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The Everest family, above, built a relationship with the developer of the Beach House Lofts, and worked with him to customize their home. It's the personal touch that keeps customers loyal to boutique buildings.

A small condo building's appeal is that you're not a number

Living large in a boutique

BY LISA VAN DE VEN

First there was the boutique hotel, designed to offer an intimate experience in a smaller space, usually with interesting architecture and a discerning group of guests who want something a little different than what's on offer at the Best Western.

Now condo dwellers are hopping aboard the boutique bandwagon. In a crowded marketplace, the boutique condominium project sets itself apart with an intimate environment, fewer suites and, often, more innovative architecture and design features.

"The word 'boutique' has a lot of hidden meanings in it," says Les Mallins, president of Streetcar Developments, which has just introduced the 12-unit Riverside Lofts site on Queen Street East. "I think deciding how many cohabitants you have in a certain building is only one aspect of living in a boutique building."

Without the downtown billboards and massive marketing campaigns that offer momentum to larger sites, Toronto's boutique buildings may make few

waves in the city's real-estate market. But they can still cause a stir amidst a certain niche of buyers — purchasers who are looking to live in an atmosphere where they can get to know their neighbours. Also, these projects are frequently the first to find their way into a hot new neighbourhood.

"The appeal of them is that you're

*'They are the canary
in the coal mine'
for condo builders*

not a number. You actually feel like you're part of something," says real-estate broker Brad Lamb of Brad J. Lamb Realty, who represents several boutique projects, including Eastside Lofts by KC Development Group and The Schoolhouse by Empire Communities and Fovere Development Services. "They tend to be architecturally a little cooler ... they have exposed brick or higher ceilings. They're just cozier,

smaller, more intimate buildings."

From a developer's perspective, boutique condominiums aren't always appealing. Without the economies of scale that come with larger sites and hundreds of units, small buildings aren't likely to generate the same kind of profit as bigger sites. But they also don't take as much money to build, which means that in most cases, says Mr. Lamb, there's less risk. And with only a few units to sell, developers can often test out new neighbourhoods, like King Street West a few years ago and King Street East today.

"They are the canary in the coal mine all over the city," Mr. Lamb says. "The little guy slides in there, does 50 units, does it easily — proves to the world that people want to live there at these prices — and the [larger] developers go, 'OK, I can do my 400 units.'"

For the small developers that take on the boutique projects, there can be plenty of challenges. Even in established neighbourhoods there's a reason certain properties haven't been snatched up by the bigger players. Largely, it's because the sites are too small and awkward to house anything of magnitude.

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“The word ‘boutique’ has a lot of hidden meanings,” says Les Mallins at the Riverside Lofts’ site, above.

Developers build relationships

BOUTIQUE

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That’s often where the innovation comes in. At Zen Lofts, a 36-unit infill project by Harhay Construction Management at Richmond and Spadina, the 80x90-foot piece of property wasn’t even large enough to include a traditional underground parking garage. Harhay installed a stacked parking system that moves one car below ground so that a second car can park above. “It eliminates the need to do below-grade parking, which on small sites you often just physically can’t do,” says Chris Harhay, Harhay’s vice-president. “That’s a good example of dealing with the kinds of constraints you have with a small site.”

Such innovation often requires a knowledge not only of the property, but of the construction techniques available to circumvent its constraints. Unlike most large-scale developments — where developers will partner with a separate builder to bring a project to fruition — boutique

buildings are usually done by companies that take on both the developing and construction tasks themselves, Mr. Harhay says. Not only does that maximize their profits, but it means they’re closely tied to both the property itself and the construction techniques that might be necessary. “You have to look very

DEVELOPING AND CONSTRUCTION IS USUALLY DONE BY THE SAME COMPANY

carefully at all your costs and how you’re going to design this building to make it work,” the developer says.

With limited means, marketing a boutique site can also be a concern, especially when that site is in an out-of-the-way spot that doesn’t get a lot of street traffic. Unlike the developers of larger projects who can afford to invest in billboards and full-page news-

paper ads, the companies behind smaller sites don’t always have that luxury.

“It’s hard to make people aware of them,” says Mr. Lamb. “They’re hard to sell until they become easy to sell. What happens is, once you are able to penetrate the marketplace, then all of a sudden everyone seems to be aware of it.”

Once prospective buyers are drawn to a boutique building, it’s the relationship they can build with the site’s developer that will often keep them loyal to these smaller projects. That’s a relationship you’re not going to get in a larger building, says Michelle Everest, who lives with her husband, Paul, and two children at Mr. Mallins’s 12-suite Beach House Lofts building in the Beach.

“We had been involved with Les from the early onset of the project. He was really great with working with us to customize [our suite] to our needs,” says Ms. Everest. “He got to know us, and that would have never happened with a large project.”

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