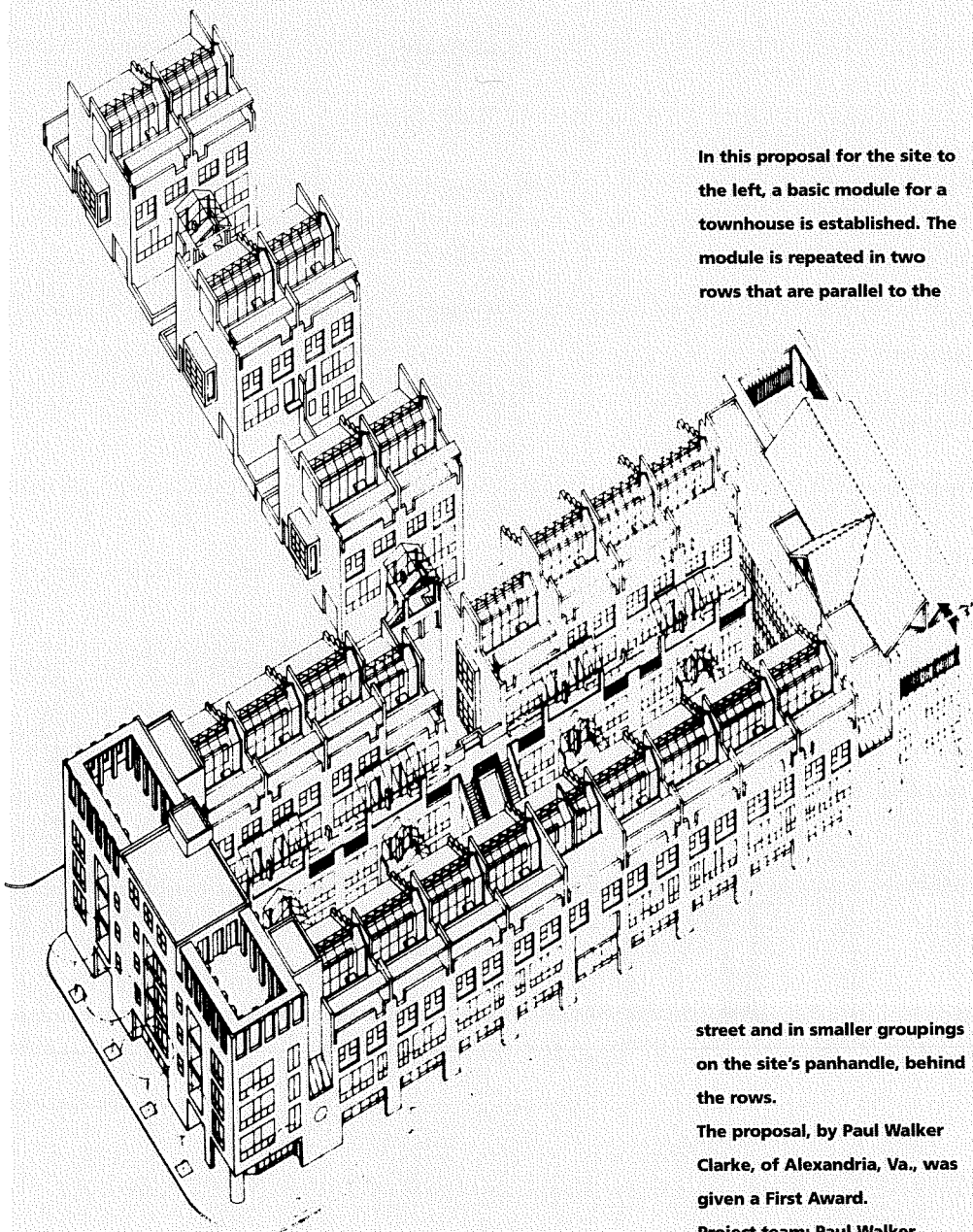
Anne Vernez Moudon

Finding Buildings to Fit Main Street

What fascinated me about the competition is that when jury members began looking for so-called "building types," we realized that we had no common definition of what a building type is. In general, we were looking for buildings that could be built along main streets, that would contain housing and commercial activity of the sort that is typical along main streets, and that would provide somewhat more density than is usual now. More specifically, we were looking for parameters that would reveal how to build these structures over a wide range of sites along main streets.

