

## **Holiday Wishlist – A Look Ahead From Those Who Help To Build This City**

by Nina Dragicevic Dec. 17, 2019



The holidays are a time of shifting perspectives. Many of us spend the season looking back over the past year — and then ahead to the next one.

In that spirit, Toronto Storeys assembled a “Holiday Wishlist” from some of the people and agencies that build this city: governments, charities, architects, developers, renovators and brokers.

If they could wish one thing for Toronto this holiday season — into New Year’s and beyond — what would it be?

## **Gord Perks, city councillor for Parkdale-High Park: ‘Social housing’**

According to [Toronto Life](#), Gord Perks’ ward is home to the best neighbourhood of 2019. Based on housing, safety, transit and other stats compiled by the magazine, Runnymede-Bloor West Village ranked No. 1 out of 140 in the city. First elected to represent Ward 4 residents in 2006, Perks has a strong background in environmental issues and champions responsible development.

Asked for his wish for Toronto, he brings up a community in another part of town.

“I wish that we would return to the way we funded social housing in the 1970s, where all three orders of government got together and built social housing, like in the St. Lawrence neighbourhood,” Perks says.

The development he describes was in fact “[Canada’s first attempt to develop a deliberately mixed-use, mixed-income neighbourhood](#)” — an engineered mini-society influenced by then-mayor David Crombie and famed urban planner Jane Jacobs, among others.

“All three governments contributed to the St. Lawrence neighbourhood,” Perks says. “It was a fantastic success and it’s one that I wish we would repeat.”

## **Karen Stintz, president and CEO, Variety Village: ‘Access for everyone’**

Karen Stintz knows Toronto inside and out. Her past roles include city councillor, TTC chair, and mayoral candidate. Today she helms Variety Village, a massive recreation complex in the east end that provides more than 2 million hours of programming every year. The charity reaches more than 30,000 individuals, roughly half of which have a disclosed disability.

“The one thing I would wish for Toronto would be greater accessibility for those who live and work in the city,” she says. “Although the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disability Act came into effect in 2005, there are many places in the city that are difficult, if not impossible, to get to for people with a disability — particularly in the more established areas of the City.

“Accessibility isn’t just for people with a disability, accessibility improves access for everyone: for parents with strollers, for seniors, for little children and big children and, of course, those with mobility challenges that may be temporary or permanent.”

Stintz says Canada’s most populous city needs to be livable for everyone.

“When people cannot access places because of physical barriers, there is a divide between those who are welcome and those who are not,” she says. “The feeling of not being welcome deprives people of being able to fully participate, and when people feel as if they are not welcome on a daily basis, it leads to isolation and disengagement in other areas.

“Making spaces accessible isn’t a cost — it is an investment in a welcoming, livable city.”

## **Andrew Frontini, design director, Perkins and Will: ‘Complete communities’**

This year, architecture firm Perkins and Will picked up an Award of Excellence from the Toronto Urban Design Awards for its work on the Albion Library. To avoid closing the existing library for two years during construction — which would have negatively impacted the community — the firm instead built an entirely separate structure on a nearby parking lot. Andrew Frontini led the project.

His wish for the city? “I would like more sustainable communities,” Frontini says. “And by that, I mean a combination of affordable housing — a housing mix — and then public space and community infrastructure.”

Frontini says for-profit residential development is rapidly outpacing the city’s ability to catch up with infrastructure, such as schools, parks, recreation centres and libraries. Using downtown’s CityPlace as an example, he points out that a community centre is being finished only now — while some of the buildings have been occupied for more than a decade.

“Before you have this giant, speculative condo tower city, you should have the heart around which a real community can grow,” he says. “I want to see the city grow in complete communities, as opposed to just development.”

Frontini says creative partnerships with the private sector can help, pointing to examples in New York and a current project at the [Galleria Mall](#). The massive redevelopment near Dupont and Dufferin Streets includes a community centre, parks and affordable housing, and Perkins and Will is involved in aspects of its design.

“If developers get to play in the sandbox,” he says, “they should help build the community infrastructure.”

## **Richard Lyall, president, Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON): ‘Supply equals demand’**

Richard Lyall has represented the province’s residential construction industry for almost 30 years. RESCON works on more than half a dozen portfolios, from building innovation to labour supply, housing affordability to industry safety. If Ontario builders have an issue, Lyall knows about it — and works to keep the government and public informed.

“I’ve got three words for you,” he says. “Housing market equilibrium.”

“By market equilibrium, what I wish for is that we have a market in which supply equals demand. Right now, by my back-of-the-envelope calculations, we’re under-producing in the range of around 20,000 units per year in the GTA.

“So that’s the annual deficit of housing — and we already have a housing debt of, I think, somewhere in the range of a couple of hundred thousand units, based on the waiting lists.”

Lyll says major projects in Toronto, from concept to occupancy, are taking up to 10 years to build. He calls this “crazy” and says governments need to streamline the building process, using Tokyo’s rapid development as an example. Tokyo’s housing prices have flatlined after a massive housing bubble — as the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) in April, this stabilization was fed by a frenzy of building and new units hitting the market.

“Our system right now, we’ve got approximately 50 different government entities that are engaged in determining how and when housing gets built,” Lyll says. “We’re not talking about cutting regulations or making things unsafe, but we’ve got to grow up. The City of Toronto aspires to be — and it is — an internationally recognized city, but we are in serious trouble right now.”

### **Annastacia Plaskos, founder and CEO, Fix It Females: ‘Support local businesses’**

Annastacia Plaskos’s renovation business Fix It Females is staffed mostly with women, and she promotes women in trades every chance she gets — from the company’s [Instagram](#) to its [Screws & Stilettos](#) podcast. Fix It Females has a storefront on east Danforth but the crew works on projects across the GTA.

“My wish is that more people will support local businesses,” Plaskos says. “I think a lot of people are drawn to the big box stores because of the value they think they’re getting. They will go and support these big box stores while the rest of the Toronto market is suffering.”

Plaskos says she chats with other local business owners and, even during the holidays, they tell her that business is slow. She’s witnessed closures as well, and points out that these businesses represent local families.

“People should put more money back into the places where money is kept, rather than give it to these huge American corporations,” Plaskos says. “If you look around the city, there’s store after store closing down.”

### **Greg Evans, president, The Behar Group Realty: ‘Support for the homeless’**

Founded in 1992, The Behar Group Realty is a hands-on boutique brokerage specializing in commercial, industrial and investment real estate — in the GTA and beyond. Greg Evans joined the firm in 2002, bringing his expertise to leasing and acquisition divisions, as well as advisory services.

“My one wish for Toronto for next year is that the city and its citizens can provide more support for the homeless and less fortunate in our community,” he says. “I feel like people should not have to sleep on our sidewalks, or beg at our intersections. Perhaps this year we can do better and provide more and better shelter space in the city.

“Recognizing that this is a complex and sensitive issue, I still hope that this year we can do better for the most vulnerable.”