

OPINION

Former Toronto chief planner Jennifer Keesmaat offers lesson on high-design affordable housing

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A new Toronto housing development would provide 119 permanently affordable apartments in the heart of downtown.

GH3

What's the recipe for more affordable housing in cities? This has emerged as a hot issue in the federal election, and the parties are responding with a raft of promises. The NDP pledges to build 500,000 units of social housing, while the Conservatives would turn huge expanses of federal property into housing. All this requires years to implement.

But in Toronto, a new housing development – with the involvement of former chief planner and mayoral candidate Jennifer Keesmaat – would provide 119 permanently affordable apartments in the heart of downtown. And the developers can't wait to get started.

There's just one catch: They need the city's okay first. But if that permission comes, this project could set a new example for urban mixed-income housing.

The lead developers are **Markee Developments**, a real estate company in which Ms. Keesmaat is a partner. "We at Markee are focused on how we can deliver affordable housing, in a way that is environmentally and financially sustainable," Ms. Keesmaat said.

Launched in 2020, the company tries to use capitalism for both profit but also doing good. Markee generally works with land owned by not-for-profits – such as a recent project with Christian seminary Tyndale University – that share their goals. Here, they're using 324 condos to subsidize the 119 regulated affordable apartments.

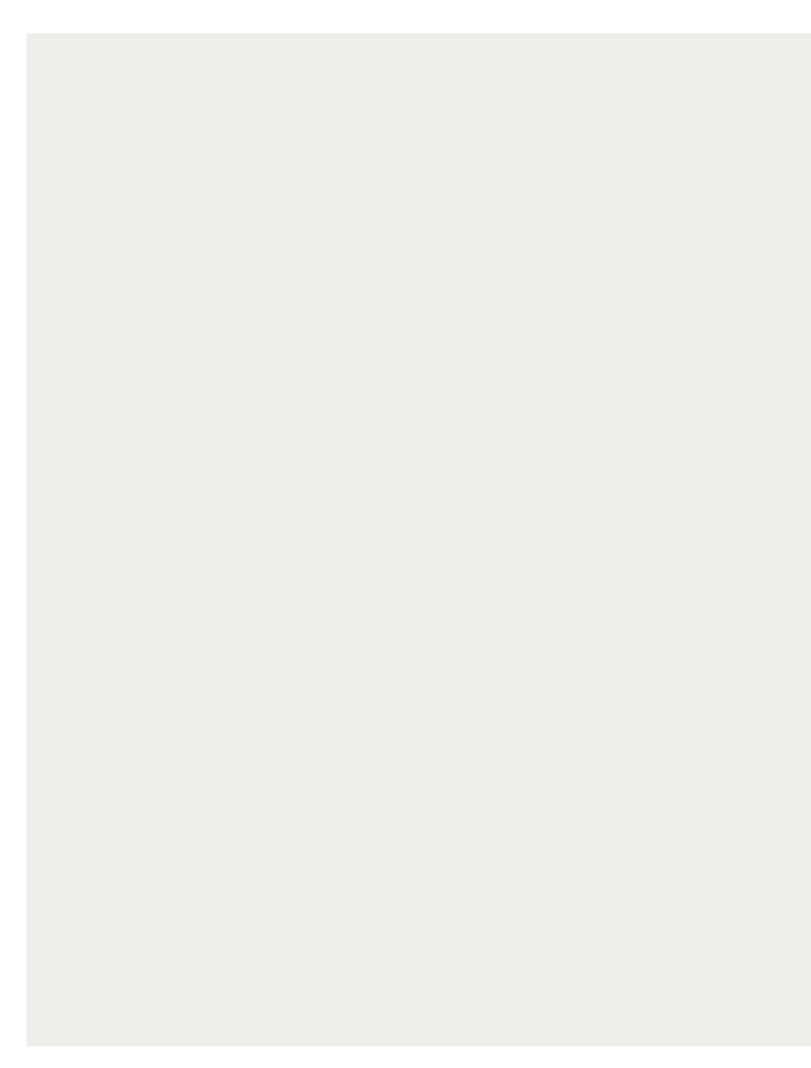
All this housing would be part of an unusual and beautiful building, designed by Toronto firm GH3, that would hug a highway ramp and bridge over a public street.

The development site includes two pieces of land spanning Sumach Street, next to the Don Valley Parkway ramps that tore through the area in 1963. Ms. Keesmaat describes the spot as "a black hole within the city."

On the west side of Sumach is an isolated row of mostly Victorian houses. The development keeps the Victorian facades, attaches a contemporary brick slab, and converts the whole thing to a streetfront community space.

