

CITY OF TORONTO DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

MINUTES: MEETING 3 – May 14, 2025

The Design Review Panel met virtually on Wednesday, May 14, 2025, at 12:30 pm.

Members of the Design Review Panel

Gordon Stratford (Co-Chair): Principal – G C Stratford | Architect
Michael Leckman (Co-Chair): Principal – Diamond Schmitt Architects
Meg Graham (Co-Chair): Principal – superkül
Dima Cook: Director – EVOQ Architecture
Ralph Giannone: Principal – Giannone Petricone Associates
Jim Gough: Independent Consultant, Transportation Engineering
Jessica Hutcheon: Principal – Janet Rosenberg & Studio
Olivia Keung: Associate – Moriyama Teshima | Architects
Paul Kulig: Principal – Perkins & Will
Joe Lobko: Partner – Joe Lobko Architect Inc.
Anna Madeira: Principal – BDP Quadrangle
Jim Melvin: Principal Emeritus/Advisor – PMA; Owner – Realm Works
Juhee Oh: Director, Climate Strategy – Choice Properties
Heather Rolleston: Principal, Design Director – BDP Quadrangle
Eladia Smoke: Principal Architect – Smoke Architecture
Sibylle von Knobloch: Principal – NAK Design Group

Design Review Panel Coordinator

Maria Mokhtariesbouei: Urban Design, City Planning Division

CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

The Panel confirmed minutes of their previous meeting, which was held on April 16, 2024, by email.

MEETING 7 INDEX

1. North York at the Centre (2nd Review)



NORTH YORK AT THE CENTRE

CITY OF TORONTO - DESIGN REVIEW PANEL MINUTES

DESIGN REVIEW Second Review

APPLICATION City Area Study

PRESENTATIONS

CITY STAFF Stephen Gardiner, Community Planning
 Shan Li, Urban Design
 Jana Neumann, Strategic Initiatives Policy and Analysis.

DESIGN TEAM Paul Kulig, Perkins & Will

VOTE None

REVIEW PARTICIPANTS

CHAIR Gordon Stratford

PANELISTS Eladia Smoke, Heather Rolleston, Jim Gough, Joe Lobko,
 Meg Graham, Michael Leckman

CONFLICTS Paul Kulig

Introduction

City staff outlined the project history, existing and future context, and planning framework. Staff are seeking the Panel's advice on the following key issues:

1. What are the key considerations in refining the public realm and landscape strategy to create a welcoming, green, and pedestrian-focused experience along Doris Avenue and Beecroft Road?



2. What are the design strategies for the streetscape improvement along the east-west connections to preserve the green character while considering the existing and planned context?
3. The proposed built form strategy for North York Centre would increase heights for tall buildings along Yonge Street and introduce built form transition with mid-rise buildings to the east and west. What are the key built form considerations to provide appropriate transition when introducing the midrise buildings in a largely built-out area?

Summary of Project's Key Points

The following Panel member discussion points were highlighted in the verbal meeting summary by the Chair:

The Panel would like to thank the submission team for presenting this significant initiative; a proposal that is bold and thought provoking in its ambition. The study area has been an important part of Toronto's growth and change, and the team's depth of work confronts the opportunities and challenges of evolving established lower-rise neighborhoods towards a sustaining density. North York at the Centre has the essential potential to become an exemplar of sensitive city-building.

The Panel encourages the team to further develop their work, to fully realize this unique opportunity. The following summary captures some of the key themes from the Panel's discussion:

RESPONSE TO CONTEXT (*past, present and future*)

A The Panel appreciates the submission team's efforts to move beyond surface-level generalities and respond thoughtfully to site-specific context. A deeper reading of context was seen as one of the proposal's most promising aspects. Further work is encouraged, including the following:

- Some of the growth goals will have a big impact on the study area and need closer attention. An example is the potential loss of existing green space and tree canopy context, with resulting side effects such reduced shade protection and water retention, increased heat island effect as population and density grows.
- Ensure that all design decisions are rooted in a genuine understanding of the physical and social context—never defaulting to “one-size-fits-all” solutions.
- Increase detailed place-based attention to the existing character of streets,

observed patterns of activity, community culture, topography, and land use conditions.

