



Critique Updating the Walk-up

by Kenneth Hayes

A new condominium in Toronto's zoning-relaxed King/Spadina neighbourhood represents a major step forward in multi-unit housing.

The permission to build mixed use and higher density projects in Toronto's "Reinvestment Area" from Queen Street south to Front and from Bathurst Street east to Simcoe has facilitated many loft-condominium developments, but it has resulted in very little of architectural merit. It has also led to the condominium conversion of industrial buildings previously occupied largely by artists. But now a building has been completed on the southern half of the western edge of the little-known Victoria Memorial Park, near Bathurst and Front Streets, that finally realizes the possibilities of this area's much-hyped zoning deregulation. At Twenty Niagara, Wallman Clewes Bergman Architects have brilliantly manipulated some common building types into a configuration that is entirely new to Toronto. At six storeys tall—eight if one counts the partly sunken parking garage and the penthouse mezzanine—the building has a distinctly urban scale that could well revolutionize Toronto's planning. It realizes the greater density the city needs without sacrificing the domestic ideals Torontonians hold so dear.

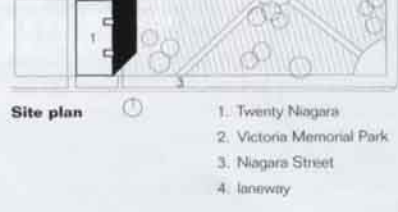
The building's most appealing quality is its transparency, which is due to more than just

the many floor-to-ceiling windows and tempered glass balcony railings. Above all, it results from the absence of the usual internal corridor. Each unit thus has a dual aspect, with a front facing east onto the park and a back facing west. This not only provides through-ventilation and greater light penetration; it also preserves the spatial variety and clarity of orientation that characterizes a townhouse. What results is an appealing, home-like completeness: instead of presenting a single view and orientation, like most double-loaded corridor buildings, every unit here has two faces, each with a distinct character. The building also becomes more equal in its distribution of amenities. While the end and top units do have distinctive features, every dwelling in the building has the same fundamental orientation and shares in the most desirable views and access to light. The individual units offer a high degree of interior customization, but the building's great promise is not in its luxury, elaboration, or details; it is to be found in the organizational changes effected in the organization of the plan and the subordination of life-safety measures to architectural values. There are only four units per floor, but this is the rare

Twenty Niagara Street, Toronto; Wallman Clewes Bergman Architects



Facing page: Twenty Niagara seen from Victoria Memorial Park. Top: an evening view of the west (lane) facade, showing the external corridor/balconies on each floor. Above: a view from Niagara Street, showing the parking access and stairs from the first floor apartment deck. Above right: the tower form at the building's north end.

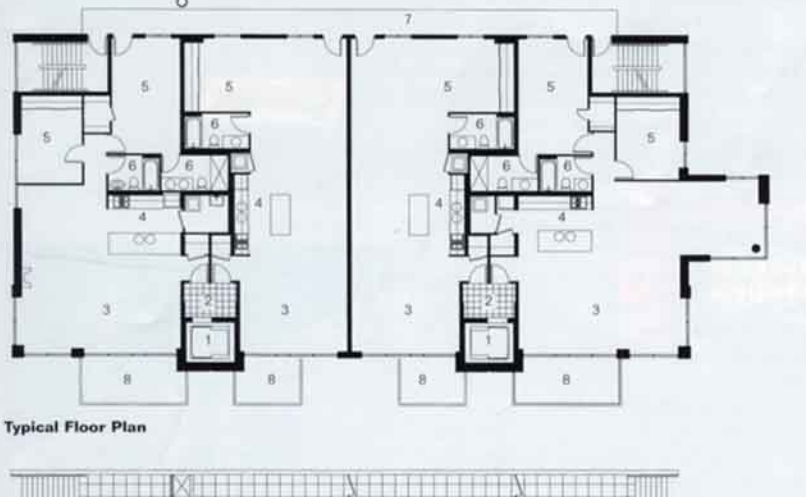


Site plan
1. Twenty Niagara
2. Victoria Memorial Park
3. Niagara Street
4. laneway

contemporary building that could only have been made better by being twice as large, extending across the park's entire width.