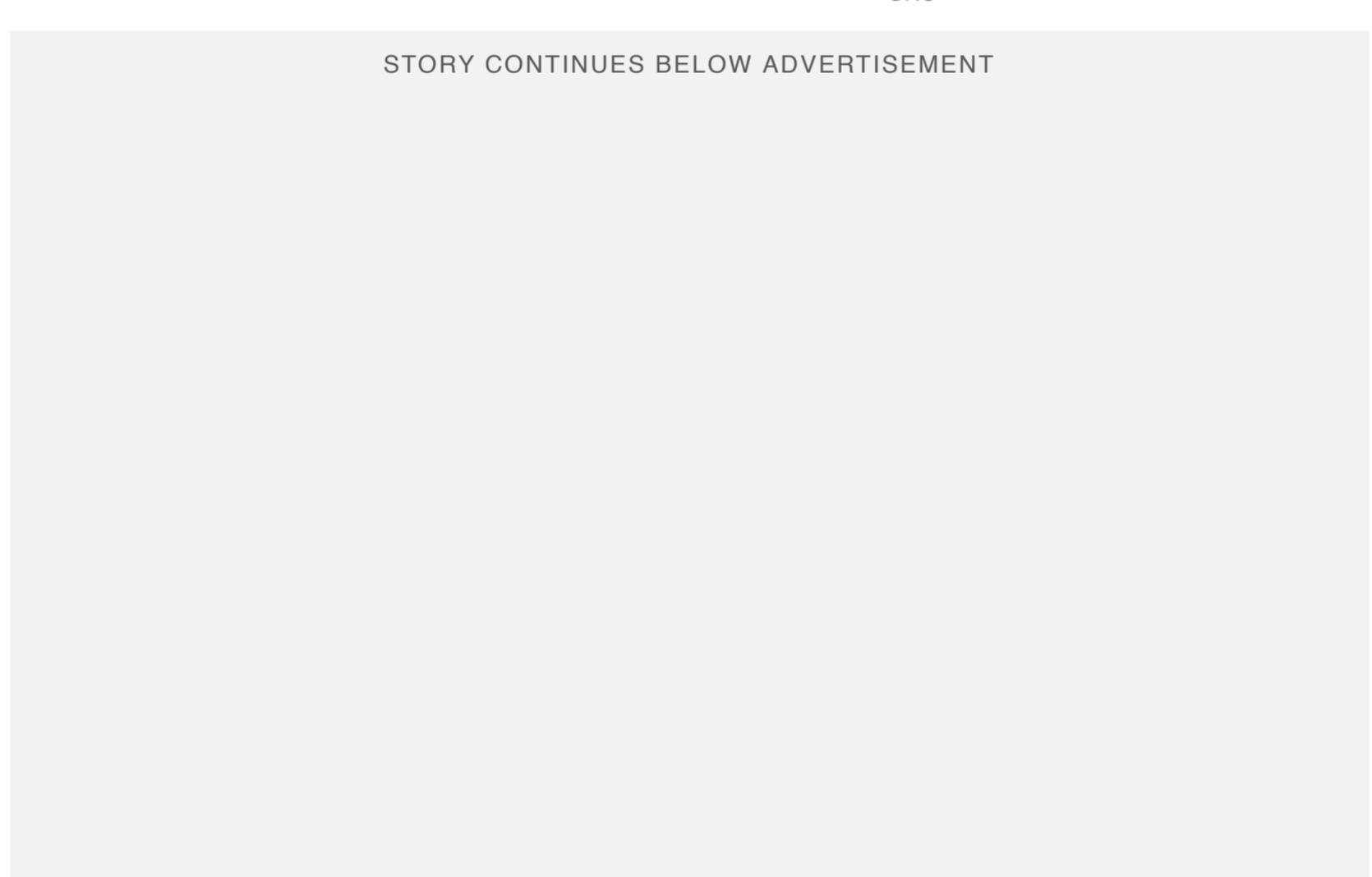
The eastern site, a triangle, includes a **unique house** built in 1996 consisting of helter-skelter cubes – an homage to Piet Blom's Cubic Houses project in Rotterdam. (The building was designed to be moved, and Markee is open to offers.)

GH3's design fills the eastern triangle with a tower rising 35 storeys, with a minimalist veil of white pickets on all sides. The building reaches out across Sumach Street, hanging a slab of apartments above a refurbished streetscape, to touch the remade Victorians. The architects wrap the base of the building on all sides with brick cladding and a set of tall arches. The architecture is Romanesque-meets-Modernist – and if built this way, it will be exceptionally beautiful.



Former chief planner and mayoral candidate Jennifer Keesmaat is involved with the project.

