

Toronto News

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Condo project builds on great plan



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 TORONTO

Many otherwise liberal-minded citizens knew that "let's make a deal" planning had gone far enough in the booming 1980s when, during one notorious council meeting, a senior city planner leapt to her feet in glee and embraced a developer whose ultradense office complex had just won approval in a close vote.

No matter how good the deal might have been, with extra on-site

density granted to the developer in return for his provision of various public benefits, it just couldn't pass the most basic smell test.

Something similar happened at City Hall yesterday.

City planners could barely conceal their pride when downtown councillors unanimously approved a new mixed-use project on Jarvis Street at twice the density allowed by the allegedly "official" plan.

There were no kisses in the small knot of civic officials and developers that formed at the rear of the committee room immediately after the vote, but the sense of mutual satisfaction among them all was palpable.

Only this time, everyone's coming up roses.

The proposal for the old CBC headquarters on Jarvis Street marks the absolute peak of the current

downtown condomania: the most cleverly organized, best designed and most sympathetic high-density infill project ever seen in Toronto.

City planners and politicians would be mad to turn it down.

At this point it's important to note that Howard Cohen, president of the company building the new Radio City towers — as well as a splendid new headquarters for the National Ballet School on the same site — is also the guy who built the most controversial towers at Harbourfront when he ran that show 20 years ago.

Were it not so noted, Mr. Cohen would become even more smug than he already has a right to be.

The infill projects he and his colleagues at Context Development are building today are not only the best of their type, they are the type. If you want to know what the real

official plan in Toronto is aiming for, forget all the numbers and take a look at what Context and its favoured designer, Peter Clewes of Architects Alliance, are building.

The team was one of the first on the loft bandwagon with a gorgeous new building on Niagara Street, followed by the innovative conversion of an abandoned community college campus in Kensington Market.

But its greatest coup occurred on a site bordering High Park, where neighbourhood opposition had foiled several previous proposals from other developers.

Tossing out the official plan rule book and concentrating instead on making the best possible building for a difficult site, Context and Mr. Clewes won a landmark decision from an Ontario Municipal Board adjudicator who agreed, over several pages of dense philosophical

argument, that good buildings are indeed good things.

No officials, and only a handful of local residents, argued against the Radio City project.

Not only does it rehabilitate a derelict site on a crummy block, it saves every one of the several heritage buildings located there, including the old Havergal College buildings that once housed the CBC.

Those handsome old piles, returned to functional school buildings, alternate along Jarvis with sleek glass boxes containing more facilities for the ballet school.

Paying for it all are two slender high-rise condominium towers, one 25 storeys and the other 30, that rise up from the middle of the site on either side of a new right of way.

(Even before winning city ap-

proval for the project, Context has sold the majority of the apartments they contain.)

But they are also what pleases city planners most about the Radio City project.

Unlike many of the "point towers" now touted by developers, which become awfully slabby in the journey from propaganda to drawing board, these two really are elegant and slender things, with only eight apartments per floor.

As a former city planner of long experience, Mr. Cohen appears to have discovered the magic formula to unlocking the good graces of City Hall: high-quality, conscientiously designed buildings.

What a concept.



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