

## LOFTS FOR THE INFORMATIONAL PROLETARIAT

## A building about ideas, not image

## The Perfect House

JOHN BENTLEY  
MAYS

With hip-hop speed, the warehouse district south of Queen Street and east of Spadina has turned from desolate urban armpit into Toronto's hottest work site and playground for our informational proletarians. They put in long hours in the city's architectural, design, advertising, software and communications industries, eat and drink on Queen, and play hard by night in the clubs on Richmond Street.

They have lifestyles instead of families, favourite brands instead of ideologies. They are the vanguard of capitalism's unfinished revolution.

But even revolutionaries need places to relax between party time and punch-in time — places close to the hot zone, of course, but furnished with hard-to-get downtown amenities such as space, light and solitude.

Here come the real-estate guys. While new residential high-rises are sprouting too fast to keep track of, it would probably be hard to find a downtown project that more eloquently or intelligently answers the needs of young, wired city workers than Context Developments' District Lofts on Richmond Street West.

Comfy, cozy and swank are strictly absent from its facades and sharply canted roofline, its two-level units (which range in size from 730 to 950 square feet) and long, spare glassed-in corridors. A fussy French Provincial armoire would probably have a nervous breakdown if left overnight in one of the glass-walled, high-ceilinged, assertively modern suites.

The twin-slab building's brick and concrete base hits the sidewalk hard, in keeping with the edgy streetscape of warehouses on all sides.

Above this six-storey platform, glass walls framed in steel carry up to the sky the structure's ground-level attitude of no-bull urbanity.

District Lofts also looks good, in the same way a good toaster or floor lamp looks good: because it works good. But for award-winning Toronto architect Peter Clewes, who designed the building for Context, appearance was not a top priority.

"The building is about ideas rather than image, especially ideas about how to live in the city," Mr. Clewes said during an interview in a light-drenched penthouse atop District Lofts. "It's a manifestation of its immediate context — the toughness of Richmond Street, which I kind of like. Richmond is not a civilized street, and it's as close as polite, safe Toronto gets to zany. People who live in houses are more interested in comfort and security. You're here, in this fairly hulking building, because you like the location,



Interior views of the District Lofts on Richmond Street, downtown. Old-fashioned modern design that's no longer trying to save the world.

and the energy of the city, where it's far busier in the evening than during the day."

Mr. Clewes's neo-modernism — which is really just old-fashioned modern design that's no longer trying to save the world — is finding expression in his other prominent downtown Context projects, including The Spire (near St. James' Cathedral), Mozo (King Street West at Sherbourne), Tip Top Lofts (in the old Tip Top Tailors building near the lakefront) and Radio City (on the site of the

old CBC building on Jarvis Street).

"There is the emphasis on idea, and an inclination toward stylelessness," the architect says of his process, "a start with functionalism not encumbered by style."

Standing by such convictions is not easy in Toronto, he finds, due to the city's "extraordinary architectural backwardness" and the absence of a strongly innovative design culture to keep architects on their toes.

If Toronto is really as reactionary as all that, you couldn't tell it

from District Lofts.

The two-level units I visited, all occupied, are remarkable for their welcome to air and light. Tall glass walls on both floors bring in the muscular bump and tumble of the nearby cityscape and great expanses of our glorious Toronto sky.

Another window installation, at the rear of each suite's slab-spanning upper level, opens toward the canyon between the building's twin towers, allowing in even more light and providing an

opportunity for natural cross-ventilation. And the front door of each unit is no more than a few seconds' walk and elevator ride from the tough sidewalk urbanism Mr. Clewes admires.

But if the outside world is kept very close at hand by plain, sensitive visual flow between inside and outside, the sense of privacy and quiet inside the suites is very strong.

One feels little crowding and no vulnerability to the hectic street scene. The units are surely out-

posts on the frontier of city living, but they are also civilized refuges from the clamour of high consumerism.

It's a balance that cannot have been easy to strike, especially in view of all the planning and financial restraints that lie heavily on commercial residential developments. But it's a balance Peter Clewes has maintained with integrity and skill in this smart project.

[jmays@globeandmail.ca](mailto:jmays@globeandmail.ca)