

Getting a piece of Toronto real estate doesn't mean getting married first or settling for a condo the size of a dorm room. More homebuyers are opting for roommates or buying with friends



Housemates wanted

BY ABIGAIL PUGH

Realtors and developers claim there is a new type of condominium buyer — and their numbers are growing. They are not buying homes with companions, fiancés or spouses, but instead decide to partner with a friend or find a roommate once the homeownership papers have been signed. It's a commitment all right, but to a non-traditional kind of partnership.

Norma Thiessen, 29, is the director of marketing for Context development. She moved to Toronto from Kitchener earlier in her career and

initially paid a hefty rent in order to live alone. Although she enjoyed the calm, space and comfort of her costly digs, she did some simple addition one day and realized that in two years she had spent \$36,000 in rent. That was enough to inspire her to get out of the rental market. She recently bought a two-bedroom unit at Context development's MoZo project, which she intends to share with a roommate. She has customized the plans — making sure there are two fully equipped bathrooms, a movable island in the kitchen and lots of storage — so that she and her roommate can enjoy maximum flexibility and privacy.

Rob Richardson and Stephen Guy-McGrath have managed to make

such an arrangement work: They bought a big house together on Parkdale's Cowan Ave., and complement one another with their homeowner-related talents. Stephen is the practical one, and as an actor, has more free time in the day to renovate. Rob's not around as much, but contributes ideas, researches the financial details and wields the sledgehammer in the evenings and on weekends.

Realtor Brad Lamb, who specializes in condo sales, says that while still an unusual approach, it's definitely a growing trend to buy with the intention of sharing platonically. Why? Well, the average price for a well-made 650-square-foot, one-bedroom condo downtown is now \$180,000, and Mr.

Lamb predicts that this will rise to \$200,000 within a year and to \$250,000 within five years. With prices this high and climbing, going in with a friend, paying around \$50,000 to \$70,000 more for a two bedroom unit and splitting the total, makes a lot of sense.

So, perhaps the question should be "Why not?" Kerry Johnston, a real estate lawyer specializing in assisting first time buyers, says that actual co-ownership among condo-buyers who are not a couple, is still very rare. Consumers often are not aware of the ease with which ownership and mortgage payments can be legally split two ways. "It can be viable and easy for two or even three buyers to pool their incomes and

buy together, but it's a little more unwieldy."

What about couples who buy together? Don't they have to worry about splitting assets and selling off if the relationship breaks up? "When the [joint purchase] is spousal or common-law, these questions about how to divide the property in the future don't come to the fore," he says.

Conservatism may play its part in shaping buying trends in Toronto, too. John Simms of the Builder Marketing Society in New Jersey notes that in the United States the trend is seen more often in hipper East and West Coast communities — especially ones with a high quotient of young, dot-com employees.

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GLENN LOWSON / NATIONAL POST

If builders are given enough notice, condo plans can be altered for easier accommodation of roommates.

Customized for platonic living

ROOMMATES

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In addition to what are perceived as contractual complexities, sharing platonically can seem difficult in terms of managing space as well. Most properties built today will accommodate only one bedroom with an ensuite bathroom (otherwise visitors would have to walk through a bedroom to access the toilet). Ms. Thiessen was quick to point out that, at nearly 30 years of age, she isn't prepared to compromise on lifestyle or privacy anymore. Other buyers probably agree — and thus don't think that roommates or co-purchasing is an option for them.

But there is a high degree of customization possible for Toronto condos, according to Jim Richie, of Tridel developments. He says if consumers buy pre-construction it is actually easy to move non-bearing walls, split the plan so bedrooms are separated by living areas, create more privacy within common areas and even — in larger suites — create a “double master” plan with two full-size bedrooms.

Developers in some markets actively reach out to this type of buyer with specific sales pitches and with innovative floor plans. Advertisers for building developments in Toronto have not taken this approach yet, however. Suzanne Bennett, a condo market analyst, says sometimes

a buying arrangement is suggested at the point of purchase, but it's not referred to in ad campaigns or on developers' Web sites.

Mr. Johnston agrees with Mr. Lamb that platonic sharing is on the increase, though: “I'm seeing more single buyers in recent years. It's a way for them to get on with things and not wait [for romantic commitment] before getting into the market,” he says. Mr. Johnston adds that buying alone with the intention to share, initially, with a friend is not tantamount to giving up on domestic coupledom. Many of his clients have girlfriends or boyfriends with whom they simply are not ready to start sharing a home.

The question often arises as to whether the buyer can transfer to co-ownership when they are ready to live as a couple later on. This way, it's an immediate opportunity to get into the market, but he or she is still looking forward to the long run.

Compared to 20 years ago, when becoming financially secure generally happened around the same time as pairing up and co-signing the mortgage papers, nowadays being ready to purchase while still single is a very common situation. Coupled with escalating rent and real estate prices, this demographic shift is a potent reason to commit to real estate before committing to Mr. or Ms. Right.

In her line of work, Ms. Thiessen has noticed it is still more common for young men to buy alone or with a friend than for young women to do the same: a point with which Brad Lamb concurs. Even Ms. Thiessen herself may not end up boosting that percentage of homeowners who are exploring new arrangements. She says with a laugh: “I might meet Mr. Right before moving in, and end up living with him in Forest Hill!”

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