- Increase study area to define a broader area for growth.

LANDSCAPE AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

In response to the envisioned density increase and its impact on existing tree canopy (and community wellness/health) in the study area, Panel members have encouraged the team to make increased green space a key priority. Comments include (but are not limited to) the following:

The goal is to make the entire study area greener than it currently is; replacing existing tree canopy with more than what will be lost to densification and adding further beyond that. Recommendations to help achieve this include:

- Making the parkland acquisition a priority strategy, including adding on to existing linear parks.
- Continue integrating ecological and climatic performance into the design (promote “sponginess”, mitigation of climate extremes, etc.).
- Providing incentives for private property owners to green their sites (e.g.: tool kit for landscape enhancing by residents).
- Make green the driver... the more density/height that is proposed, the higher the contribution of green space is required.
- Have landscape strategies drive and shape both livability and resilience.
- Make this the opportunity to match adequate amounts of green space with population.

BUILT FORM

Panel members would like to see more information about the team’s proposed built form strategies (e.g.: mid-rise, high-rise, exiting building conversions, etc.).

The Panel thanks the team again for their thoughtful submission and encourages them to sustain and deepen this level of rigor as the work progresses.

Panel Commentary

Overview of Initial Feedback

The panel members opened the discussion by expressing appreciation for the substantial effort put into developing the project's vision. The comprehensive nature of the presentation was acknowledged, with particular emphasis placed on the clarity with which the spatial relationships were laid out. Panelists recognized that significant work has been done in defining how various elements of the development will come together. However, the panel expressed that while the framework was strong, the future rollout of the project is just as important. They suggested that the design team focus more on how to effectively implement the plan to ensure that the envisioned goals are realized over time. One panelist specifically pointed out that future stages must address how these relationships will evolve and how the private and public realms will interact to foster a successful and vibrant community.

Green Infrastructure and Community Engagement

One panelist raised the concern that much of the land adjacent to the proposed linear parkways is privately owned, which poses a challenge to the realization of the park's full potential. They emphasized that while the design calls for green infrastructure, it will ultimately depend on private landowners to maintain and enhance these spaces. A critical element in achieving the intended urban forest is providing these landowners with the necessary resources and support. For example, many private landowners struggle to find native plants or understand how to manage their green spaces in a way that supports local biodiversity. The panelist recommended that the city develop a toolkit for landowners that includes resources on native plant species, as well as landscape design tools that can help owners improve their yards and green spaces. This toolkit would assist in fostering a more unified effort to develop the urban forest, which is integral to both the environmental and aesthetic goals of the project. Additionally, the panelist stressed the importance of focusing on soil health, suggesting that rainwater management systems could be used to nurture the soil and support plant life. This approach could mitigate issues such as flooding and contribute to the resilience of the area in the face of climate change.

Public Realm and Urban Forest

Another panelist discussed the broader theme of river and watershed health, agreeing with the project's long-term goals but emphasizing how important it is to look beyond immediate visual appeal to address deeper ecological connections. While the river theme

may not be directly relevant to the current phase of development, the panelist suggested that the health of the rivers and watersheds should play a role in shaping the identity of the neighborhood. By fostering an awareness of local watersheds, residents and property owners could be encouraged to take ownership of environmental stewardship. The panelist argued that connecting the community to the watershed could not only enhance the area's ecological integrity but also cultivate a sense of responsibility and pride among residents. They suggested that this connection could become a powerful aspect of the project's identity, contributing to the overall resilience of the neighborhood.

