

Mainsuite

Fitting into the neighbourhood is the heart and soul of good urban design

BY LISA VAN DE VEN

It used to be — at least if old black-and-white sitcoms are to be believed — that Main Street was a place where the kids hung out at the soda shop, and Mom picked up her weekly wares from the friendly neighbourhood grocer. She'd smile and nod her way back home, greeting all the neighbours she knew along the way.

Today, the idea of Main Street is somewhat different. In the urban environment, it's hardly just a single street. In the vast collection of neighbourhoods that is Toronto, there are a wealth of local Main Streets; if you search hard enough, you may even find a soda shop.

But for developers and city builders, those Main Streets create a greater challenge: a design dilemma that means maintaining the character of the street and the neighbourhood around it, while moving the city's design aesthetic somewhere past the 1950s ideal. It's the continual challenge of a maturing and ever-changing market,





Architects like Roland Rom Colthoff (left) and Richard Witt of Raw Design, are redesigning Toronto's many neighbourhoods.

TYLER ANDERSON / NATIONAL POST

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where more people living in the downtown core mean more Main Streets under transformation.

And at the forefront of those changing neighbourhoods are often the city's niche developers and their teams, marketing boutique buildings meant to attract design-savvy buyers. Their specialty:

smaller buildings that let residents feel close — in the most physical of senses — to the neighbourhood around them, while at the same time trying to reference the individuality of the streets they inhabit, respect the context of the neighbourhood, and push the design beyond the average. In the process, they also hap-

pen to be changing the face of Toronto.

"I think it's the next phase of reinvigorating the city," says Richard Witt, principal with architecture firm Raw Design. "Toronto's always been known for having residents in the inner city ... as the population increases, we need to provide people with new opportunities for residential."



Residents at Stage East can feel part of the surrounding streetscape.

There are several developers and architects in the city building largely on smaller infill sites located on main neighbourhood streets

Mr. Witt and his Raw co-principal, Roland Rom Colthoff, are experts in this type of Main Street architecture. The firm was created in fall 2007 with the aim of focusing on smaller design-savvy buildings with more of a physical relationship to the street around them. It's a compromise between the sprawl of the traditional low-rise single-family home, and the high-rise towers that are usu-

ally saved for more arterial roads, where residents' homes are far above the street they live on. Raw's signature buildings — more boutique in nature — aim to offer an answer to that, an alternative for buyers looking for a condominium lifestyle more in keeping with a traditional neighbourhood feel.

"You're very on and part of the street," says Mr. Rom Colthoff, citing examples

such as Neilas Inc.'s five-storey Stage East project at Leslie and Queen East, and its six-storey Cube at College and Ossington, both designed by Raw.

Raw isn't the only firm specializing in this type of design. There are several developers and architects in the city building largely on smaller infill sites located on main neighbourhood streets around

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Cube is among many projects popping up on infill sites around the city.



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existing local amenities. For the most part, they’re looking to attract buyers with a clear idea of where they want to live, looking to be in hot neighbourhoods with character. This type of buyer often has a sophisticated outlook, so forward-thinking design that pushes Toronto’s boundaries is a priority.

