

# SCALING UP IN AN HISTORIC NEIGHBOURHOOD



Lana Hall

A recently approved set of urban design guidelines for the Bloor West Village area highlight some of the challenges of protecting the area’s fine-grained retail and historic character while adhering to Provincially-mandated densification targets.

At its meeting on December 16, Toronto city council approved a set of urban design guidelines for Bloor West Village, an area bordering High Park and stretching along Bloor between the Humber River and Keele Street. The urban design guidelines are accompanied by the High Park Neighbourhood Area Biodiverse Landscape Manual.

Bloor West Village has a “unique and active retail character” that serves the local community, but it is also a destination for those living elsewhere in the city. It includes existing and potential yet-to-be-identified heritage properties, as well as important linkages to natural and cultural heritage resources, including High Park, says a City staff report. As such, the guidelines’ key objectives include ensuring compatible

intensification along the Bloor transit line, building on the “fine-grained” pedestrian-oriented scale of Bloor West Village, protecting access to sunlight in public spaces, celebrating the area’s natural and cultural heritage, and enhancing the public realm.

The guidelines, which span 96 pages, permit mid-rise buildings to be developed in the study’s three character areas, and recommend these new mid-rise buildings reinforce the historic context and main street character of the study area. Infill developments, additions, and adaptive re-use projects that add “gentle density” to the study area are encouraged where

possible.

Development of tall buildings, which is expected to increase along Bloor Street West, with height peaks near the area’s transit stations, should enable access to a minimum of five hours of sunlight on the north sidewalk of Bloor Street West. New tall buildings developed adjacent to parks should accommodate at least five hours of continuous sunlight at the March and September equinoxes. Tall buildings in the Village should feature a defined base building that responds to the historical context of the surrounding sites.

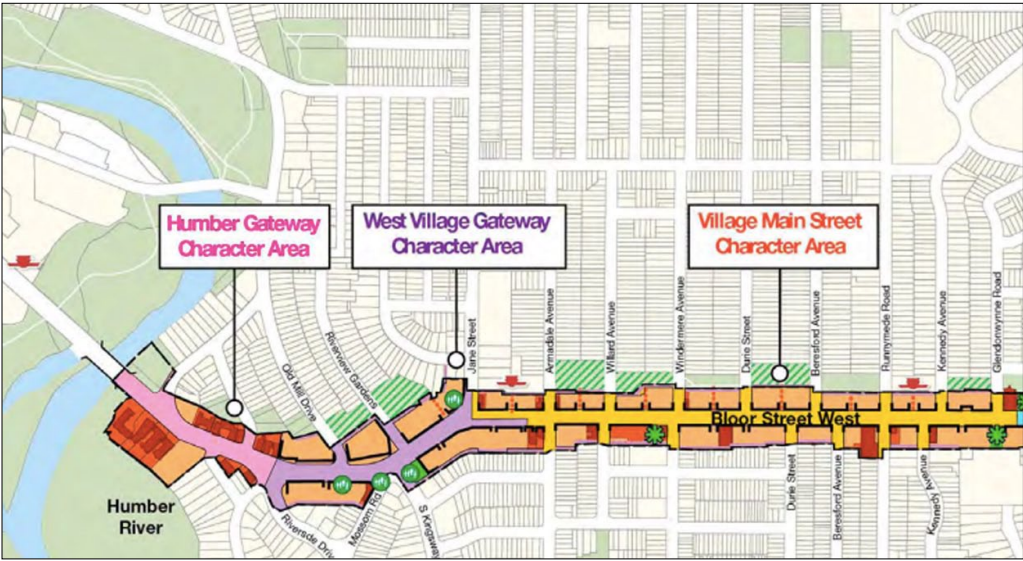
The guidelines recommend that all new buildings

developed in the area include materials, such as brick and stone, and articulation that reflect the character of the prevailing surrounding heritage properties.

The guidelines also emphasize Bloor Street West’s unique retail character, and recommend new buildings incorporate retail at grade, with each storefront spanning approximately five to eight metres of street frontage, and recommend that residential lobbies be placed on side streets where possible.

