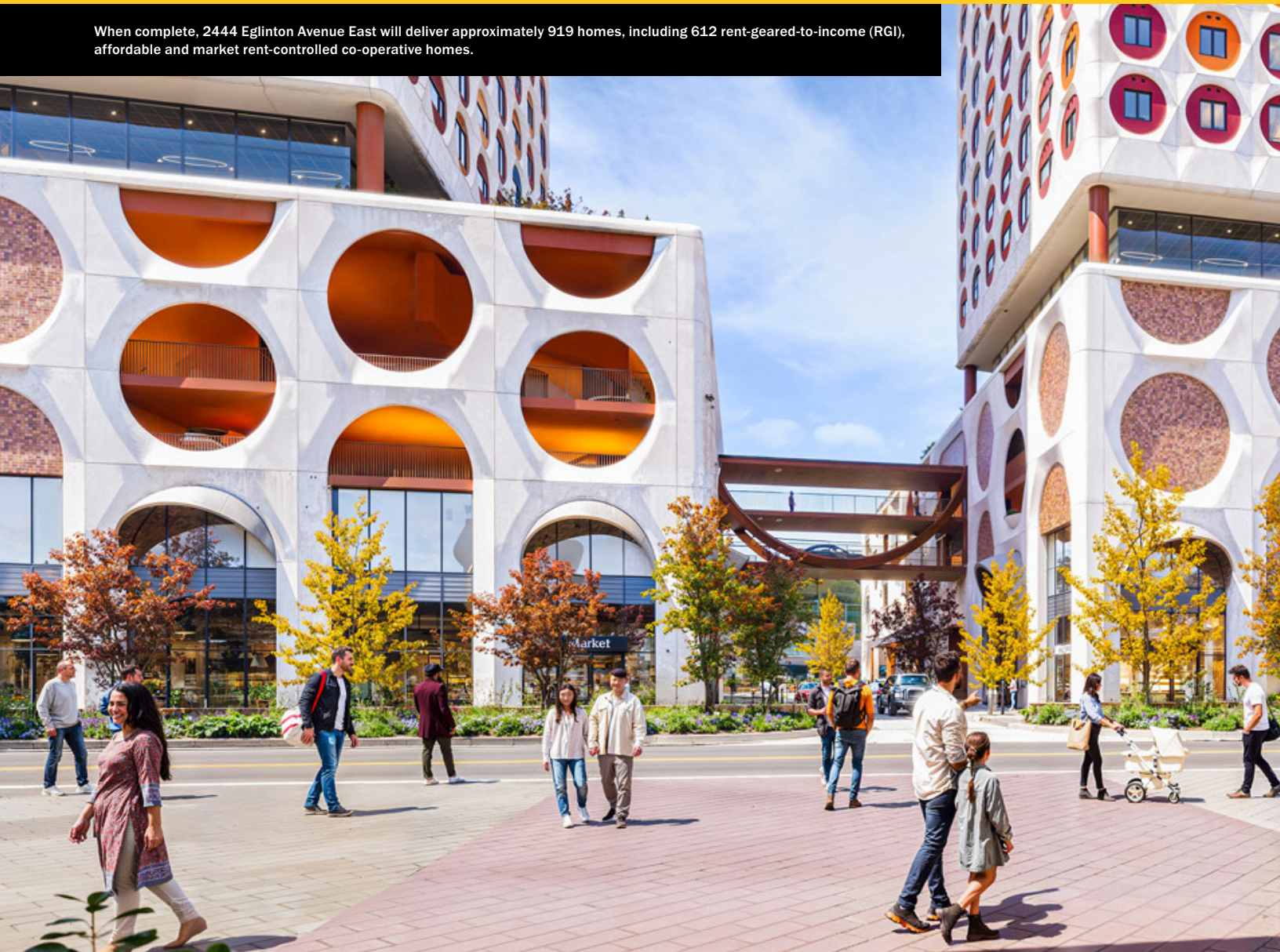


# Once in a Generation: The Story Behind Ontario's Largest Co-op Development

BY JAMES WATTIE

When complete, 2444 Eglinton Avenue East will deliver approximately 919 homes, including 612 rent-geared-to-income (RGI), affordable and market rent-controlled co-operative homes.







