

School's out as condos move in

Former Catholic girls' school in Annex to be converted to upscale units 'One-of-a-kind building' also poses engineering challenge, by W. D. Lighthall

Graduates of Loretto Abbey College School in the Annex will have to find another place to hold their reunions.

Context Development Inc. plans to convert the former Catholic girls' school, built in 1914, into an upscale condominium project called The Loretto.

Context recently opened a sales office inside the old school, located on Brunswick Ave. north of Bloor St. W. The area has long been regarded as one of Toronto's more desirable downtown neighbourhoods, with its tree-lined streets and Victorian-era homes.

"We have got this wonderful building in the Annex. Loretto Abbey is a one-of-a-kind building," says Craig Taylor, director of marketing for Context. "After the first weekend on the market, we were 70 per cent sold. We're thrilled."

(Condo buyers have a 10-day grace period to rescind their purchase agreements; so theoretically, some of those sold units could come back on the market.)

Only three units remain unsold in the former school building, but 12 of the 13 townhouses Context plans to build at the eastern edge of the site are still available.

"We'll excavate behind the school building, put in the parking garage, then build the townhouses, an amenities pavilion and a central landscaped courtyard on top of the parking garage," says Taylor. "So there won't be any vehicular traffic in the courtyard or in front of the townhouses. It will all be underground."

The original five-storey, red-brick school was built by the Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a combined convent and school.

Loretto Abbey, as the school was always known, was later operated by the Toronto separate school board. The board closed the building and relocated the



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

Loretto Abbey College School, built in 1914, is being converted into condos. Units range from \$350,000 to more than \$1 million.

school in 2001.

The school has an Edwardian architectural style, an early 20th-century style of design, characterized by a move away from the ornate architecture of the Victorian era to simpler designs that incorporated classic Greek and Roman elements.

"Edwardian refers to a return to simplicity, but having classic elements on a grand scale," says Kathryn Anderson, with the city's preservation services department, who wrote a report on the Abbey's history and architecture.

"Loretto Abbey is an important example of an early 20th-century school building. It also has historical significance be-

cause of its association with the order of sisters that founded it," Anderson says.

The building's curved bay windows let in reams of natural light, ceiling heights vary from nine to 13 feet, and the old classrooms have a spacious, open-concept feel.

Alex Spiegel, director of development for Context, says the key to converting an old building like Loretto Abbey is working with the original structure and features as much as possible.

"The biggest challenge of the conversion is to try and take the existing features and use them in the best way when you create the suites in the building," he

says.

Converting an old building is quite different from constructing a new one, he adds. With a new building, the construction process is largely predictable. But a conversion involves fussy details, heritage issues and the building techniques and materials of bygone eras.

"There's always surprises with a conversion," Spiegel says. However, with the extra effort comes a sense of reward.

One engineering challenge stems from the Abbey's unusual floor, called a terracotta, flat-arch floor system. It's made of large clay blocks that are connected to the building's structural steel frame.

"It's like an arch, but it's flattened," Spiegel says, adding the curve of the arched flooring is so slight it's not easily seen by the human eye.

"It's a unique floor system. It was probably only used in about a dozen buildings in Toronto. It was more common in Europe."

Spiegel says terracotta floors were also expensive and, with the advent of poured concrete floors, fell out of use.

Flat-arch floors are also more difficult to work with because they have limitations concrete floors don't. As a result, Context has to be selective about where holes are made for the new mechanical and electrical systems and other components required

to convert the building into modern apartments.

"We have to work with the constraints of the floor system," Spiegel says. "We can't punch a hole somewhere just because we want to. So that's why we don't have any two-storey suites in this building. The apartments are spacious, but they are all one-storey suites."

Units in the former school range from about \$350,000 to more than \$1 million.

The original plans had 47 units, but Taylor says that has been reduced by people buying two or three units and combining them into one.

The three-storey, three-bedroom townhouses are 2,585 square feet and cost about \$800,000.

Taylor says prices for the apartment units in The Loretto are averaging about \$400 per square foot, well above the average price for new condos in Toronto. The average price of a new condo in central Toronto is \$344 per square foot, according to condo experts N. Barry Lyon Consultants Ltd. Taylor attributes the pricing to a combination of location, the building's heritage and character, and the spacious units.

Because The Loretto is a conversion project, the units won't be covered by the Tarrion Warranty Corp. (formerly the Ontario New Home Warranty Program). So Spiegel says Context is offering warranty coverage for the first year of occupancy comparable to Tarrion's.

Estimated maintenance fees are 43 cents per square foot for the apartments and 19 cents per square foot for the townhouses.

Construction is expected to start this fall, with occupancy in the summer of 2006.

The sales office is at 387 Brunswick Ave. and is open Monday to Thursday from noon to 6 p.m. and weekends from noon to 5 p.m. Call 416-921-3330 or visit the Web site at www.context.ca