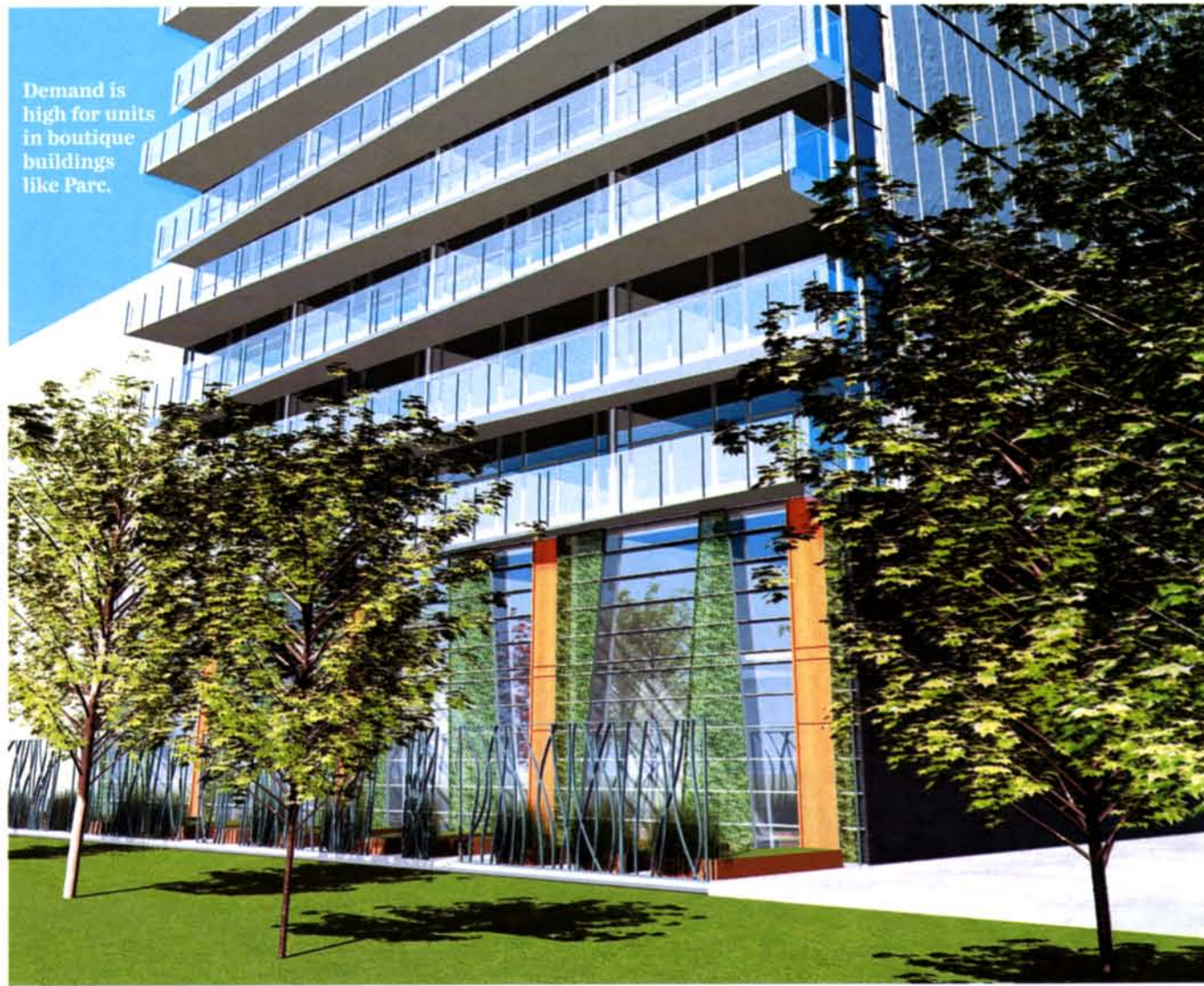
“There’s a growing sophistication in

the marketplace. People are demanding and expecting more from developers,” says Chris Harhay, vice-president of Harhay Construction Management. “People are becoming much more vocal about the design of the buildings, and want to see something that’s an improvement to the standard.”

Mr. Harhay and his company specialize in this type of boutique project, with

sites like Gläs at King and Spadina, and East on King East, as well as the Ninety at Broadview and Queen, an upcoming site that’s larger than its predecessors but incorporates some of the same design principles.

Mr. Harhay is also partnering with Brad Lamb and Lamb Developments, along with Niche Development, on Parc, a boutique building on King Street West



Demand is high for units in boutique buildings like Parc.



Developers are mindful that projects like East become part of the existing neighbourhood, rather than separate from it.

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near Strachan. Mr. Lamb, too, specializes in this type of building, both in his development pursuits and in many of the sites he represents at Brad J. Lamb Realty. “It’s irresistible when you see this cool little site that could be something dramatically different, and kick-start a whole neighbourhood,” he says.

As more buyers choose the condominium lifestyle, the city is seeing more and more of these projects, Mr. Lamb says. A little more than 10 years ago that wasn’t the case, he adds. That was when Context Development introduced Twenty Niagara to the King West neighbourhood; released for sale in 1996, it was among the

first boutique buildings of the city. It also took about 10 months to sell the 16 units. “Now, I could sell that building making 16 or 20 phone calls. I could sell it in an afternoon,” Mr. Lamb says.

But not all these Main Street-style buildings are an automatic hit, even now. What is important, both Mr. Lamb and

Mr. Harhay agree, is that the projects interact with the street around them, becoming part of the neighbourhood rather than separate from it. For developers and designers trying to push the design envelope, this could be as simple as choosing a band of brick that matches the historical façades in the area or — in the case of Parc — incorporating two storeys of vine growth to reference the park next door.

“Especially with smaller buildings, you do have to try to use what’s available in the neighbourhood,” Mr. Harhay says. “You’ve got to consider the existing urban character and fabric of the neighbourhood.”

Considering context, he adds, doesn’t mean you can’t stand out; standing out is part of the point for Mr. Harhay, Raw and other builders focusing on these types of projects. It’s all about creating a new type of Main Street; one where residents are proud of where they live, and where whoever in the family visits the local grocer knows at least a few people along the way; a Main Street where condominium living isn’t just about being high above the street, but close to it, in a building that adds character to its surroundings.

“It’s building the fabric of the city,” Mr. Rom Colthoff says. ■■