## THE INTERVIEWEES



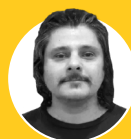
**Jason Chen,**  
VP, Development, CreateTO



**Tom Clement,**  
Executive Director, Co-operative Housing  
Federation of Toronto



**Gregory Henriquez,**  
Managing Principal,  
Henriquez Partners Architects



**Peter Venetas,**  
Partner, Civic Developments

**W**hat do you get when you mix city-owned land, co-operative housing, co-operation and a shared purpose? A poster child for development in Toronto, one of the largest co-op housing projects in Ontario in the past 25 years and the province's largest co-operative development.

The City of Toronto is investing in public lands for the development of affordable housing within mixed-income, mixed-use, transit-oriented communities and this site at 2444 Eglinton Avenue East is one of almost 100 city-owned sites that are either housing ready or may be unlocked for new housing. Currently, the site contains a vacant autobody shop and a former commuter parking lot for the Kennedy TTC and GO stations.

In January 2024, the City of Toronto and CreateTO announced Civic Developments, Windmill Developments, and Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT) as the development partners for this project. A world-class architecture team of Henriquez Partners Architects, with landscape work by CCxA, designed the unique honeycomb look of the building and public realm. When complete, 2444 Eglinton



The tower windows with their different coloured portals are inspired by Ontario flint corn. The metaphor extends to some of the garden renderings where corn fields are shown.

Avenue East will deliver approximately 919 homes, including 612 rent-geared-to-income (RGI), affordable and market rent-controlled co-operative homes.

In June 2024, following the approval of zoning by the City's Planning and Housing Committee, Chair Gord Perks described the moment as "a really important turning point in the history of the City of Toronto. This is a victory for the City of Toronto." City Council granted final zoning approval shortly thereafter. Construction is expected to begin later in 2025.

**"...one of almost 100 city-owned sites that are either housing ready or may be unlocked for new housing."**

We gathered members of the project team from CreateTO, Civic Developments, CHFT, and Henriquez Partners Architects to talk about what is making the development of this project successful, the unique and award-winning design and how this project can provide lessons to planners across Canada.\*

#### WORLD-CLASS DESIGN

**Gregory Henriquez, Managing Principal, Henriquez Partners Architects:** The project is three residential buildings: two towers with one larger slab street wall extension sitting on a retail and parking podium with large, landscaped gardens on the top of the podium that the towers sit upon. It's divided with a street going down the middle of it with two co-op buildings on one side and the market residential building on the other.

**Tom Clement, Executive Director, Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT):** We felt that Scarborough was a good

site. The way I'm looking at it is that it's right at the subway. There's a GO train. Those things are important. Just for fun, I checked how long it took to get to Bloor and Yonge from Kennedy on the subway. It's about 22 minutes. Now we're going to be able to build a stronger community there.

**Henriquez:** In our practice, we always search for poetic metaphors and try and find some poetry to balance the functional realities of what we need to accomplish. We were inspired by Ontario flint corn, which has a whole bunch of different bright colours within it. The goal is to make the project "of this place in the world."

We thought if we could create windows which were metaphorical kernels of the corn cob that got extended up for the towers with different coloured portals, that could be extended also into the podium as well. It could even become a way of taking over the nearby hydro corridor one day with community gardens, and you can see some of our renderings have corn fields planted.

We've also elevated the first levels of housing way up above the streets and the trains and the noise. It also gave us the chance to create a wonderful garden platform above the podium which the residents can all spill out onto with their amenities.

**Jason Chen, VP, Development, CreateTO:** Our evaluation process for selecting a partner for 2444 Eglinton, like on many of our CreateTO projects, included an emphasis on high-quality design. We were confident Civic Developments would put together a world-class team because of their reputation for design excellence. What's unique about 2444 Eglinton is that historically, it is rare to see such a strong design team venture this far outside of a city's downtown core. There's

no rule that says only downtown buildings should be beautiful.

**Henriquez:** The goal is to find a way to build beautiful architecture in a way that's cost-effective. The biggest challenge was figuring out how to build the parking because it's a contaminated site. We needed to build the parking above grade because we couldn't afford to dig it all up and then dig parking down below. We'd spend half our budget just in the soils. It also made it easier for us to do the geo-exchange as we don't have to dig as far down in order to get the geo-exchange working.

