

Former candy factory to get a makeover

W.D. LIGHTHALL
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

It's a new project but an old story.

The conversion of a Victorian-styled, early-20th-century industrial complex into modern condominium lofts also means the end of a spirited community of artists and performers who currently live in the buildings.

In the early 1900s, brothers Robert and Thomas Watson moved their thriving candy and confectionary company from downtown Toronto to Sorauren Ave., just south of Dundas St. W., an area known today as Roncesvalles Village.

There, in a classic, brick-and-beam factory and warehouse complex built in 1903, the R & T Watson Co. manufactured candies, cough drops, lozenges and other confectionaries.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the Watson Co. buildings were converted into live-work spaces of lofts and studios.

Attracted by the character of the buildings, with their exposed brick, wood beams, high ceilings and large, arched windows, a tight-knit community made up largely of artists, actors, writers and others in creative professions took shape in the old candy factory complex.

Today, Rosebud Homes Inc. and Sky Development Group plan to redevelop the site into an infill project of condominium lofts.

Called The Robert Watson Lofts, the project involves demolishing the smaller of the two original Watson Co. buildings and converting the other into a five-storey condominium. As well, a new five-storey condo building will be constructed on the site.

Current tenants have been notified they will have to move sometime before this fall, when construction is expected to start.

Many long-time residents of the buildings regard it as the end of an era. They paint a picture of a lively and creative community of artists residing in quirky lofts, studios and gallery-like spaces. Community barbecues and parties were held in the parking lot and an area behind the buildings. There is even a somewhat ramshackle communal garden and picnic area, complete with a tree house for children.

"This is a different place from anything else in the city. It's like a mini enclave, a little world unto itself," says Steve Burke, a painter and printmaker who, for the past 10 years, has lived in the building slated for conversion.

"Most everybody knows everybody else. Everyone here is either an artist or musician or works in the film industry. There are performers and writers; there are a lot of creative people here," Burke says.

► Please see **Candy, P9**



ELVIRA CORDILEONE/TORONTO STAR

Conversion project will transform former candy factory on Sorauren Ave.

Artists displaced by planned conversion

► Candy From P1

He notes few residents are in a position to take the developers up on an offer to give them first choice of the condo units. Prices for the condos, which start selling this month, range from \$140,000 to \$400,000.

"The condos are going to be expensive compared to the rental units now, which are fairly affordable," Burke says. "It's not going to be the people who live here now moving into the condos. The majority of us can't afford to buy them."

While the old Watson Co. buildings are technically zoned for live-work units, the residential portion of that zoning was conditional on bringing them up to modern building-code standards, which was never done. As a result, tenants all have commercial leases and the fact that people lived there illegally was ignored.

With eviction notices on the horizon, long-time residents have already begun to leave. There is a feeling of loss among those remaining that this downtown artistic community, with its sense of organic authenticity not easily replicated by developers, will soon be gone.

"It's a great place to live, it really is," says Leona Rowe, Burke's partner, who once ran a daycare in their home for residents' children. "But since ownership has changed, a lot of things have changed. A lot of the feeling of community has disappeared. . . . It's very sad. Soon it will all be history."

Condominium realtor Brad Lamb says it must be remembered that the buildings as they stand now are not fit for residential use.

"It was a candy factory built in the early 1900s. It was never built for people to live in," says Lamb, whose company is the real estate agency for the new project.

The building that will be converted into condominiums "needs major fire, safety and structural upgrades to meet current residential building-code standards," he points out, noting that redevelopment of the site will benefit the city and the immediate neighbourhood.

"It's better from a safety standpoint, it will improve the streetscape and it improves the value of the neighbourhood," he says.

The features of the Watson Co. buildings that appealed to the downtown creative community — their heritage and early-20th-century industrial architecture — are the same features driving the conversion of the larger building.

Project architect Harry



Kohn says with its brick walls, wood columns and beams, high ceilings and large windows, the building has all the sought-after features of modern lofts.

"First of all, there's the character and warmth of the brick and exposed wood. There's also nice high windows with arches that are not easy to replicate," Kohn says. "There's an ambience in this building that is hard to duplicate in a brand new building."

While the building's Victorian-era industrial features may have cachet in today's real estate market, its age complicates the conversion process.

Kohn says designing suites was a challenge because since it was built more than 100 years ago, numerous changes have been made to the original structure.

"Units are customized around the existing structure," says Kohn. "In the building itself there are a lot of varying conditions and irregularities to the structure. We tried to take advantage of those situations in a positive way to give character to the units."

Because the building has a post and beam structural system, an engineering company specializing in heavy timber was hired to survey and check the condition of all the wood. This was necessary to ensure the building can carry the additional weight, or building load, the conversion will add.

"Most of the materials are in good shape. It's a matter of identifying what you need to reinforce and supplement for the conversion," Kohn said.

The new, five-storey building, which will be contemporary in design, will be constructed behind the existing building, which fronts on Sorauren Ave. Its exterior features and building materials have been chosen to complement the old structure.

To help meld the buildings together, both will have balconies overlooking a landscaped courtyard located between them. At one end of the courtyard will be a shared, indoor amenity area.

"So while they are two distinct buildings, they do come together to make a unified complex," Kohn says.