This approach transcends most planning processes. Toronto's Housing on Main Streets office, which is part of the city planning department, sponsored the competition because its staff is trying to deal with some of the shortcomings of regular city planning techniques, which focus on land use. When a problem like Toronto's housing shortage arises, land use planning methods are

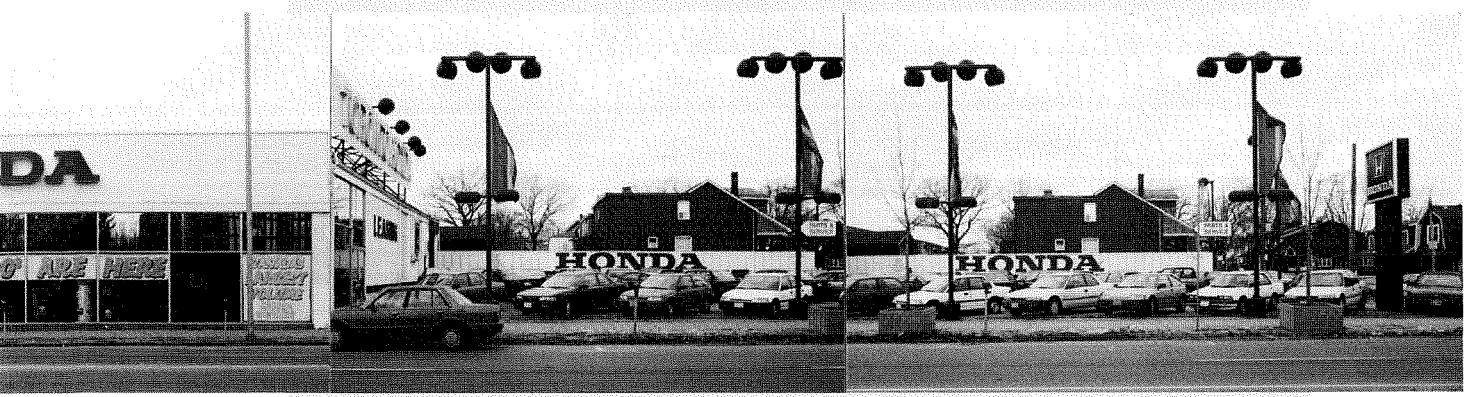
This car dealer occupies the irregularly shaped, block-long site shown above.



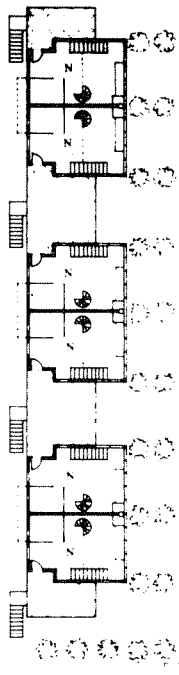
In this proposal for the site to the left, a basic module for a townhouse is established. The module is repeated in two rows that are parallel to the street and in smaller groupings on the site's panhandle, behind the rows.

