

THE DEVELOPERS: CONTEXT

'Respect for the city's fabric'

BY TERRENCE BELFORD

The moment you step through the door, you know Context Development Inc. is a different kind of condominium builder. The difference starts with the company's offices. Where other developers situate themselves in bright, new suburban buildings, Context is smack in the heart of downtown, across from the Yonge Street entrance to the Eaton Centre, in a turn-of-the-century office building still in the stages of renovation.

The office space of other developers could be anywhere in North America — they have that sameness to them — but Context's quarters are a perfect fit in downtown Toronto.

While the towers going up along Yonge Street and the waterfront could just as easily be built in Calgary or Vancouver, Context's projects are not transplantable. They all have a distinct Toronto feel.

"We choose locations that have a strong local identity and character," says Howard Cohen, president of Context. "These are all essentially Toronto projects. You could not build them anywhere else. That is part of the charm of this city. Toronto is built on very strong and identifiable local neighbourhoods."

Mr. Cohen understands neighbourhoods. After all, the reason he came to Toronto was to find ways to bring people downtown to live. As a city planner, his first job was to sort out the controversy over Trefann Court in the 1970s. Official policy at the time spoke for extending Regent Park south to Queen

Street, and local residents wanted none of it. They had John Sewell, who would eventually become mayor, on their side. Opposite, championing the city's cause was June Rowlands, another mayor-to-be. And the councillor chosen to chair the working group was David Crombie, a third future mayor.

Mr. Cohen had the tedious task of devising a plan all three could support. He did, introducing scattered pockets of subsidized housing through the small community. Housing that fit with the neighbourhood, in context.

"The name says it all," Mr. Cohen says of the company. "All of our projects take into account the surroundings, the neighbourhood and the daily lives of the men and women who will eventually make them their homes. They all are in context."

It starts with the physical look and design of the buildings. "We are doing buildings within an urban fabric and, as such, we have

respect for that fabric," he says.

"District Lofts, for example, is in the middle of what used to be a downtown light-industrial area. The bottom floors, the ones pedestrians see, have to fit in with their once-industrial neighbours. Upper floors we can be more adventurous with."

The suites must be designed in context, too. "The interiors are designed to give them maximum value. These aren't single-family homes," he says. "Living in a downtown condo is a different lifestyle entirely. They have to have lots of light and air — windows on at least two sides wherever possible. The units also have to have character. That means high ceilings, open spaces and, often, two-level units.

Of course, it makes a difference when the developers live in one of their own buildings. Context partners, Mr. Cohen and Stephen Gross, have each bought a two-bedroom unit in District Lofts.

The partners came together af-

ter following very different career paths. Mr. Cohen went from city planner to president of Harbourfront. His biggest achievement there was the light rail transit system that makes access to the waterfront a snap by TTC. Then he became president of The Goldman Group, a long-established Toronto development company founded by Murray Goldman. The Castle Hill townhouses at the foot of Casa Loma were his major accomplishment during those years. After that, Mr. Cohen was president of the Design Exchange. He helped take the site of the former Toronto Stock Exchange from the drawing boards to a focal point for the city's leading designers.

He first ran into Mr. Gross when he was raising financing for 20 Niagara Street, a 22-unit condo building. Both Mr. Cohen and his partner, Lloyd Alter, had interest in the project.

Mr. Gross was president of Waterloo Capital Corporation, after leaving his post as president of Canwest Global Communications.

"Waterloo Capital invested in 20 Niagara and then in a couple more projects like Upper East Side Riverdale and Kensington Market Lofts," he says. "We seemed to click as a team, so we started Context together back in 1997-98."

And the business continues to grow. Next on the agenda is a project on the grounds of historic St. James Cathedral on King Street West. "It reflects the sort of philosophy we live by," he says. "We do projects we like and which fit our criteria."

Projects that have a downtown neighbourhood context.

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CONTEXT SITES

Home — on High Park

One-bedroom plus den and penthouses, priced from high \$200,000 range. Sales centre at 2142 Bloor West. (416) 767-5656.

Radio City — Twin Towers

Site of the former CBC headquarters. Priced from \$160,000. Sales centre at 380 Jarvis. (416) 963-0220.

MOZO

160 suites, priced from \$159,900.

Sales centre at 204 King Street East. (416) 598-3838.

District Lofts

Richmond West and Spadina. Two-bedroom and penthouse suites remain, priced from \$277,900. Sales at Radio City presentation centre.

Ideal

College at Markham Ave. Two-bedroom and penthouse units, priced from \$167,900. Sales at Radio City presentation centre.



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Stephen Gross and Howard Cohen focus on projects with a local identity.