Much of this building's innovative character arises from a profound rethinking of circulation and life-safety. The normal daily mode of access is by two elevator towers at the quarter points of the east (park) face. On the ground level, the elevators have lobbies on two sides, providing walk-in and visitor access from the garage. The elevator lobbies above grade are no more than two by three metres and have only two entrance doors. On the west face of the building is an emergency escape in the form of a narrow balcony that connects the two required exit stairs at the north and south corners. Although the stairwells are fully enclosed, they are essentially outdoor spaces and could well be left unheated. In case of emergency, each lobby is provided with an electromagnetic control that permits anyone to automatically unlock the unit doors and escape through the interior to the balcony and stairs at the back. The control is connected to the building-wide fire alarm so it cannot be used without calling attention to the intrusion, thus alleviating concerns about security. In effect, the traditional fire escape has been reinvented to suit current code requirements.

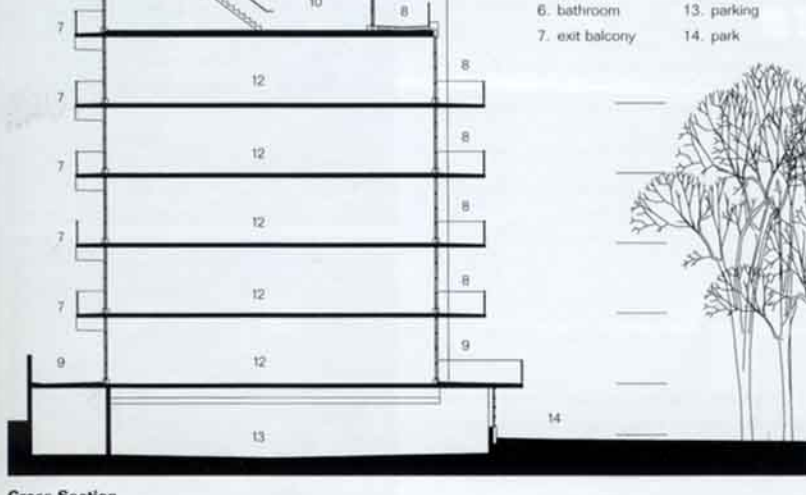
The building combines two of the innovative building forms developed by the modern movement—deck access and double loaded stairwells—in a way that overcomes the faults and limits of each. The building forms of European high modernism have never been directly adaptable to North America because our codes require that buildings with vertically stacked dwellings provide two distinct means of egress from every common space. Unfortunately, this requirement has prohibited more promising types of larger residential buildings and has led to the widespread construction of double-loaded corridor apartment towers and slabs. Ironically, this has reproduced—albeit with improved hygienic means—the type of back-to-back dwellings that housing reformers originally opposed. Skip-stop schemes with corridors on every second floor provide two orientations, but require two-storey apartments with an internal stair. Despite their promise, very few have been built in Canada and they remain something of an architect's fetish. Stacked townhouse schemes are more common, but they are limited to four storeys,



Typical Floor Plan



First Floor Plan



Cross Section

- Legend**
- 1. elevator
 - 2. lobby
 - 3. living/dining
 - 4. kitchen
 - 5. bedroom
 - 6. bathroom
 - 7. exit balcony
 - 8. balcony
 - 9. deck
 - 10. penthouse
 - 11. mezzanine
 - 12. through-units
 - 13. parking
 - 14. park

Twenty Niagara Street, Toronto;
Wallman Clewes Bergman Architects

of which one is usually half-submerged. The single loaded balcony-access building common in the UK has many good qualities, including a dual aspect, but generally fails to provide adequate privacy because people must walk directly in front of another unit to get to their own. The uneasiness of this situation multiplies when vertical circulation is minimized, requiring long balconies that increase the exposure to anonymous, distant neighbours. Open balconies are not suited for access in our climate, but at Twenty Niagara, the balcony only serves as an emergency exit, and will be rarely used otherwise. And, even if this route is taken as an option, one need only pass by one's immediate neighbours to reach the nearest stairs. Given these conditions the balcony takes on a different character entirely, becoming the informal back on which services such as fire hose cabinets, air conditioners, and a very tall service stack are frankly exposed.

In Germany during the nineteen-twenties, the building type with two apartments on each floor sharing a stairwell was called a *zwei-spänner*, and it was often developed to five or six storeys and extended for great lengths simply by adding stair-plus-two-apartment modules. The Canadian equivalent is the walk-up, which tends to be built only to three storeys, except in the denser of urban conditions. The increased density and the reduced internal corridor space compensate for increased cost and the reliance on mechanical means. In fact, the overall efficiency means that carrying costs for common space are considerably reduced. Even the absence of a conventional lobby seems not miserly, but a frank recognition of how superfluous those trite and dreary spaces usually are.

