

# Architect looks back to the future

JULIAN JACOBS

## Ancient courtyard homes could help solve density issues

BY FRED LANGAN

Architects are dreamers; engineers with a soul. They make their living with commercial projects and sometimes turn out a house or an office tower they hope will change the world, like Moshe Safdie's building block Habitat 67 or the stark black towers of Mies van der Rohe.

Julian Jacobs's latest dream is pretty close to reality. He wants to build affordable housing in downtown Toronto based on an idea that is thousands of years old: courtyard houses as the Greeks and Romans built them. Look at a street plan of Pompeii and you'll see the houses are built in tight clusters of courtyards.

Actually, the idea predates the

Greeks and Romans.

"When man first settled one of the earliest forms of housing was the courtyard house," Mr. Jacobs says over the boardroom table at his design office in midtown Toronto. "But the town house became popular in England and Europe, so the row house has become the dominant low-rise multi-family house."

He thinks he could change that with his "court garden home." The courtyard concept allows houses to be built in tight clusters, but with some green space between them. The houses face the street and a private internal courtyard. A garage opens to the lane or street.

Instead of a building surrounded by landscape, this concept is a landscape — the courtyard — surrounded by the building.

"There is always a south facing courtyard. That is important to the enjoyment of the building and also for energy efficiency," Mr. Jacobs says. "There is no front yard, so that saves a lot of space. Front yards in most buildings are decorative, and don't really serve a purpose. Side yards are a waste of space."

There is a proposal to build a demonstration unit at Washington and Huron streets in the heart of the University of Toronto campus. The design is an L-shaped bungalow attached to a two-storey coach house and garage, which creates the courtyard. The living space comes to about 1,500 square feet.

"What you have is three bedrooms or a two-bedroom home with a loft. And this coach house/loft becomes an agent of change or transformation," Mr. Jacobs says as he describes the idealistic theory behind his design.

"The loft could be used for a family member, or rented out as a small apartment for a student. The use changes as their life transforms from a couple to a family to empty nesters."

These houses are designed for the middle class, people who can't find an affordable place to live in the city. The cost would be about a quarter of a million dollars.

One way to keep housing cheap is mass production. But that only makes sense if many units are built, say, 500 at a time

on a large site.

Conventional construction would be used for the demo houses. Buyers would be able to customize the units, giving them luxury touches.

Energy efficiency is another aspect the architect wants to incorporate into the project, something that is easier to put into a cluster of houses built from scratch.

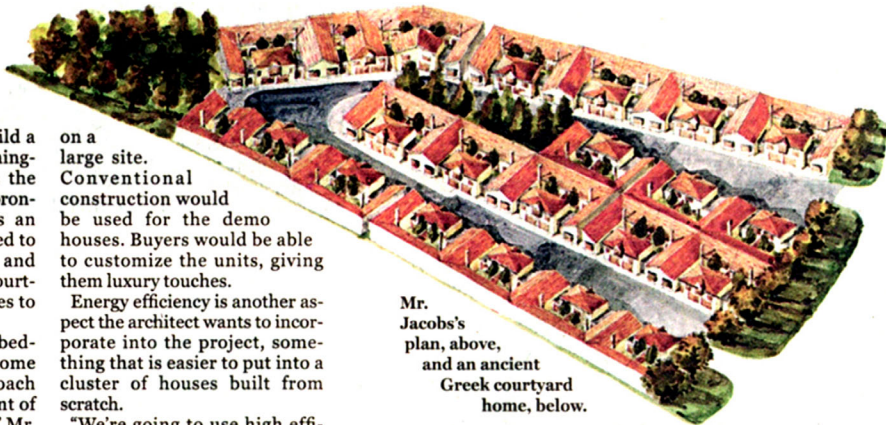
"We're going to use high efficiency heat pumps together with solar panels. Wind generation and geothermal could be used for larger projects," Mr. Jacobs says.

"If we go to a flat roof, we want to cover it with a special sod developed for this purpose."

The sod adds to the insulation and gives the houses a unique green look. The planning for the project is advanced and construction could start as early as next spring.

"While this one is done as an affordable prototype, the size of the concept can expand in both size and luxury," Mr. Jacobs says.

National Post



Mr. Jacobs's plan, above, and an ancient Greek courtyard home, below.

ABOVE: JULIAN JACOBS. BELOW: THOMAS GORDON SMITH, VITRUVIUS ON ARCHITECTURE

