

New condos embrace modernism

Liveability evident in design elements

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The Toronto region's condominium boom is driving a demand for high design not seen for two generations.

In Mississauga, builders Fernbrook Homes and Cityzen Developments insist the ultimate winner of the Absolute condominium design competition must be an international icon. The six semifinalists selected last week suggest they will get their wish.

Good design is, however, more than stylishly iconic buildings. To be successful in the long term, quality buildings — especially residences — have to be as functional as they are beautiful.

Toronto's modernist epoch of the '50s and '60s gave the city many of its most ambitious, stylish and successful buildings.

The best architecture of this era incorporates rich materials, complex spatial forms and a deep concern for the way occupants live — all hallmarks of modernity. Those lucky enough to inhabit these buildings appreciate amenities not found in architecture that is more prosaic and less considered. In many ways, the design of these buildings represents a heroic belief that good architecture is an essential part of living well.

Older, modernist-inspired apartments and condominiums dot Toronto's landscape. Peter Dickinson's One Benvenuto Place, for example, accents the crest of Avenue Road. Built in 1955, it is ageing well. In fact, design elements used here are finding new life in the latest generation of the city's modernism-influenced condominiums.

Toronto's current condo boom is turning out to be a modernist renaissance, especially in the city's urban core. Today's style-conscious condominium buyers have rediscovered that the architecture they inhabit can either enhance or diminish the quality of their lives.

A small, local company is adding well-considered, innovative projects to Toronto's growing pool of modernist-inspired buildings. Founded in 1998 by Howard Cohen and Stephen Gross, Context

Development's mission to offer the condominium market well-designed, modern architecture has proven to be a timely strategy. The company's portfolio of successful condominiums includes 20 Niagara, Ideal Lofts, District Lofts, Tip Top Lofts and Radio City.

Context's first project was a modest six-storey building at 20 Niagara Street just off Bathurst Street near Front. Designed by Wallman, Clewes, Bergman (now Architects Alliance), this condominium project captured the design community's attention when finished in 1998. Defining the edge of a small downtown park, the building's formal elements and unit arrangement reflect its modernist heritage.

For example, the architect's use of east-west through units allows for energy-saving cross-ventilation. Large, east-facing windows and smaller windows on the west wall bring light deep into the building. Both these architectural devices are integral to the modern movement's concern

GOOD ARCHITECTURE IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF LIVING WELL

for the quality of life of its occupants. Each unit allows for interior customization, something that most of its design savvy occupants preferred. Other amenities include views toward the downtown core that are among the best in the city.

What makes this building truly exceptional is that it takes a typical Toronto form and deftly re-imagines it for the site's context and required density. As a result, this building is one of the city's architectural gems.

If 20 Niagara represents how a small, intimate building enriches a larger metropolis, Context's District Lofts illustrate how a gritty urban site can benefit from a strong, modernist-inspired intervention.

Located near the northwest corner of Spadina and Richmond, in a district best known for its nightlife, the District Lofts quickly became a new Toronto landmark. Also designed by Architects Alliance, this building adopts the form of two parallel east-west slabs rising out of a



BEN RAHN AND BRENDA LIU



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The condominiums at 20 Niagara, top, and the District Lofts at Spadina and Richmond, right, were clearly influenced by modernist trends. One of the finalists for a landmark development in Mississauga, left, suggests the tower will be an international icon.

well-concealed parking plinth. At the east end of the building is a glass framed elevator core serving both sides of the building.

With typical unit sizes of 730 to 950 square feet, the 14-storey building uses modernist-inspired stacked two-storey dwellings. This space-saving technique means access corridors are only required on alternating floors. The design also allows for flow-through air circulation and natural light from both sides of the building.

According to design architect Peter Clewes, the building is about ideas rather than image. With a difficult site in the warehouse district, Clewes managed to create a building that fits the neighbourhood while offering thoughtful amenities to buyers with a passion for living well. Like 20 Niagara, this building celebrates the modernist idea that good design enhances the quality of life of its inhabitants as well as that of its neighbours.

The Mississauga competition's jurors have an opportunity to bring the city more than just a stylistic reference. They, like the people behind the best of the recent development in Toronto, can select a project that will also enhance the way we live.

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