

## HEAVENLY HOMES

# Buyers flock to divine designs

Condo conversions offer one-of-a-kind suites, buildings with character

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Special to Sun Media

I've always thought that living in an old church that's been converted into a chic living space would be heavenly – as long as the walls didn't echo with the ethereal chatter of sermons long past. My ideal address also includes stunning architectural gems steeped in history. A creaky old mansion converted into luxurious condos – yes, please! I'll take the mansion condo over my brick babe in the burbs any day.

I'm not alone in my belief that existing structures such as churches, warehouses, schools and old mansions make for fascinating places to live. For years, a handful of Toronto builders has been turning everything from places of worship to factories into one-of-a-kind condo developments. And buyers love them.

"The charm of conversions, for a lot of people, is that they're living in an older building, and people generally like what they know," says Brad Lamb, a Toronto real estate broker and developer, currently working on a conversion project called The Mansions at Jarvis and Bloor. "People still like those styles of architecture that are reminiscent of history, so churches and warehouses make people feel good."

What's more, buyers love the uniqueness of conversions. "They have interesting interiors and finishes: brick, post and beam, higher ceilings and hardwood floors," says Lamb, the star of

HGTV's *Big City Broker*. "There's a sense of beauty to the old elements when you juxtapose them to super-modern things."

Case in point: The Church lofts on Dovercourt Road, by Dovenco and Bernard Watt Architects. The neo-Gothic church was reworked to house 28 one- and two-level lofts that blend some of the building's original features with modern elements. There are exposed brick walls as well as cornice and vaulted ceilings, some up to 20 feet high. In several units, stained-glass windows run from floor to ceiling. On the contemporary side, you'll find Italian-imported kitchens, modern bathrooms with vessel sinks and hardwood flooring.

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[Conversions are] a labour of love.

Real estate broker and developer  
Brad Lamb

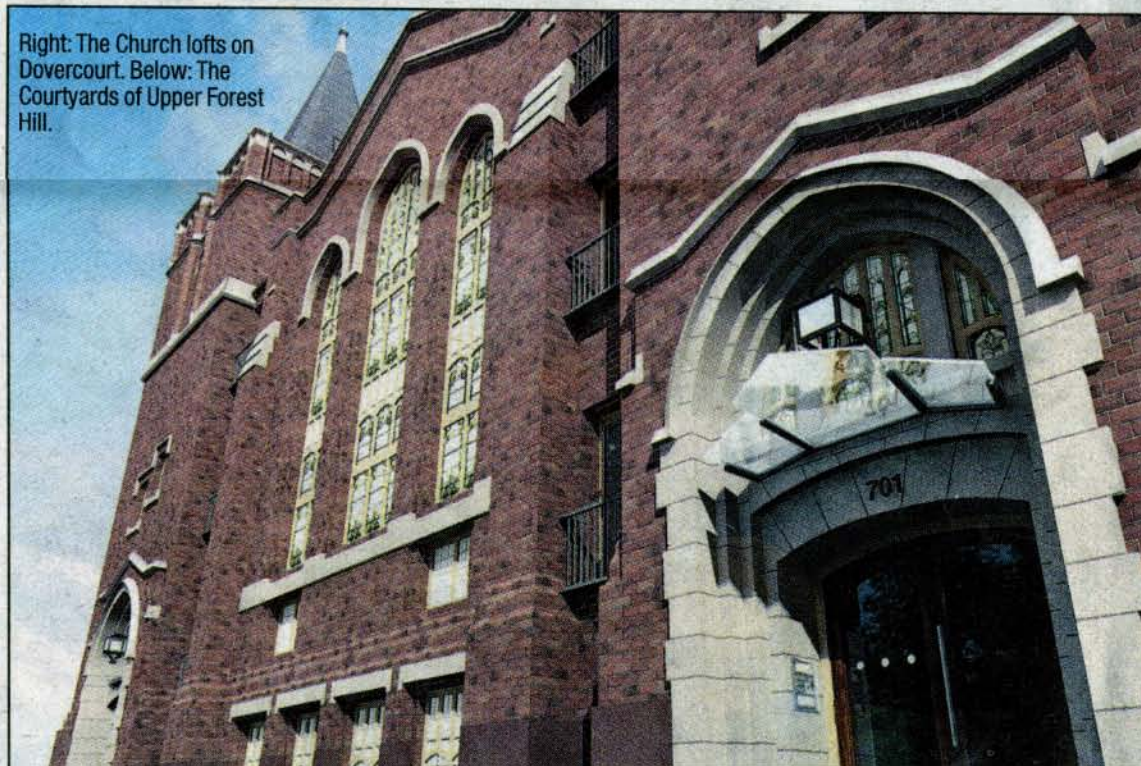
The further appeal of some conversions is the sizes of the suites. Take the High Park-area Victoria Lofts, by Triumphal Developments. Some of the units in this century-old church are as big as 2,000 square feet – huge by today's condo standards.

