

INTERVIEW

Always fitting into the picture

Context Developments builds condos that suit their neighbourhoods

BY ALBERT WARSON

Howard Cohen has it made. He develops condominiums that he knows intuitively – apart from the hard-won experience of a 30-year slog in the front lines of the city's development battleground – are timely and right for downtown Toronto's urban revival.

Nothing to prevent other developers from doing that. The main difference is that Cohen doesn't have to forage for financing or fret about lenders, not with an investor in the wings like Gerald Schwartz, whose Onex Corp. almost swallowed Air Canada and the former Canadian Airlines, among other much-publicized financial exploits.

There is no blank cheque. Instead there is Stephen Gross, Cohen's partner in Context Development located on the top floor of a renovated historic building on Yonge Street across from Eaton Centre.

Once they agree on a project, Gross, who presides over Waterloo Capital (also in Context's office), clinches the financing with Schwartz, Waterloo's principal investor. It's like having a really friendly bank down the hall in your office.

Gross, a chartered accountant with an MBA, brings sterling credentials to the financial side of Context – former president and CEO of Canwest Global Communications for 10 years and previously vice president, income property development for Metropolitan Properties. A skilled business asset, but not without a keen appreciation of architecture and a sense of the market.

Cohen, who has business smarts

in his own right, doesn't mince words. "I wouldn't exist without them (Gross and Waterloo Capital).

Waterloo has financed all the Context projects so far – Twenty Niagara Street, Movie House, Wellington Worx, Upper East Side Riverdale (townhouses), Kensington Lofts, Modern Living Zone, more recently Ideal Lofts, District Lofts, and in 2002 Radio City and Home (in High Park) and next year a project on part of historic St. James Cathedral property.

Their completed projects have created nearly 700 condo units worth more than \$100 million.

There is no reason to believe it won't go on like that indefinitely. But as long as Cohen is running the company, it will go on in downtown Toronto, not in the boondocks.

Actually, Cohen would seem out of place anywhere else but in Toronto, the only city in Canada he would live in. And it suits him.

He is a witty, affable, sophisticated architect and planner who first came to public prominence as Toronto's chief planner/neighbourhoods, during David Crombie's reformist mayoralty in the 1970s.

Cohen was responsible for the official plan and bylaws that encouraged housing downtown. His work isn't done.

Chief city planner Paul Bedford, whose policies Cohen admires and identifies with, is still at it, on a larger, more varied scale.

Other pit stops in Cohen's career also shaped his sensitivity to responsible development, as president of Harbourfront Corporation from 1978 to 1987, then the Goldman Group until 1991, when he

became president of the Design Exchange, then Context.

The name of the company, he adds, represents its insistence on doing developments that fit into their neighbourhoods, rather than clash with them.

The Home condo will be a 43-suite, terraced project on a vacant site once occupied by a gasoline station on the brow of a hill overlooking High Park, for example. There won't be any trees bulldozed; the development is in context or in harmony with its immediate setting.

"I've never been involved in projects that didn't represent some kind of better value, or design that makes things better," Cohen replied, when asked if there were common threads woven through his checkered career.

Often mindless, knee-jerk opposition to development, even if it would objectively speaking benefit a neighbourhood is another commonplace development experience.

"The strongest objections at the Ontario Municipal Board over our Home proposal, for example, came from people who live at the bottom of the ravine, not the top near the site. There had been nothing there for 10 years and they wanted to keep it that way. The OMB ruled in our favour, noting that the power of design solved the planning problems," he said.

But then Cohen is accustomed to opposition, no matter how frivolous. "I've always been in a confrontational role. Even in the 1970s I was fighting for things that were very controversial. I was considered to some extent anti-development, but I wasn't really. I was just trying to change the form of development, not development itself.

