

CITYSPACE

Condos get some class



Among Toronto's schlocky high-rise homes lurk some architectural gems.

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discovers their developers are doing it simply for the love of good building

In Renaissance Florence, buildings were designed as billboards of hierarchy, to be read even by the illiterate. Take the nobility's palace. Everybody understood that the ground floor next to the disordered street belonged to the servants. The *piano nobile* with its larger windows and more ornate columns was zoned for the rich. The spiritual quarters of the palace were located on the third floor, apart from the messiness of urbanity.

The homes of the hyper-elite in Canada can be easily read too. Not so much as dignified expressions of beauty but as bloated shelters, like those of Vancouver's British Properties, which buckle under the weight of their garish accoutrements. In Toronto, the luxury condominium is more often than not designed as a mud slide of architecture, bits and pieces robbed from the Château de Fontainebleau and 18th-century Bath with a *je ne sais quoi* from yer basic German schloss.

Details of harmony and proportion matter not at all when you're building a condominium like Toronto's One Post Road out of pre-cast concrete and sprayed-on stucco parading as stone. But don't look too closely — those are green shingles on the French mansard roof parading as copper. And, "Honey! Call the building manager. Tell him to bring his glue gun. The seams of the entrance columns are coming apart."

"It's an extraordinarily conservative market," says Peter Clewes,



'Home,' an award-winning condominium going up at the edge of Toronto's High Park: 'We feel we have a market of people who do care about design,' says the developer.

principal of Architects Alliance. "Developers are followers."

That explains why versions of One Post Road or Cheddington Place, a condominium overlooking the Rosedale ravine with suites selling for \$1-million plus, are churned out with mind-numbing regularity. The price tag suits the rich as does the illusion of grandeur. On the other hand, these people can afford to travel the world. They've seen Versailles with their own eyes. Could it be that the fakery of the architecture is an insult to their intelligence?

Thankfully, not all developers are cut from the same cloth. Howard Cohen and Gary Switzer are prominent developers in Toronto who are also architects. They were trained in the language of sections and elevations, how a building might set itself down gently on a

sloped site or how the skin of a building, wrapped in copper and limestone, might contribute something back to the city.

Because of a hunch about the sophistication of Toronto's elite, both Cohen and Switzer are separately backing high-end condominiums that are contemporary, urban and real. Forget the châteaux of the Loire valley. Ever tried living in one? They're cold and dingy.

There's an alternative to playing make-believe. It has to do with architecture of integrity that can enhance the main street. This, in sharp contrast to the kind of condominium that invests heavily in the finishes of the powder room while presenting a blank, stucco face to the street. That's when condominiums "turn their ass on the city," one architect says.

Cohen's development company, Context, is currently constructing "Home" at the northwest edge of High Park. Designed by Architects Alliance (with Clewes as partner-in-charge), the condominium is a spare, light-filled building constructed with horizontal and vertical bands of brick to relate to the urbanity of Bloor Street West. The condominium steps down the 50-per-cent park slope from north, effectively working 10 storeys discreetly into the southeast edge of the site. The construction budget is \$12-million. The building, which won an Award of Excellence from Canadian Architect magazine, is scheduled to open in June, 2004.

Gary Switzer is the executive vice-president of Great Gulf Homes. He's the company's front-line man for the downtown. He roams Toronto, playing out his passion for the city and admits to knowing very little about the sprawling suburban communities that Great Gulf is building across North America. Now the company has engaged Hariri Pontarini Architects to design Toronto's most

exclusive modernist condominium at the corner of Russell Hill Road and St. Clair Avenue West. Switzer and Great Gulf founders, Elly and Norman Reisman, visited McKinsey headquarters on Charles Street West, designed by Hariri at a European standard of elegance. Wanting to open a new territory of design, the company engaged the architect shortly afterward.

The Russell Hill condominiums are intended as a gateway to Forest Hill. The flat roofed building with an emphasis on horizontal stone bands evokes the prairie-style houses of the American great Frank Lloyd Wright. But the aesthetic also belongs to a brand of architecture specific to Canada and the making of meaningful shelters for this northern country.

The courses will be constructed of rubble limestone, possibly quarried in Owen Sound, Ont., with thick-gauge bands of copper. Limestone piers and tall French doors in oak will allow residents to open an entire wall to continuous balconies. All units feature a custom-designed stone fireplace and

radiant floor heating. Units start at \$1.2-million with the 5,700-square-foot top floor unit priced at \$6-million. Interior designer Brian Gluckstein will collaborate with Siamak Hariri to do the interiors. "It's like an Armani," Switzer says. "It's so understated in its elegance and cut."

Canada's developers come from a mix of backgrounds — some work their way up through the construction industry, others are fresh out of business school. Without a vision of architecture, they'll rely on formulas of neo-Victorian housing rather than daring to break from the pack.

"Howard is a modernist," says Clewes, whose firm has designed almost all of the award-winning condominiums for Context Development Inc. since being founded in 1997 by Howard Cohen and Stephen Gross. Switzer grew up in Toronto — he remembers playing in the construction site of the new City Hall. As a student, he photographed the demolition of the grand mansions on Jarvis Street. He graduated from the University of Toronto in 1978 and today is comfortable talking about the remarkable innovations of modern architecture: the chrome-plated columns at the Tugendhat house, for instance, by the great Mies van der Rohe.

"We feel we have a market of people who do care about design. It's still not the majority of the market," says Cohen, whose firm is also building the 40-storey Spire, a taut, glassy tower reminiscent of the iconic Lever House in New York. Cohen's first condominium was located at 20 Niagara — a 20-unit glass pavilion overlooking a park. Six years ago, when 20 Niagara first went on the market, 1,500-square-foot units sold for about \$300,000. Now they're estimated at nearly twice that amount. "Good quality housing is well-designed," says Cohen. "You can't have one without the other."

Like Cohen, Switzer is playing to many markets in the downtown. At 18 Yorkville Ave., the Great Gulf condominium is offering units as small as 400 square feet in an effort to appeal to first-time buyers. The Morgan on Spadina was designed by Sheldon Levitt of Quadrangle Architects for Great Gulf. "For the Morgan, we probably added about \$1-million on the facade. Did they get it back? Probably not."

The city never rewards those developers who are fighting hard for a higher level of architecture. They're expected to go through the same process as the average promoter of schlock. There is, of course, financial gain. But the best pay back appears to come from the love of it. Switzer calls Siamak Hariri his couturier. Hariri, in turn, talks about the pleasure of working for an educated client. "They're letting us explore something that is extremely refined in terms of detailing, quality and materiality. I think it's a first. And the city councillor was amazed: 'You mean this has no stucco in it?'"

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