

CONDO LIVING

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CITY PERSPECTIVE: Developer Howard Cohen, right, and business partner Stephen Gross get a good view from the top of District Lofts. Gross and Onex Corp. chairman Gerald Schwartz control Waterloo Capital Corp., which has invested in Cohen's downtown condo projects.

Where Context counts

Developer Howard Cohen has some complex and controversial projects in the works — from the old CBC building site to a High Park embankment

By JUDY STEED
STAFF REPORTER

Howard Cohen is known for winning awards and causing controversy.

As usual, the architect and former city planner is up to his eyeballs in a variety of complex condo projects.

He's also got some potential neighbours — in the communities of High Park and St. James Cathedral — who don't want his buildings in their backyards.

But he says he's so busy he doesn't have time to worry.

Last month, workers topped off the roof on District Lofts, Context Development Inc.'s 14-storey, 148-unit, Peter Clewes-designed condo on Richmond St. W., just east of Spadina. (It started selling at \$180 a square foot and is now going for \$260 a square foot and is nearly sold out. Two of its residents, one floor apart, will be Cohen and his business partner, Stephen Gross, past president of Canwest Global Communications.)

Across town, at MoZo, short for Modern Living Zone, another Clewes' gem — a 15-storey, 150-unit building slated for the corner of King St. E. and Sherbourne, in the design district — is half sold.

What's up next for the developer of 20 Niagara (his first and most elegant; he made no money on it, but the buyers did) and of Kensington Market lofts, a 145-unit conversion of former George Brown College buildings?

Radio City, Cohen calls it, and it's the perfect moniker for the abandoned CBC site on Jarvis St. just north of Carlton St. Context is working with the National Ballet School, which will occupy the old brick radio building where Peter Gzowski was king of CBC Radio's morning show for many years.



20 NIAGARA



IDEAL LOFTS

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Tune in condo lovers, Radio City is coming

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In a previous life, the building was the original home of Havergal College, the private girls' school.

For the rest of the CBC complex, the broadcast tower will be torn down and the TV building where Barbara Frum held sway will fall to the wreckers' ball, replaced by two Context condo towers mid-lot, with townhouses along Mutual St., the eastern edge of the site.

Radio City exemplifies Cohen's strengths, and past experience as city planner and president of Harbourfront Corp., where he learned to negotiate complex agreements among stakeholders ranging from cultural groups to city politicians and private developers.

The tour begins at MoZo, on King St. E., where construction is slated to begin in the spring, with occupancy for the fall of 2002.

Cohen, a cool character dressed in black, explains that the block between King St. and Adelaide St., bounded on the east and west by Sherbourne St. and Frederick, is owned by Jack Pong of Capital Ventures Inc.

"We're in partnership with Capital Ventures," Cohen says — which means that Context didn't have to pay for the land for MoZo up front, but will eventually have to.

Clewes has designed the building to fit in with the restored industrial structures along King St. E. that house high-tech and design companies. "MoZo celebrates modernism," Cohen says, "as it graduates from a brick façade on the lower floors to glass and contemporary pre-cast concrete above."

Its western view will take in a (new) small park behind the building, and, eventually, a second phase that, if demand warrants, will include a 25- to 30-storey condo tower.

From MoZo, Cohen cruises to St. James Cathedral, where a brouhaha is bubbling over the Anglican Church's desire to make money from its property — while facing bankruptcy in various jurisdictions for its role in the abuse of native children.

The cathedral's trustees issued a proposal call earlier this year for the southeast corner of Adelaide and Church. Context's winning bid — to be designed by Clewes and George Baird, who teaches architecture at Harvard University — will replace the crumbling parish hall, while maintaining the neo-Gothic yellow brick exterior walls.

The condo tower will be 20-plus floors — "we're negotiating with the city on height" — positioned (on what is now a parking lot) so as not to obstruct views of the cathedral and its spire.

Critics say that's not possible and argue that the condo tower will demean, if not damage, the historic site.