"The pinnacle was the central area plan, with which I was involved,

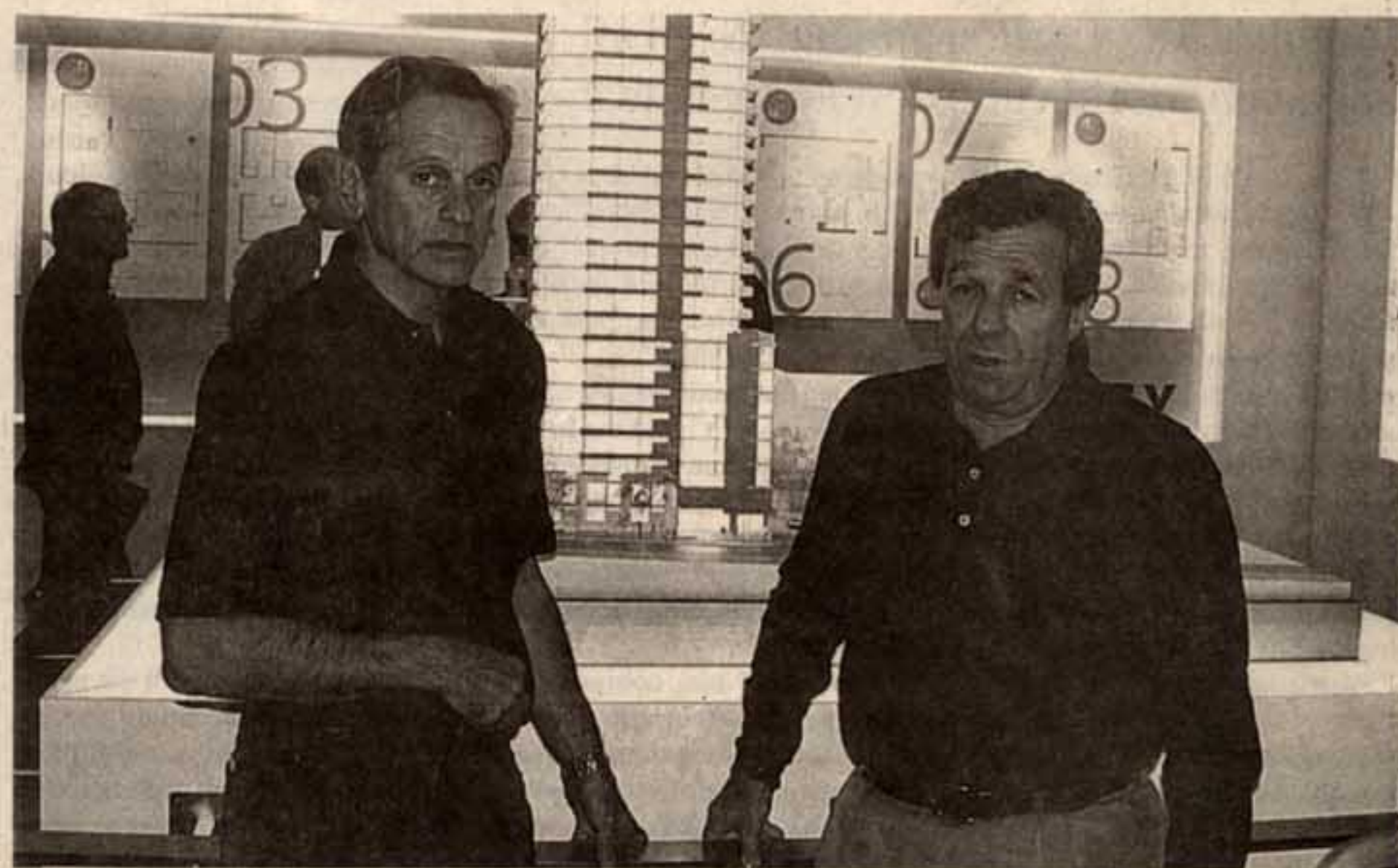


PHOTO: ALBERT WARSON

Howard Cohen, left, and partner Stephen Gross welcome buyers in the Radio City sales centre and model.

partly to stimulate more housing downtown. All the developers were fighting me on that one, both on the right and left," he recalled.

Over the years Cohen couldn't help but notice that "people are against change and it's so easy to be politically expedient (politicians bowing to pressure from constituents).

"Even today people write disparagingly about Harbourfront without understanding what it's all about. I even heard a radio interview in which someone wondered why there aren't any parks at Harbourfront," he continued. Some people even, to this day, think it outrageous for people to live on Toronto's waterfront.

"There is so much [varied] thinking in Toronto, no sense of what a

city is all about or how to build cities. It is unbelievable the number of people I meet who have no sense of what makes Toronto work, or what makes it a wonderful city. Nor do they know how to build on that foundation. They don't understand intensification, the use of public transit, or the importance of downtown housing, and how that creates a feeling of urbanity that we have to aspire to," he added.

It sounds a bit self-serving, considering the nature of his business, when he says disapproval in Toronto of families with children living in high rise apartment buildings is unfair. But come to think of it, some people would say he's right.

Children live with their parents in apartment buildings all over the world. "People in downtown Lon-

don and New York don't have single family homes with driveways," he said.

In more sophisticated cities people don't argue about whether there should be any development, but are more interested in its form. Cohen is encouraged by the change in Toronto's population by people coming from other parts of the world, who want to live downtown, and whose influence on development will continue.

Before the end of the year Cohen and Gross will be moving into one of their newest condominium projects on Richmond Street near Spadina Avenue and the art gallery, funky Queen Street West neighbourhoods. Cohen has the penthouse on the 14th floor. Gross won't be far away, on the floor below.