The above-grade parking actually reduces the amount of concrete needed compared to below-grade parking. Less concrete means less embodied carbon, pushing the sustainability effort in a way that's more environmentally responsible. A lot of the negatives ended up being helpful in us balancing the budget and creating a better building.

**Chen:** When the concept of above-grade parking was proposed, we knew that from an urban design aspect this would be challenging, but we knew if anyone could pull this off, this would be the team to do it.

The design review panel and the city's planning and urban design team really supported the above-grade parking due to how well integrated it will be and how it's designed to suit the context of its surroundings.

**Clement:** One Friday night I saw an email come in and it said, "You're a winner!" and I thought, oh that's probably some sort of scam. But I opened it up anyway. I don't know why and sure enough it was a notification that we won a design award. [Henriquez and CCxA's design was awarded the 2025 Green Good Design Award for Green Architecture, noting it "sets a precedent for future urban developments..."]

**Peter Venetas, Partner, Civic Developments:** This is a class A design team. Again, kudos to CreateTO and the City of Toronto. They want great design. We want great design. Communities want great design. So much imagination goes into that



design. When I show photos of it, everyone is like wow! You've got a great location, great public transit connections, and you've got great design.

### CO-OP HOUSING

**Clement:** A co-op is where the residents have input into how the building is managed and the decisions that have to be made around work and improvements to the building. It's not just that you get something under your door saying we're going to do X, Y, Z to the building. There's discussion.

**Henriquez:** We find working with co-ops makes it easy. Co-ops are really good folks. They want to do the right thing and create community and do something meaningful for their members. They have a long-term vision. The buildings are an asset they're going to hold for a long time. It makes doing co-op projects a really enjoyable process.

**Chen:** Plus, the affordability levels beat everything that you can ever want. Especially with the security of it being a non-profit where rents will remain affordable for the long-term, there's no better outcome really.

**Venetas:** You start thinking how rare co-op housing has been over the last 30 years. It just sort of reinforces that we are doing something incredibly unique and that we should deliver the best possible building. I'm not interested in working on projects that don't move the needle. I want to work on those things that really matter, that make change, and that become the prototypes and the precedents for more and more of these kinds of projects.

**Clement:** It's going to be a community for people of all ages. We know it's a good place for people to age in place because of the transportation connections. I've been dealing with co-ops for over 40 years, and I know that they are amazing communities.

**Henriquez:** I think my last co-op was finished in 2004. It's been over 20 years since co-ops have really flourished in this country. It's the type of meaningful work that we historically have done a lot of, and we want to do more of.



**Chen:** I think [the co-op] actually really helped gain support for the project. Having 612 units of co-op rental housing brought a lot of attention and support to the site. Not just from the city but the federal government, too. The Federal Co-op Housing Development Program they have, it was perfect for this.

**Clement:** Across the country, we've needed a federal co-op housing program for a long time. I worked with the old programs so I'm familiar with them. These programs are part of the recipe. Good support from government at all levels and a program specifically designed for co-ops and that's what's going to make this project a go.

### CO-OPERATION

**Venetas:** What's been really nice about this project is that everybody was on the same page from the very beginning. Everybody was very open about collaborating with each other and what some of the sensitivities, opportunities, and constraints were. Then there was this continued ability to work with staff as we were developing the applications to ensure they met the requirements of the city and could be processed in a timely way.

**Henriquez:** Once the application was in, every effort was made to make sure it was accelerated through the city, and CreateTO obviously played a big part in that.

**Chen:** On this project in particular, there was a bit more of this feeling of trust between our partners and city staff. They got the picture. There were some issues that would come up but there was always the feeling of "Don't worry, we'll get there. Trust us, we'll get there." I think that was a big thing.

**Venetas:** There's a level of flexibility, collaboration, and problem solving, which is often something that doesn't happen. There was an ability to discuss application comments and what they meant and how to then address them. Often, that doesn't happen.

Typically, you get your comments, you go away, you mark up the drawings and you resend them. Here we've been able to have dialogues around some of the different opportunities and constraints that we have to balance.

It's good to have differences of opinion. It's good to have conflict. Conflict breeds resolution, but it has to be within the context of working towards the same goals, which in this case is an incredible project that will create much needed housing.

**Henriquez:** It's been a delight to work in this realm because the people on our team are really committed and that makes a big impact on the outcomes.

