



RESCON: Out of crisis comes opportunity

Richard Lyall

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Innovations in design and embedded technologies in new housing will abound.

COVID-19 will force innovation in new-housing supply and design

In my last column, I wrote about construction under COVID-19. That raised questions about where housing construction will be going and what that means for those seeking shelter.

Prior to the onslaught of COVID-19, the GTA's housing industry was producing at nearly full capacity in the midst of a continuing housing supply crisis. The bottom line was we were not

producing enough housing to meet our demographic needs. The housing market, like so many things in our world, was upended. Then came isolation.

Many who have been waiting for new homes, however, were assured they would not be abandoned when Premier Ford made it clear that certain finishing work could continue. This was critical as housing is a core need like food, health and security.

The industry had already scrambled to introduce new safety measures as well as other changes to meet this challenge. But this extraordinary effort meant that production slowed to meet the necessary COVID-19 safety protocols.

Also, the front end of the industry concerning what is called site servicing – grading, roads, utilities, sanitary and water systems – was eventually stopped along with most other sectors of construction. That was in aid of Ontario's battle to restrain and suppress the virus.

Careful and thoughtful steps will soon be taken by the Ontario government to gradually reopen the economy while being vigilant for virus flare-ups. The first work indicated to be reopened will be outdoor work where physical distancing already exists. Site servicing fits that category and the industry now has COVID-19 safety experience.

This is vital as servicing work not completed in the next few months means there will not be enough time to, for example, frame and finish houses before winter. Ongoing apartment delays will be extended, further reducing supply.

Thankfully, this can still be avoided. Material and product supply chain pressures have been limited. Given the pre-existing deficit in housing, the economic hit from recessionary effects will be tempered. While sales have fallen dramatically, so have listings. Online sales and rental channels are exploding.

Municipalities are already trying to keep housing and other construction projects moving as well as introducing opportunities for innovation and modernization of planning and permitting services. This will drive streamlining approvals and cut development timelines significantly, triggering needed zoning and site-plan reforms.

Little surprise that recently Toronto Mayor John Tory and Councillor Joe Cressy talked about COVID-19 as an opportunity to end homelessness, up zone transitways, open up government lands, and introduce planning and zoning changes to allow immediate construction of housing. This will lead to more sites being opened to redevelopment by non-profit and private sector developers, as well as the production and building of badly needed social and missing-middle housing.

Expanding supply will have a positive effect on prices which had been increasing higher than incomes because of supply constraints. They will not fall but rather stabilize. Increased home-based healthcare and stay-at-home working will impact design and increase resilience and sustainability.

It will trigger home-diagnostic technologies for healthcare purposes and more advances in air-handling or scrubbing systems. Workspaces separate from living spaces will be in demand. Bathrooms will become diagnostic centres. Home gyms and wellness spaces will become desired design features rather than afterthoughts. New housing will be better and safer than ever.

In all, there will eventually be a more balanced innovative market and efficient supply-chain process. Innovations in design and embedded technologies in new housing will abound. Also, with many retiring and the need for continued production, a new generation of skilled trades workers will be needed.

Out of disaster comes opportunity to make our living spaces better.

Richard Lyall, president of RESCON, has represented the building industry in Ontario since 1991. Contact him at media@rescon.com.