

Developers plan to turn the hulk of Loretto Abbey into pricey new homes, blending old and new

# Dear Abbey: an upscale reno

BY ALBERT WARSON

It takes some imagination to envision upscale condominiums — some of them selling for as high as \$1-million — in the sadly dilapidated hulk of the former Loretto Abbey Day School in the Annex.

But given Context Development Inc.'s success in other urban Toronto neighbourhoods, its plan to transform this genteel institutional building into a stylish condo should work.

The spirit of The Loretto, as the project is called, becomes more discernible as architect Alex Spiegel, Context's director of development, describes the structural blessings of the sturdy building constructed in 1914.

**'It was never a tour de force in architectural terms.'**

It will be converted into 47 condo suites, with private terraces and optional roof decks facing an internal, landscaped courtyard (where a parking lot and large patch of grass exist today). Thirteen townhouses will be built across the back of the property.

The condominiums will cost between \$350,000 and \$1-million; the townhouses will be priced in the mid-\$700,000s.

There is some minor heritage value in the large bay windows and front façade of the venerable L-shaped building, one wing of which has four storeys and other five. But there is little that is redeemable in its architecture, except for the im-

posing, vaguely beaux arts-style front entrance. This was a temple of learning, presided over by the Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, not a cathedral.

Edwin Rowse, a partner in Toronto-based ERA Architects Inc., which specializes in the restoration and renovation of historic buildings and is a consultant on this project, describes Loretto Abbey as "a well-built, very good building of its time, with handsome proportions. It is significant because of its association with the old school and its landmark status in the neighbourhood. But it was never a tour de force in architectural terms."

The Loretto Sisters paid \$46,750 for the land on Brunswick Avenue north of Bloor Street and about \$110,000 for the construction of the all-girl school, which later incorporated the Loretto Abbey College School. They would be shocked to learn that Context is investing more than \$20-million in the enterprise. They would be even more shocked to learn that the spaces where girls in black tunics and surprisingly short skirts used to recite catechisms will sell for about \$400 a square foot.

What will that buy? Units featuring new, wider windows with lower sills, as well as balconies, roof decks, new mechanical systems and interiors stripped to the bare brick walls. Buyers will be able to customize and combine suites.

The exterior will be renewed, and the fire escapes that are bolted to the exterior walls will be removed. Mr. Spiegel says the old solid wood and glass-panned classroom and dormitory doors can be used by residents to separate spaces.

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A handrail polished over the decades by students' hands.



Classroom doors will be saved.



PHOTOS BY FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The former Loretto Abbey Day School in the Annex will shortly be redeveloped into upscale condos.



The graduating class of 1932, Loretto Abbey College School.



Builders take a break, 1914. Centre, the school circa 1920.

## 'We won't try to imitate old architecture'

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The suites will have two to four bedrooms.

"The floor structure, nine- to 12-foot ceilings and columns will remain," he adds. The developer also will maintain the building's "flat arches" — terracotta blocks topped with concrete that support the weight of the floors. It was a technique commonly used in Europe but not much in Canada.

A floor of suites will be added to the top of the four-storey section to make the entire building five storeys. Craig Taylor, Context's director of marketing, says the addition will be consistent with the company's glassy, transparent development style. "Classic modern" he calls it, acknowledging the oxymoron.

"The new has to look new, although sympathetic to the neighbourhood," he says. Mr. Spiegel adds: "We won't try to imitate old architecture."

Less unusual will be a small, one-storey amenities building at the back, with exercise and multipurpose rooms. It also will feature the glassy style of a Context building.

Otherwise, the entire project will be approached as "a blank palate," Mr. Spiegel says. Blank, yet within the context of the company's trademark practice of fitting into the neighbourhood, in a specific, rather than formulaic way, he says.

Technically, Context had the right to demolish Loretto Abbey and, under the current zoning laws, could have replaced it with 100,000-square-foot of mid-rise condo, Mr. Spiegel says. Instead, the company chose to rebuild the 60,000-square-foot former school building and add 30,000 square feet of townhouses. A laundry building and boiler room with chimney will be demolished to allow access and turning room for fire engines.

Mr. Spiegel says neighbours are pleased the building will be renewed rather than replaced, and are satisfied with the concessions made by the builder, including preserving a very old black walnut tree. They won't be bothered by parked cars either; an underground garage will house the vehicles of all the condo and townhouse owners.

The neighbourhood is an eclectic mix of solid, large old homes with spacious verandahs that generally sell for \$750,000 to \$1-million, nondescript houses that wouldn't be missed if they were torn down, and apartment buildings that have seen



Sunshine streams in from one of the large bay windows on the building's front façade.