Parkland Acquisition and Development Strategy

The need for a solid parkland acquisition strategy was another focal point of the discussion. A panelist highlighted that one of the most crucial factors in the success of the North York Civic Center development will be how well park spaces are integrated into the broader urban fabric. While the project includes some green spaces, the panelist stressed that securing large public parks and ensuring their accessibility is key to the long-term success of the area. They emphasized that the development of green spaces should not just be an afterthought, but should be central to the overall planning. Additionally, the panelist suggested that the design team explore how these spaces can be expanded and integrated into the community, making them easily accessible for residents and visitors alike. They noted that the current design has made a good start, but more effort is needed to ensure that parkland becomes a defining feature of the development.

Site Topography and Connectivity

Another panelist brought up the importance of topography and how it shapes both the physical and social landscape of the development. They noted that understanding the site's topography in greater detail could lead to more effective landscape planning. The panelist suggested that rather than focusing solely on isolated green spaces like Wilkin Creek, the design team should look at creating a more interconnected network of green infrastructure that spans across the site. This network would serve not only as ecological connectors but also as pathways that strengthen the community fabric. By using natural topography as a guide, the panelist argued, the development could create more organic connections between neighborhoods and offer opportunities for walking, cycling, and other forms of active transportation. They proposed that landscape connectivity could play a significant role in defining the neighborhood's identity and help the site evolve in a way that feels naturally integrated with its surroundings.

Transition and Community Capacity

The topic of transition, particularly the shift from old to new development, was another area of focus. A panelist suggested that the focus on transitions between existing and new buildings might be overemphasized. While transitions are important, they argued, there needs to be more focus on building community capacity. The panelist emphasized that community capacity — the ability of local neighborhoods to adapt, grow, and thrive amidst change — should be central to the planning process. They suggested that instead of focusing on rigid transitions, the design team should explore how to enhance the social infrastructure of the area, ensuring that the community is equipped to handle the changes brought by the new development. This would include creating spaces that support social interaction, community engagement, and a sense of belonging. The panelist urged the design team to consider these broader community-building strategies, as they would be essential to ensuring the project's long-term success.

Retail Strategy and Built Form

A panelist expressed concerns about the dominance of large-scale retail in the design, particularly on the ground floor of the buildings. While large-scale retail has traditionally been the go-to solution for urban streetscapes, the panelist pointed out that this approach might not be the best for creating a vibrant and walkable environment. They recommended exploring small-scale, locally focused retail options that could better serve the community and contribute to a more lively and pedestrian-friendly street environment. The panelist also suggested that the ground floor of buildings should include community spaces and services, such as healthcare facilities or small businesses, that would better support the needs of residents. This approach, they argued, would make the area more engaging and accessible, creating spaces where people can live, work, and play without the need for large retail chains.

Green Space and Tree Canopy

Another important issue raised was the expansion of tree canopy in the development. A panelist emphasized the need to address the loss of tree canopy in the area, particularly to the east of Doris. They suggested that the development should incorporate a more ambitious strategy for increasing the tree canopy, with a focus on innovative approaches to tree planting. The panelist recommended thinking beyond traditional tree planting methods and considering new ways to integrate trees into the urban environment. This could include more radical solutions that would ensure a robust and sustainable tree canopy that can thrive amidst the urban heat island effect. They noted that increasing the tree canopy would not only improve the area's aesthetic appeal but also contribute

to environmental sustainability by mitigating heat and improving air quality.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In conclusion, the panel agreed that the project holds significant potential to transform North York into a thriving, vibrant community. However, they emphasized that several critical elements need further refinement. The design team was encouraged to focus on enhancing green infrastructure, securing parkland, and integrating more community-focused retail and services into the development. The panel also urged the team to deepen their exploration of tree canopy expansion and landscape connectivity to ensure the development is both ecologically sustainable and socially engaging. With these refinements, the panel expressed confidence that the project could become a landmark development for the region, contributing positively to both the environment and the community.