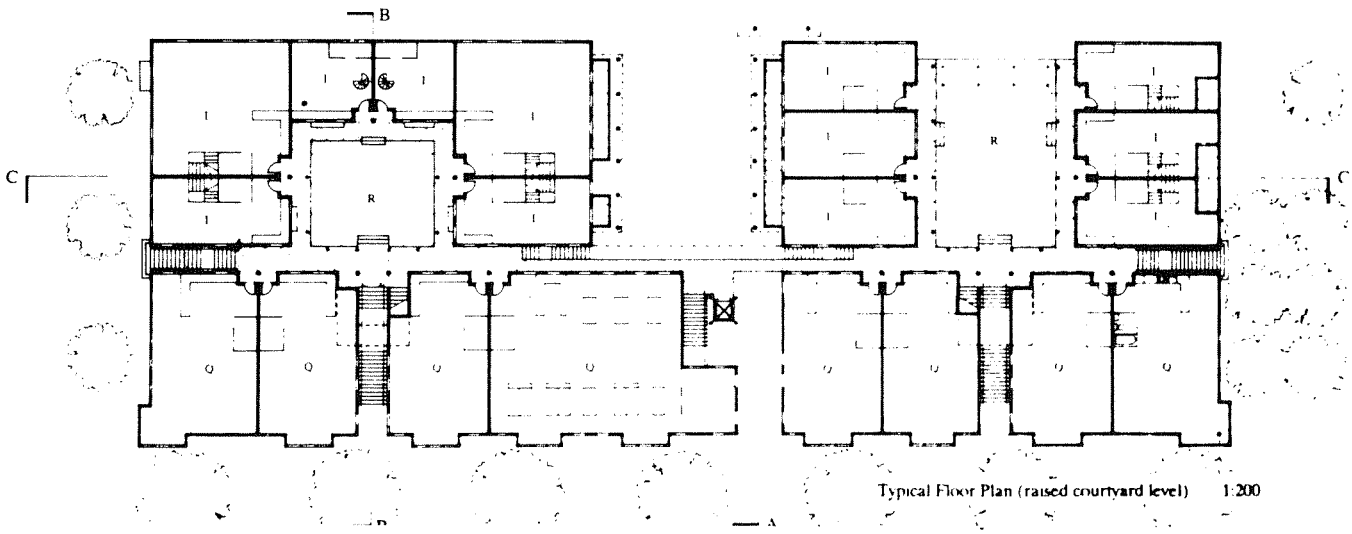
The proposal, by Paul Walker Clarke, of Alexandria, Va., was given a First Award.

Project team: Paul Walker Clarke, Lipo Chen, Meredith A. Wirsching.



In this proposal for the same site, an "inner block" of studios is fit between the traditional rows of homes that line the existing streets, one of which is shown below. An existing lane provides access to the "inner block," in which space is also set aside for allotment gardens.
The submission, by Bill McIlroy and Denis Pieprz, of Alexandria, Va., was given a First Award.





Typical Floor Plan (raised courtyard level) 1:200

applied to analyze and solve it. The land use planner looks for areas that could be rezoned for high-density housing, and that is where one tower after another will be put.

The idea behind the Housing on Main Streets competition was different: to see what can be accomplished by focusing directly on where people live, how they live and what types of buildings they live in, rather than planning the city through abstract zoning. In one sense this approach is not innovative because this is the way cities have traditionally been built. What is innovative is that city planners are interested in the type of building that is erected.

The basic premise of the competition was to address the issue of affordable housing by looking for these spines of collective life in the city and relating those spines to the very specific places where people live their lives—such as homes, work places and shopping areas.

The competition accomplished this by focusing on the street, which is the common element of the city. Everybody can remember different cities by their streets, particularly grand streets like Champs Elysées, Broadway, or Fifth Avenue. Each of us has memories of streets on which we have lived; that is how we remember the places from which we come.