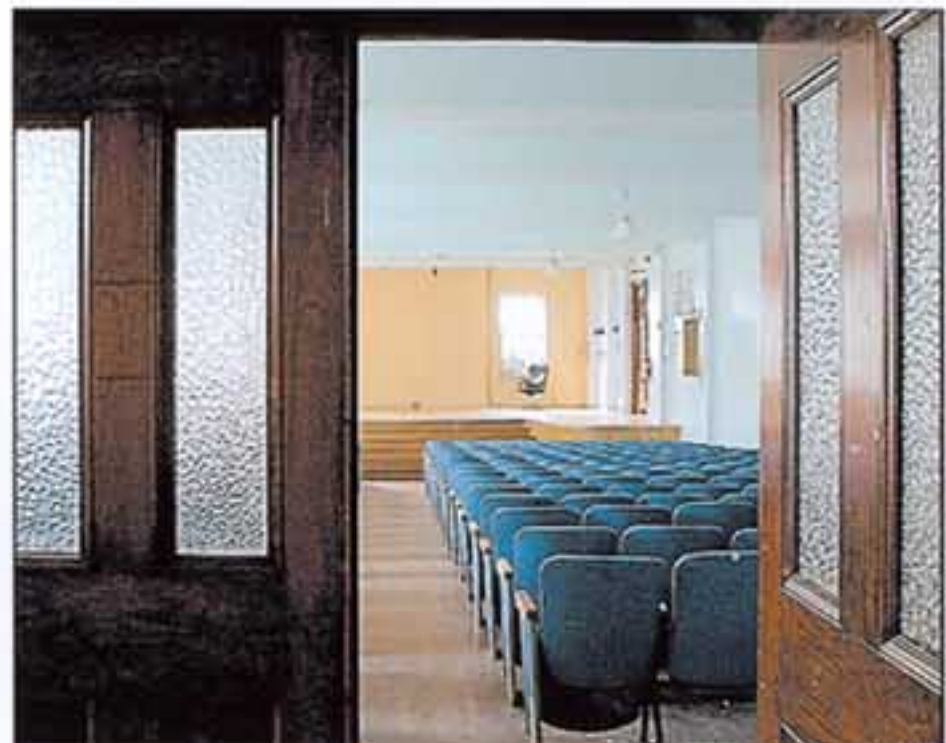
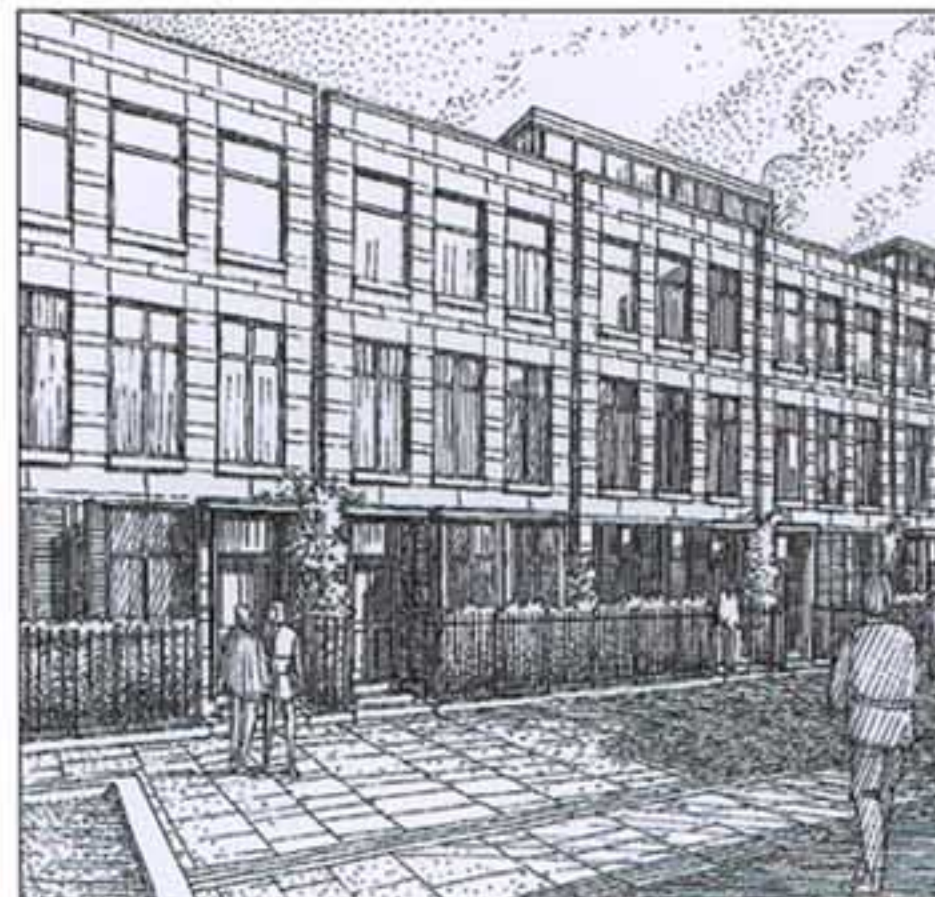
**Early interest from potential buyers suggests a fall start for construction.**

much better days.

Looking down from the abbey's rooftop, the immediate neighbourhood, as Mr. Spiegel says, resembles an old British town, with the steeples of two neighbourhood churches plainly visible through the still bare trees, along with some of the period housing types and new Georgian-style townhouses.

Mr. Taylor says early interest from potential buyers — a lot of it from Annex residents who tend to prefer understatement to ostentation — suggests a fall start with construction finishing in 12 to 18 months. A sales centre is being set up on the site and is scheduled to open in late April.

Special to The Globe and Mail



An artist's rendering shows the townhouses planned for the back of the property. The Loretto Sisters would be shocked to learn that Context is investing more than \$20-million in the enterprise. Above, the auditorium.