But while conversions can be big, bold and beautiful, those good looks come with a price. In order to make existing structures livable, all-new wiring and plumbing are often necessary – and that's just the basics. "What people don't realize is that converting old buildings costs more than knocking a building down and building brand new," says Lamb. "To rehabilitate an old building and keep it standing and work with the existing shell is a nightmare. They're a labour of love."

Award-winning developer Bob Mitchell of Mitchell & Associates admits there are challenges to conversions, but he's more about the benefits of them. For over 25 years this pioneer of Toronto conversions has been breathing new life into many existing Toronto buildings. His project at 41 Shanly Street was the first legal loft conversion in the city.

He says conversions are "inherently more environmentally friendly" because you're working with a structure that already exists. "When you're converting buildings, basically what you're doing is recycling existing

Right: The Church lofts on Dovercourt. Below: The Courtyards of Upper Forest Hill.



resources," says Mitchell. "You're taking advantage of services that are already in place. You're taking advantage of bricks and mortar that's already there."

Another advantage, says Mitchell, is that conversions help "maintain the physical character of neighbourhoods."

One such conversion now on the market is The Courtyards of Upper Forest Hill on Bathurst Street. The Art Deco six-storey apartment building is being converted into 63 residences by SLM Property Investments.

"We're contemporizing it," says managing partner Steve Warsh. "We're respecting the original architecture, but at the same time we're pretty much touching literally everything in the building." That means new elevators, electrical wiring, roof and more.

And SLM is even going to work in a party area, media room, exercise space and hotel-style guest suite. Amenities like this are rare for a conversion.

"People seem to buy here because they don't want to be in a 30-storey glass tower," says Warsh. "They like the fact that this building has character. The reality of it is that pretty much everything will be brand new. But you're living in a very mature, high-end residential

area. The landscaping is mature. The building is mature, but it's new – and that's the appeal."

To get a sense of a conversion in progress you can visit the sales office and two model suites at The Courtyards. Common areas are currently under construction, and production only begins on a suite once it's purchased. The average price for a condo here is \$290 per square foot.

In general, prices for conversions are comparable to other condo prices. Very few true conversions come to market each year, but when they do, sales tend to be swift. That's not surprising. How could anyone walk away from a loft in a neo-Gothic church or a suite in an Art Deco building that painstakingly preserves the past and magnificently pays homage to the future?



The Victoria Lofts in the High Park area.

## FAST FACTS

Conversions aren't covered by the Tarion Warranty Corporation, but most builders offer a one-year warranty.

Some current conversions:

**The Church**  
www.thechurchlofts.com  
(416) 532-3535

**The Courtyards of Upper Forest Hill**  
www.courtyardsofforesthill.com  
(416) 783-0483

**The Mansions at Jarvis & Bloor**  
www.torontocondos.com  
(416) 368-5262

**Victoria Lofts**  
www.victorialofts.ca  
(416) 604-2719