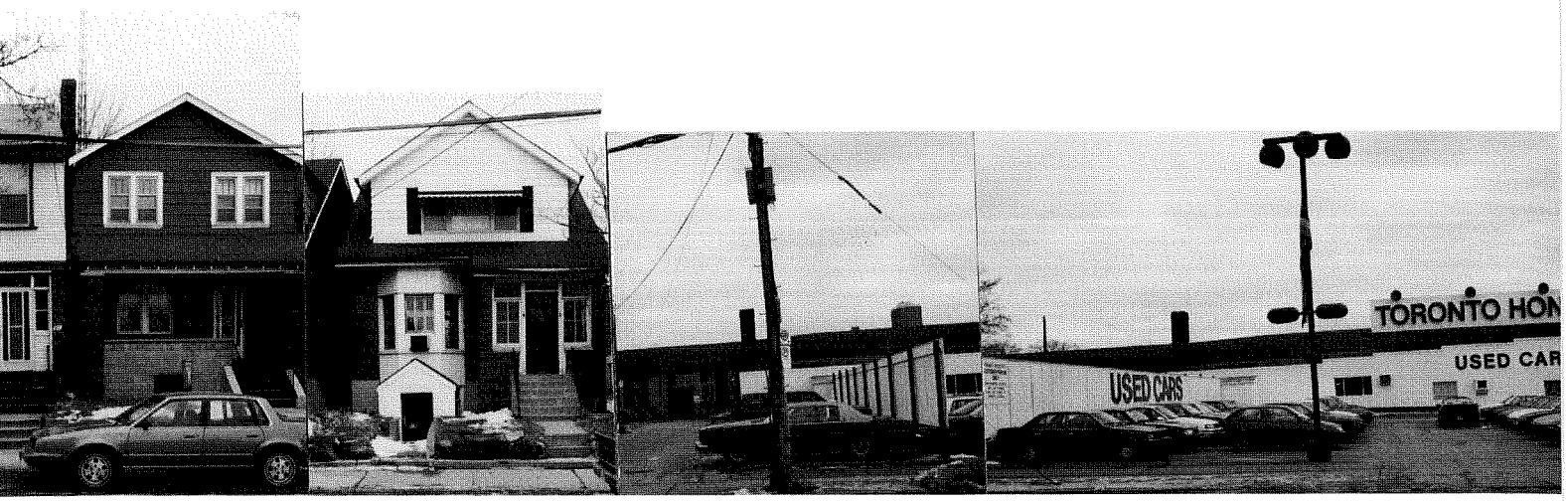
The street is different from monuments or special buildings that you might recognize in the city because it is a collective, shared space. It is formed by many individual buildings, all responding to the nature of the collective space. The problem the competition posed was designing building types that would be appropriate, in function, form and style, for the selected streets. By focusing on the street, one is forced to be a pluralist and must accept different points of view.

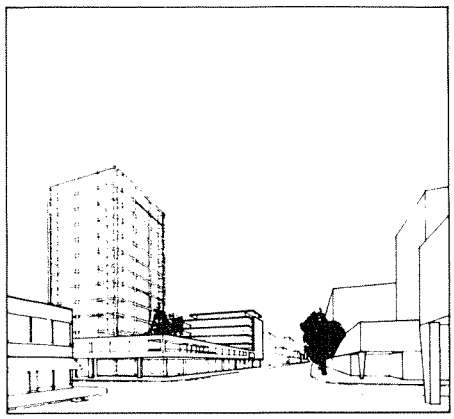
When you compare a map that reveals the property lines along Toronto's main streets with the sketches presented by the Grand Award winners, you can begin to see a similarity between the two.

The sides of the main streets are lined with a series of properties, or lots, that abut the street, usually along their narrow end. One after another, these lots extend back from the street, and the pattern is repetitive. The Grand Award winners are presenting the same idea; the building type is like the lot along the street. A building type can be used in many different ways and can be reinterpreted on different sites, just as every building on the lots along the street is used, interpreted and built to very different tastes and attitudes.