Cohen, accustomed to tough development battles from both sides of the equation, isn't going to let the fight stop him. He drives north up Jarvis and

parks by the chained gates of the derelict CBC property. The land is overgrown with weeds; guard dogs prowl the perimeter. Yet the potential is obvious.

"I like things that have character and personality," says Cohen. "That's why I like the CBC site. It's got history."

No one knew what to do with it for a long time. The National Ballet School was interested, but didn't have any money. "The city said to us: You can maintain your density if you work with the ballet school." The latter gets its space for free.

Radio City, with two towers, 25 and 30 storeys high, will be Context's next project on the market, by the spring of 2001.

Cohen drives around the block and down Mutual St., to show how Context's townhouses will retain the residential streetscape, and then he's off to Kensington Market, to look at his lofts, passing the Context condo called Ideal, which is under construction at the entrance to Little Italy on College St., just west of Bathurst. (It is sold out.)

"Every neighborhood has a real distinction," Cohen says, reverting to city planner mode, waxing eloquent about the surge of people into the city core. "People want to be downtown because it's busy and active. Families are realizing they can bring up kids in condos."

What Cohen's buildings don't do is add to the diminishing stock of affordable housing. Which displeases Brendan Caron, a neighbour of Context's Kensington lofts, who argues that, while Cohen appreciates the character of neighbourhoods, like most developers he doesn't produce buildings that locals can afford

to live in.

Cohen had a different sort of problem with money. Until he teamed up with Stephen Gross four years ago, financing projects was a tough slog.

They met when Cohen was working on 20 Niagara, and Waterloo Capital Corp., controlled by Gross and Onex Corp. chair Gerald Schwartz, invested in the project. Waterloo finances developments both suburban and urban, and Gross became enamoured of Cohen's sleek downtown style.

"Stephen brings deep business experience and financial strength to the table. You can't do these projects without it," Cohen says. "And he really likes good architecture."

Together, Gross and Cohen step into a cage elevator that rattles up the construction site that is District Lofts. They admire the views from the raw concrete floors of their own condos-to-be. Gross purchased three units and had walls torn down, enabling him to reconfigure his personal living quarters to include 20-foot high ceilings. He can't wait to move in, and raves about the joys of downtown living and the rush of condo buyers, ranging from empty nesters to first-time home owners and families fleeing the 'burbs, who are Context's customers.

"Toronto is a downtown city," Gross says, "and this condo thing is just beginning. There's a huge move into the core, in the long run. Look at this neighbourhood." His hand sweeps along Queen St. W., due north of District Lofts. "It's Greenwich Village, Soho, right at our doorstep."

He acknowledges that the "boom and bust" cycle hit con-

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Developers take controversy in stride

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do buyers hard in the late '80s, but doesn't anticipate a slowdown in the near term.

Nor does Cohen worry about the battle looming on Context's western flank, where some High Park residents are fighting his proposal for a six-storey terraced condo building on Bloor St. W. beside the park, on an old gas station lot.

"They're taking us to the Ontario Municipal Board for a hearing on Dec. 11," he says with a shrug. "They want to keep the property as a vacant lot."

For Cohen, the art of development is like conducting a symphony, bringing all the disparate parts together into a

harmonious whole. He seems somewhat surprised, given the logistical difficulties, that so much has happened since 20 Niagara was built in the mid '90s.

He has gained recognition for his work: the Kensington project earned a City of Toronto award, while 20 Niagara has won several architectural prizes, including one from the Ontario Association of Architects.

And Cohen still falls in love, he says, "with every building, every buyer."

However, Gross admits that "this is a business with a lot of frustrations." How does he cope?

"Sometimes you just want to bang your head against the wall."

WHERE CONTEXT COUNTS



MOZO: Context is marketing a 15-storey 150-unit condo at King and Sherbourne Sts. Prices, which average about \$250 a square foot, start at \$144,900 for a 630-square-foot one-bed-room unit and range to \$750,000 for a 2,340-square-foot unit.