



ELVIRA CORDILEONE/TORONTO STAR

COOL SPACE: Mike Niven relaxes in his Church St. condo. It reflects many of the principles he incorporates in the suites he designs for developers: cool neutrals, warm wood, lots of light.

Modern vision



AWARD WINNING: Mike Niven won an award for this sales office at the Radio City condominium project, which will occupy the former CBC site on Jarvis St.

Model suite designer creates a clean, uncluttered urban look

BY ELVIRA CORDILEONE
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Sometimes in life the best opportunities come disguised as misfortune.

Take the case of a young interior designer, not long out of school, who was summarily dismissed when the big recession hit a decade ago. With companies cutting back or going belly up at a furious rate, what chance did he have of getting another design job?

So the enterprising young fellow started his own company.

"I hired a financial and a marketing consultant, picked their brains and starting knocking on doors," said Mike Niven, head of Mike Niven Interior Design.

Within 10 years, the firm grew from a home-based operation to one of a handful of highly successful Toronto interior design firms that cater to builders of condominium towers. Today, he has a staff of nine, including four designers, and offices on Church St.

But Niven is also involved in a second company. A few years ago, he became a partner in

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MEET A DESIGNER



DESIGNER'S TOUCH: From left, Mike Niven has taken on Tridel's Essex development in Mississauga; Radio City on Jarvis St. and also found time to design a Corian sink for the model suite at the new Domus condominium.



Clean and uncluttered

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BOLD Design + Development with engineer Bob Westcott, after he couldn't find a manufacturer to make a cone-shaped sink for a downtown conversion project.

BOLD Design now sells a standard line of products, including lavatory bowls, sinks and vanities throughout North America made of Corian, a blend of natural materials and acrylic mould.

Niven, still a few years short of 40, is pragmatic about what's expected of him in his work: Builders hire him to help them sell condominiums.

Whether he's working on a sales office, a model suite or a 30,000-square-foot recreation centre, his objective is to create an image that will attract the builder's target market, one that will also support the project's overall marketing plan.

Depending on the individual project, the look can be either cutting-edge modern or traditional.

"For Radio City (a twin-tower and townhouse development on the CBC's old Jarvis St. site), we went with a *Wallpaper* (magazine) image theme: a young-oriented and very expensive look, and pulled in elements of the CBC building."

Still, there are certain principles Niven uses for every assignment: "I always gravitate to warmth, even in a white room — wood and lights. I don't like anything fussy. I don't like a lot of visual clutter and everything we do comes off clean."

He also believes style is meaningless if it's divorced from function. In his own home, for example, he has lined up a long row of green apples inside a narrow metal decorative tray almost as long as the table itself. The colour of the apples gives the table just the right touch — yet the apples are real and edible.

Howard Cohen, head of Radio City's builder, Context Development, jokingly takes credit for having spotted Niven's talent in the late 1980s, when the "young whippersnapper" was employed by a design firm hired to work on luxury townhouses at the foot of Casa Loma.

Cohen likes Niven's use of intelligent design rather than "heavy decoration" to create an effect. He was so pleased with his work on Radio City he recently hired him to do Home, a development bordering High Park that stirred much local opposition when it was proposed.

Indeed, the Association of Registered Interior Designers of Ontario recently awarded Niven a bronze medal for Radio City's sales office.

Niven's company may be relatively small, but he intends to keep it that way so he can continue to give his clients a high degree of personal service.

Still, he has been able to take on such sizeable design projects as Monarch's Aqua, Tridel's Essex and a development in Dallas called The Mercer.

Niven said the condo business demands speed of execution, in and out within six to 10 weeks. And each project not only has to present an appropriate image, it also has to be memorable and easily buildable.

In response to an often-heard criticism that model suites are deliberately underfurnished to make them seem bigger, Niven pointed out he not only wants to allow room for people to tour without bumping into things, but as living spaces continue to shrink, it's his job to show buyers how they can make room for all their possessions — and, in that way, make it possible for them to buy.

"We're not selling the furniture, but it's got a real sense of openness and it feels large," said Niven, referring to the two-bedroom, 850-square-foot Radio City model suite. "Yes, people might underfurnish (model suites) but we come up with ways to solve problems." For example, he points to a series of drawers that slide under the bed to make a tiny bedroom more liveable.

Tridel first hired Niven in 1997 for Qwest, a 14-storey tower at Richmond and Simcoe Sts.

"It was our return to downtown," said Ritchie. "We knew Mike's reputation — a little more cutting edge — and we wanted that."

With Qwest under his belt, Tridel gave him the contract for Triomphe I and II, two mammoth towers currently under construction at Yonge and Finch. And most recently, Tridel signed him on for Ovation, twin towers to be built opposite the Living Arts Centre in Mississauga.

"I don't know what a designer is supposed to be, but there has to be a meeting of minds," said Jim Ritchie, Tridel's senior marketing and sales vice-president. "(Niven) has an ability to understand our product, but he was also helpful in pulling us away from the norm."

"It can't just look pretty, the look is one thing, but he understands materials and how long they last."

Linda Mitchell, Monarch's vice-president for sales and marketing, has first-hand experience with Niven's ability to present what she's selling to best advantage.

When he designed the sales centre for Aqua, a high-rise on Queen's Quay, he took advantage of the fact the sales office was on the sixth floor of an existing building and used Lake Ontario as a spectacular back-

drop. "I needed an urban, trendy kind of clean look (for Aqua) and Mike Niven popped into my mind," said Mitchell. "He has a handle on what's the latest and greatest, but he's not faddish. It's a look that has staying power — even more important in condos because (the sales office and model suites) have to last two to three years through to the time when people move in."

By all accounts, Niven works hard and long, a recipe for spending a lot of time away from home — even when home is a 1,600-square-foot, two-level downtown penthouse. The building he lives in, the Alexus, was completed last year and its builder, Greenco, sold the suites with higher-end finishes rather than putting the money into a lavish lobby and miles of recreational facilities.

Niven's personal space reflects his professional design philosophy: It's clean, uncluttered and coherent. At night, Niven is on top of the world. And if sleep proves elusive, the young designer can simply lie back, relax and count stars.