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*\* Author's note: Some responses have been edited for length and clarity.*



Currently, the site contains a vacant autobody shop and a former commuter parking lot for the Kennedy TTC and GO stations.

**Venetas:** I think this project is potentially the poster child in terms of how we can work better to solve not only issues that arise with respect to the housing crisis that we're in, but also how we can just better city-build between the private sector, the non-profit sector and the public sector. We need that. It takes all entities working together to solve all these problems. It can't just be the city on its own or the private industry on its own or a non-profit.

We're stronger together than we are as separate entities. This project really exemplifies that kind of collaborative and team spirit. I'm not saying that the project was easy. By no means should anyone take away that it was easy.

#### RAPID APPROVAL

**Venetas:** Sometimes approvals can take two years, sometimes they can take longer. I think one of the things that we really need to focus on is that this was the first time that CreateTO had worked with a private developer to do the entitlements, to do the zoning.

**Chen:** Typically, CreateTO leads the entire entitlements process for our sites and then we take it out to market. In this instance, we decided to pilot a site where we would let the developer lead the re-zoning.

We did do a significant amount of due diligence on the site first. We came up with a development concept plan which was vetted by city staff and the local councillor's office. We also held community meetings and workshops with residents where we socialized a proposed development concept for the site.

When we went out to market for a partner, we provided all these due diligence materials and community feedback and advised the team that if they stay within the general development concept provided, the planning approvals should be fairly smooth. There would essentially be nothing

much further for staff to comment on. Any comments that needed to be addressed were already addressed.

**Henriquez:** One of the nice things we experienced was the collaboration between the City of Toronto, CreateTO, and the developers Windmill and Civic. We were all really determined to make this thing happen as soon as possible. There was a real attempt to accelerate the approval processes. I think we got a rezoning in record time: 69 days.

**Venetas:** [69 days] has got to be some kind of record in the city in terms of getting a comprehensive re-zoning approved. But a lot of that credit has got to go to CreateTO in terms of teeing the project up the right way, having explored various development scenarios on the site before our involvement. I think what we were able to do is really calibrate it. So, it ended up becoming a site that could move forward, but there was a lot of work that CreateTO and the City of Toronto had done to set that stage.

**Chen:** I must give a lot of credit to the City of Toronto's Priority Development Review Stream team who helped drive the approvals process forward. They did an excellent job coordinating all the different commenting agencies and helping us resolve issues as they came up. The Civic and Windmill teams were also key in a smooth process. Not only by having a strong knowledge of the approvals process, but also by working with staff and being flexible to resolve issues. It truly was a collaborative effort with everyone working together to get us there.

**Venetas:** I remember being at the Planning and Housing Committee and seeing how happy the planners were, that they were achieving these timelines as well and how that's a great precedent for them. So, it's this

idea that it's a big win for everybody and it took all of us to kind of make it happen.


#### WHAT'S NEXT?

**Henriquez:** There's a lot of heavy lifting to be done between the poetry and the ideas and translating into reality. That's where the real grit and rigour is required to make sure that the intentions are really followed through – time to make a building.

For every young architect or young planner, the lesson here is that just because you've planted the seed doesn't mean that it's going to become a tree. You have to nurture it. You have to add water. You have to make sure it gets a stake in the winds. It's a long haul. We're all in for the next four years to try and translate this intent, our good intentions of everyone – of the co-op, the developers, the city, and the community to build this housing together.

**Clement:** I am absolutely optimistic about affordable housing with the City of Toronto. We're going to be able to do a lot more and I've been waiting a long time for this so I'm absolutely excited.

**Chen:** We at CreateTO are very excited to see this project break ground later this year. I am so proud to be a part of this transformative project. Personally, I have learned a lot about co-op rental housing and how important it is in the housing spectrum. 2444 Eglinton will be a huge contribution to the City of Toronto's affordable housing pool.

**Venetas:** This is a once-in-a-lifetime project. Will it become a twice-in-a-lifetime project or three-times-in-a-lifetime project? That should be the goal. But right now, it's that once-in-a-lifetime project that we have in front of us that I hope becomes the precedent for doing more and more like this. 



**James Wattie** Wattie is the Manager of Communications for CreateTO, the City of Toronto real estate asset management agency, and a former producer CBC News in Toronto.