



BEN RAHN / DESIGN ARCHITECTURE

Innovative partnership: Context Development's District Lofts, a project designed by Architects Alliance, was a finalist in the 2000 Canadian Architect Award of Excellence.

New modernists

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on Architecture

More than 40 years ago, Toronto architect Peter Dickinson rebuked his colleagues for turning their backs on housing as a field of architectural innovation.

The late Dickinson was highly regarded for bringing the same spirit of experimentation to his residential projects, such as the Benvenuto Apartments on Avenue Road, as he did to his institutional commissions, which include the Hummingbird (formerly O'Keefe) Centre and the Queen Elizabeth pavilion at the Canadian National Exhibition.

Decrying "the very poor standards in residential buildings" in a 1959 article for *Canadian Architect* magazine, he accused architects of abdicating control over the design of housing.

Things have not changed much since then, says Peter Clewes of Architects Alliance. While Toronto has undergone a recent boom in condominium construction, Mr. Clewes says the majority of what is being built does not challenge any basic precepts of housing design — a view difficult to argue with when so much condominium design seems reduced to gimmicky marketing hooks.

In contrast, Architects Alliance and its client, Context Development, are gaining a reputation for innovative housing. (Like Dickinson, the firm does not restrict itself to a single building type. Along with Peter Busby Associates of Vancouver, they designed the recently completed Computer Science Building at Toronto's York University. The building is widely regarded as a groundbreaking work of sustainable design in Canada.) Howard Cohen, president of Context, also has a background in architecture and urban design. An example of their innovation can

be seen in two recent developments by Alliance and Context — District Lofts on Richmond Street just east of Spadina Road and Ideal Condominiums at College and Markham streets. Both respond to their immediate sur-

THEY TAKE THEIR CUES FROM SURROUNDING 19TH-CENTURY WAREHOUSES

roundings while embodying the spirit of innovation that characterized the work of an earlier generation of modern architects.

They take their cues from surrounding 19th-century warehouses, borrowing scale, brick and stone palettes and patterns of fenestration on street-level floors. Retail shops at grade provide services for residents

and encourage pedestrian traffic. On the upper floors, more transparent skins of glass and metal reflect the modernist tradition of maximizing access to light, air and view.

An innovative feature of District Lofts is a narrow profile that allows for a skip-stop elevator system. This means elevators stop on alternate floors, serving two-storey units, one storey of which spans the entire width of the slab, allowing for windows on both sides. The system, pioneered by Swiss architect Le Corbusier in his *Unité d'Habitation* projects in France, also improves a building's efficiency by reducing the amount space required for corridors.

At Ideal Condominiums, the building's depth precludes the use of the skip-stop, through-unit strategy on all but the top floors. Instead, the units are designed to be wide and shallow in order to benefit from plenty of window area, rather than narrow and deep like many condominium units.

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