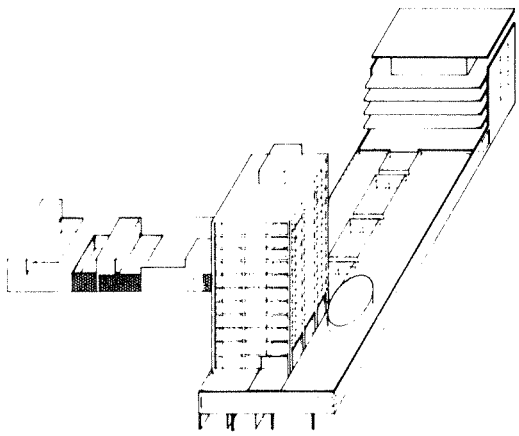
The other proposals provided something more concrete: specific examples that could be fitted upon specific sites chosen for the competition. You might like or dislike these proposals, but each could be built along these streets.

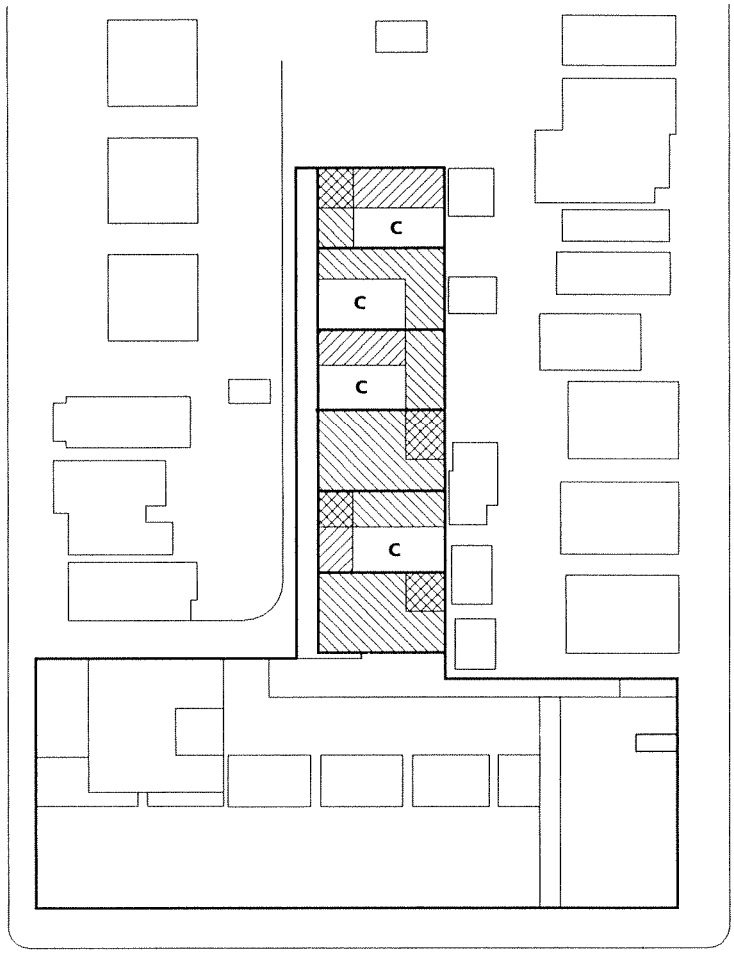
The small number of "generic" proposals, generic in the sense of suggesting possible adaption to different programs and sites, was disappointing. While some proposals seemed to be designed for replicability, very few did that explicitly. This was especially surprising in that the competition organizers had been careful to select a range of sites explicitly covering conditions that were generic and typical: corner sites, mid-block sites, small sites and medium-scale sites.