A novel and promising aspect of the building is its proximity to the western edge of Victoria Memorial Park. This park, somewhat smaller than a city block, originated in the mid-

eighteenth century as a military burial ground. It connects via Wellington Street to Clarence Square on Spadina Avenue in one of the few local planning gestures that distinguish themselves from Toronto's homogeneous grid. These spaces have a traditional urban scale and formal order, yet the buildings they need to define them either fail to do so, or have vanished. They might well be more suited to residential than industrial use, and in this case, the zoning changes really represent a return to late nineteenth century intentions. Twenty Niagara is the first new building in this area to powerfully affirm the desirability of such a site. It is regrettable that the developers, Howard Cohen and Lloyd Alter, who had an option on a large site on the park's south side, will not be continuing their work. Drably traditional townhouses will be built there instead, just as they have been throughout the area.

The relationship to the park might not have been quite so successful had it been handled with less skill. The building presents a classic stepped-back profile. The single-storey parking garage occupies almost the whole site area, but it is only half-submerged so that its top surface forms an elevated terrace that mediates between park and building. The garage has extensive obscured glass windows to alleviate the impression of bulk. Instead of assailing the park with a conspicuously applied canopy/entrance feature, the entrances (there are two separate ones) are along a narrow walkway at the park's edge, sheltered by an overhead cantilevered slab that is simply an extension of the first floor terrace. This uniquely compressed and architecturally integrated space makes a park-side entrance without flaunting its presence. The grade separation allows the park and the building to come very close together without impinging on the public. It is to be hoped that the residents will invest the decor of their windows, balconies, and terraces with as much grace, good sense, and discretion as have the architects.

Twenty Niagara offers a simple, direct response to Toronto's need for increased density and alternatives to the suburbs. Dumpsters filled with soil are once again crowding the front yards of downtown dwellers seeking mortgage relief by digging dungeons under their Victorian houses. When this last happened in the late 1980s, Toronto's architects and planners responded, with the Housing on Main Streets competition, a *reductio ad absurdum* of the "vacant lottery" infill strategy from the 1970s. That huge effort did not produce a single significant building. While it might be comforting to blame this failure on the recession and on narrow-minded municipal authorities, what it really showed is that strategies like main streets densification and the back lane houses that so fascinate Toronto architects are merely neo-hippie lifestyle fantasies.

These quaint projects may establish the careers of a few young designer-architects, but they do not address the larger problems of housing, which are only going to become more acute this Fall with the lifting of Ontario's rent controls. Toronto needs systematic, appropriately scaled urban development, not further idiosyncratic, handcrafted, off-the-grid micro-alternatives.

Twenty Niagara is crucial a development in Toronto housing because it is a mass-market driven solution that is fundamentally appropriate to a culture of houses. Condominiums are the logical extension of the tradition of middle-class home ownership in this city and, by virtue of their scale, have the capacity to make significant urban form in a way that houses do not. If Twenty Niagara's customization was reduced and the ceilings made eight feet high instead of ten, it could be substantially more affordable without sacrificing any of its truly valuable qualities. The park setting is certainly part of this building's appeal, but the plan could easily fit onto Toronto's typically long north/south residential blocks, which have the same orientation. The setbacks that with houses make Toronto so diffuse are just about appropriate to this building's new scale and urban quality. Twenty Niagara is not going to alleviate homelessness by some trickle-down magic, but it offers such thoroughly integrated and substantial advantages for inner city residential development that it could well redress Toronto's lack of smaller, urbane apartment buildings. Such a breakthrough does not often occur in architecture and urban planning. It should be widely emulated. ■

Kenneth Hayes teaches architectural history at the University of Toronto Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design.

- Client:** Context Development Inc. (Howard Cohen, Lloyd Alter)
Architect team: Ralph Bergman, Peter Clewes, Blair Robinson, Rudy Wallman
Structural: Yolles Partnership (Robert Holcycyd)
Mechanical/Electrical: M.V. Shore (Rudy Zuege, David Low)
Landscape: James Floyd/Project Works Landscape (Serge Chukasev)
Interiors: Crayon Design (Cheryl Krusmer, Michelle Rouffler)
Construction Management: Intraurban (Tom Schwartz, Ian Kyle, George Gargoura)
Completion: July 1998
Photography: Brian Main

Top right: the frankly exposed services on the west side. Above right: a view of the penthouse, overlooking the park. Above right: balconies flanking an elevator tower on the park side. Right: an evening view from the park.