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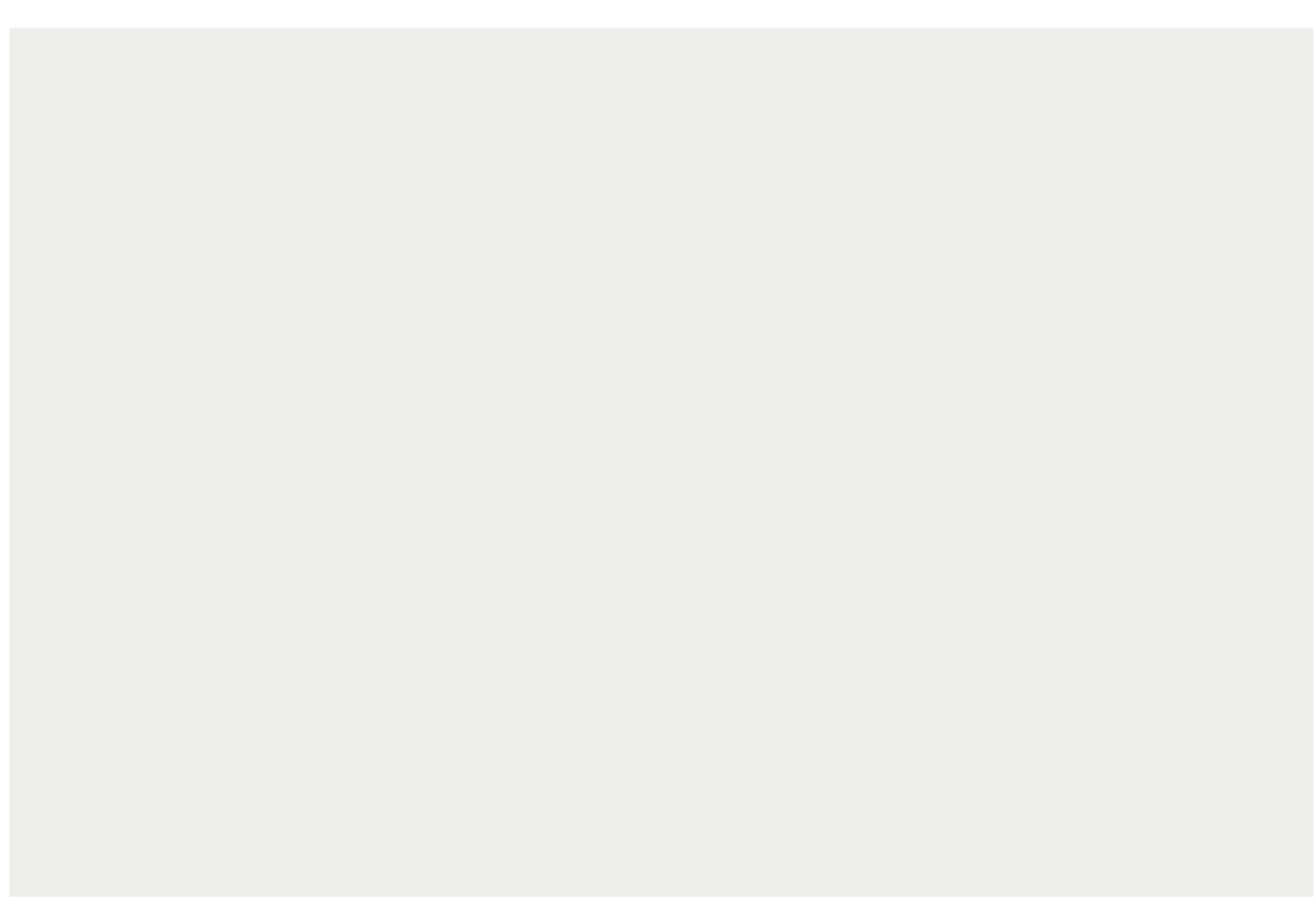
Not only that, but the development would improve the streetscape on all sides, which is currently an asphalted purgatory. Markee are talking with the leaders of The Bentway, the non-profit which runs the vibrant public space underneath the Gardiner Expressway, about animating the area under the highway ramps.

In short, this project is a weird one, showing real creativity from the designers and the developers. But the most important aspects are financial and regulatory. How would they get this done?

Three things: Some subsidy; limiting their profit; and hoping for a friendly helping hand from the city.

Markee will apply for Toronto's **Open Door program**, which waives some development fees when there's affordable housing involved. They are also willing to accept a smaller financial return – they won't share specifics publicly, but have shared them with the city. And finally, they are hoping the city will okay the height and density they need, and fast.

The model here (familiar in Vancouver) is a trade-off: Developers get to build more in exchange for providing public goods or affordable housing.



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However, this is difficult in Toronto because the city's planning process relies on haggling. The city's zoning is often meaningless. On the Sumach site, the height maximum is largely 16 metres, or about five storeys. That's a joke. This is a downtown – **highrises belong here**.

Ms. Keesmaat argued that a tall building makes sense. "Particularly in the light of the fact that we have a housing emergency, we should be adding density in places where there are parks and schools and other amenities, which are abundant here."

She is right. Hopefully Ms. Keesmaat's credibility will help this development happen quickly. That will require a can-do attitude from government. It means discarding some outdated ideas about where tall buildings belong; letting the private sector build for profit, while harvesting public benefits; and accepting that a fast-growing city needs a lot of new housing of all kinds.

If anyone's looking for a new housing platform, this is not a bad place to start.

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