view east on Danforth



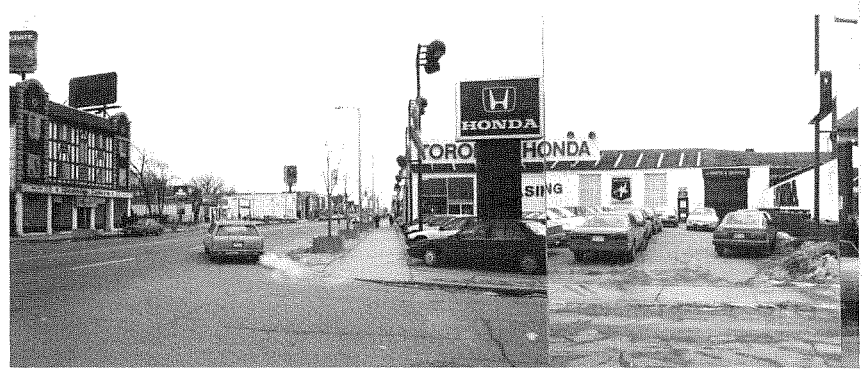


Variations on a Courtyard House

- Second story cantilevered over ground-level courtyard
- One story tall
- Two stories tall
- C — Open courtyard

Another submission for the same site proposed two apartment blocks and several con-figurations of courtyard/studio housing on the rear of the lot.

The submission, by M. Kohn Architect/Val Rynnimeri, of Toronto, was given an Honorable Mention.
Project team: Sydney Browne, Alison Hahn, Martin Kohn, Val Rynnimeri.



These results seem to suggest that designers and planners are ill-equipped to deal with the small urban site, and especially the very common small urban lot. It may be that planners know only how to focus on large areas, treating lots within them as two-dimensional entities to be developed according to general formulas that are applicable by the simplest-minded plan checker. Architects, on the other hand, are trained to design special, signature types of buildings that help them to project a design image and to attract a personal market.

Thus, if planners do too little about the environment of small sites, architects tend to do too much. Only developers are left to shape the small-site environment with common buildings—yet their training and general outlook on the city is often not adequate for generating sophisticated solutions.

Solutions for the problems raised by small urban sites do not appear to be in the vocabulary of designers and planners. These problems are important because, as the competition assumed, most built-up or buildable sites in cities are small. Large pieces of land in single ownership are rare; most of the lots available for houses, shops and even apartment buildings are rarely wider than 100 feet.

We dealt with a number of issues when trying to understand what the proposals revealed about building type. The first issue is that the way a particular building is used can change through time. In Toronto, as in many other cities, you find many buildings that date from the nineteenth century and have been used and re-used in different ways. We decided to focus more on building form than on building function because we believed that if buildings have a good form, then people can inhabit and use them differently over time, making them suitable no matter what their needs.

We considered how all three dimensions of the building responded to the lot size. The older structures along the main streets are typically built on very narrow lots, only 22 feet wide; nowadays buildable lots tend to be wider. Most of the lots we were looking at in the competition were 66 or 88 feet wide; or if they were large lots they were almost a block long, up to 200 feet long. Deep buildings, similar to the old ones, were also acceptable as long as some usable open space was provided for the residents away from the busy streets.

Another issue we considered was density, which is quite important in terms of addressing the intensification and rejuvenation of main streets. There are examples of old buildings along main streets that have four or five stories and work well. You see some examples at that density in the award winners.

Another thing we see along very ordinary Toronto streets is that different types of buildings were built at different times. There are actually different generations of buildings. So we were looking for the 1990 generation of buildings, which in some instances will clash, but in other instances will fit into the urban fabric. The 1990 generation should not only continue the rhythm of shops along the streets, but also include affordable and comfortable residences above. Such buildings are likely to stand taller than their neighbors, in response to new demands for urban residential quarters.

The architectural style of the facade is another issue. We agreed that if a building were well designed, any style would do. We were open to a main street with different styles; yet, we had certain conditions. If the buildings surrounding the site were historic, the new building would have to fit into that context. (We had fights about what would fit.)

Finally, the last issue of building type that arose repeatedly was to what extent were we looking for an ordinary, background building, a building that you don't notice very much and fits in. We were looking for a building type that could be manipulated and interpreted and changed by different designers, but which was respectful of all the collective aspects of the street, including the facade and the commercial space on the ground floor. Once in a while we accepted that a very special building, like a tower, could be put on the back of a lot. Special buildings, signature buildings, could appear here and there, but we were looking for ordinary types of construction.