Some elements in the urban design guidelines also express the importance of

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Map showing the boundaries of the Bloor West Village study area, for which a set of urban design guidelines was recently approved. The guidelines highlight some of the challenges of protecting the area’s fine-grained retail and historic character while adhering to Provincially-mandated densification targets.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

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recognizing the Indigenous history of the area, including recommendations to consider giving Indigenous names to new parks, incorporating Indigenous design principles into new parks and public spaces, and determining new ways to interpret the area’s buried rivers.

At a Toronto and East York community council meeting on November 27 where the guidelines were first introduced, City staff explained that every single property that fronts onto Bloor Street West within the study area is within at least one **Protected Major Transit Station Area (PMTSA)**.

In August the **Province of Ontario** approved changes to Toronto’s official plan that permit increased height and density on new developments built within designated **PMTSAs**. This means that height recommendations for new developments proposed within the Bloor West Village study area that had been contemplated back in 2018 when the study process was first undertaken are no longer enforceable.

Local Bloor West Village resident **Marc Collins**, who has a background in land use planning, spoke at the November 27 meeting and expressed some concern about the reality of enforcing recommended design approaches for the

neighbourhood.

“The urban design guidelines themselves contain lots of lovely urban design notions and best practices, including many pictures of meadows in High Park and existing recognizable buildings in the neighbourhood,” he told community council. “None of [these] will be worth the paper it’s printed on because they will be ignored and buildings demolished as soon as there is a profitable development proposal compliant with zoning requirements.”

Collins also questioned why the urban design guidelines had few renderings showing tall buildings “of the scale that are now allowed and encouraged by the major transit station areas policy,” a scale of built form that is likely to become more plentiful along the main stretch of Bloor Street West.

Local Village resident **Barbi Lazarus**, also speaking at the November 27 meeting, said she supported several elements of the urban design guidelines, including their emphasis on maintaining narrow storefronts along Bloor Street West that encourage the tenancy of independent businesses, and the positioning of residential lobby entrances on side streets to avoid interfering with the small business streetscape along Bloor.

Lazarus also praised City staff for recognizing many of the historic mixed-use buildings on and along Bloor Street West, many of which contain affordable rental units, on properties that support mature oak trees.

Like Collins, Lazarus expressed concern about the Province’s new emphasis on increased density around transit stations, and she **urged City staff to consider a stipulation in the guidelines that would encourage not only ground floor small business retail along Bloor, but also retention of second floor office space in new redevelopments. These features are common in some of the older, mixed-use buildings in Bloor West Village, which often contain essential services, such as medical and dental offices.**

“The City is trying to encourage people to walk and cycle as much as they can for their day-to-day activities, and right now Bloor West Village is one of the few areas of the city where that is possible because of the wide range of amenities that are available,” Lazarus told council.

**“...If we don’t mandate that new developments keep the small retail frontages and keep the second-storey office and retail space, we’re going to end up like many of the other neighbourhoods in the city, which contain nothing but restaurants, bars and coffee shops, but few of the amenities that are truly required for a complete 15-minute city.”**

At the November 27 meeting, ward 4 Parkdale-High Park councillor **Gord Perks** did not mince words while describing the “long and winding road,” it took to get to a finalized set of urban design guidelines for the neighbourhood amid shifting policy changes from other levels of government.

“What has made it long and winding is the process constantly getting interrupted by forces outside the City of Toronto’s control. I’ve been trying to remember exactly how many new pieces of provincial legislation have been introduced in the last seven years, and I think we’ve all lost count ... And each and every time they do that, these kinds of neighbourhood-level studies get thrown out the window.”

Perks said he believed some community members were “inappropriately” directing their frustration at the City’s planning staff, who have been “heroic” in their efforts to bring forward the urban design guidelines, despite several interruptions to the process.

“If we could have had what we were ready to implement in 2018, I would be thrilled. Now all I can say is, given the circumstances, this is the best we can do.” 🌻