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Street Smarts: The core condo score



Nancy MacKinlay and Will Sealy, with their boxer, Ruthless, like living near St. Lawrence Market.

Aaron Lynett/National Post

By Suzanne Wintrob
Special to National Post

Toronto has a love affair with the condo, with 28,466 new-build units purchased in 2011. Thousands more are planned. Suite size, price, amenities and architecture are important, but more and more, a building's neighbourhood is being considered the ultimate draw. The seventh part of a lengthy series examining the GTA's new condo 'hoods.

Once upon a time, Nancy MacKinlay lived with her parents, her older brother and the family dog on a quiet, leafy street in Scarborough. Now that she's all grown up, the 33-year-old wouldn't dare trade her lively urban digs for the hush of suburbia.

"It's relaxing for me," says Ms. MacKinlay of her downtown neighbourhood. "I like the hustle bustle. I find when I go visit my parents in Scarborough, there's just nothing — you have to get in your car to go anywhere," she says. "There's not the convenience of putting your shoes on and walking out your front door and going grocery shopping and then stopping for lunch somewhere and then picking up flowers," she says. "It's all so close and there's tons of variety. I like the diversity of everyone walking the streets. There are families and older people and younger people. There's lots of fashion. There's always something to look at and things to do."

Except for eight months post-university when she moved back with her parents to save money for a condo, Ms. MacKinlay has lived the high life for the past eight years. Yonge and Davisville was her first stop, with the Jarvis and Carlton area her second. Last summer she packed up again, this time moving to a brand new one-bedroom 641-square-foot unit at Context Development's Market Wharf building with her boyfriend and their boxer, Ruthless.

Given the unprecedented condo construction going on in the downtown core, she could have chosen another area or even another Context property. But what sold Ms. MacKinlay on the neighbourhood was its proximity to St. Lawrence Market, which she calls "the Mecca for foodies" such as herself. She stops in often for fresh ingredients as well as a chicken parmesan sandwich at her favourite eatery, Uno Mustachio. She and her boyfriend frequent the bars and restaurants on The Esplanade and go dancing at Foundation Room lounge. They're fixtures at Cherry Beach dog park where Ruthless can run free and play in the water. And they are no longer distracted by the traffic, sirens and street noise — in fact, Ms. MacKinlay says the "constant buzz" energizes her.

"Even after a weekend of being up [at my parents' cottage] and fully appreciating what nature has to offer, there's always that feeling of when I get back to the city I'm happy to be home," says Ms. MacKinlay, an account

executive at an uptown advertising agency. “It’s never, ‘Oh no, here’s the rat race again.’ It’s always a relief.”

Downtown living might not be for everyone, but those doing it couldn’t imagine being anywhere else. It’s the energetic vibe and sheer convenience that draws them in. From the Eaton Centre and Yonge–Dundas Square to the financial district, the St. Lawrence Market area, Chinatown and Nathan Phillips Square, there’s action day and night. Condominium developers are certainly responding, with crane and dump truck operators doing brisk business along the Yonge Street strip and on almost every main street between Bay and Jarvis. While some would find the clatter intolerable, true downtowners bask in every moment.

Liz English, 27, is one of them. She grew up in Don Mills but moved to the Queen and Church area at her first opportunity. A human capital consultant, she works eight street lights away, so walks to work (“I really have no excuse to be late,” she quips) and uses her Zipcar membership once or twice a month to buy groceries or meet with clients. Most of her friends live downtown, too, and she’s honing her urban cycling skills this spring so she can take advantage of the Bixi bike system. She’s a regular at PJ O’Brien Irish Pub behind the King Eddy Hotel and meets friends after work for a gin-and-tonic at the Fairmont Royal York’s Library Bar. Brunch is at Le Petit Dejeuner or Origin on King Street, while Beer Bistro and Terroni near King and Yonge are “guaranteed dinner hits.” Everything she needs is just steps from home — including stores like Hasty Market and Kitchen Table for late-night treats — and the sound of helicopters landing on St. Michael’s Hospital don’t even bother her like they did when she first moved in.

“Access to the [underground] PATH and being beside the Eaton Centre make it really easy for me to accomplish errands throughout the week and I’m not saving all of my to-do list for a Saturday afternoon,” she says. “It allows me to explore the city and indulge in visiting the ROM or St. Lawrence Market and taking photos in St. James Park, so it’s nice.”

With the influx of new residents, many of the downtown attractions are evolving, too. St. Lawrence Market has introduced an executive chef series where people can interact with chefs and dine on five-course meals. On weekdays, the market has become a lunchtime magnet for employees working

as far over as the financial district. Spokeswoman Rebecca Grima says the entire neighbourhood has changed to cater to residents, with new restaurants, furniture stores, banks and grocery stores opening up in recent years.

Yonge–Dundas Square has also grown into a popular hub, with area residents among regular spectators at evening concerts, movies and cultural festivals. Event manager Sara Peel says there’s even a “quiet day”[usually Mondays after an eventful weekend] where the only noise is that of the water fountains. The point is to let residents, Ryerson University students and other passersby “use the square as their backyard.”

Given its proximity to Yonge and Dundas, Ryerson builds the downtown core into its programming and encourages interaction between students and area residents. The AMC movie theatres are used during the day for lectures, with the cinemas equipped with pop–up podiums for lecturers and portable desktop panels that attach to the theatre seats, so students can take notes. The university has nearly completed transforming Maple Leaf Gardens into a 200,000–sq.–ft. athletic and recreation centre complete with basketball/ volleyball courts and a full–sized hockey rink, with Loblaw supermarket at its base.

Students also take their projects to the streets. For example, professor David Amborski of Ryerson’s School of Urban and Regional Planning encourages students to use the downtown landscape to examine condo and commercial development and understand market trends. The vicinity gives them hands–on experience with such issues as homelessness, waterfront development and live–work districts. Students can easily hook up with local Business Improvement Areas and interact with municipal leaders situated in nearby City Hall. Mr. Amborski’s colleague has his students ride a streetcar across town to observe the city in action and report on their findings.

Still, it’s not only young people flocking downtown. Kamal Bhatia, a 55–year–old motivational speaker, lives in Mississauga. He’s excited for 2014 when he and his wife will hand over the house to their two sons, now 24 and 22, and head to a one–bedroom Ice2 condo by Lanterra Developments at the foot of York Street. They plan to walk everywhere and take in the theatre, restaurants, dance clubs and nearby waterfront. As he puts it: “When the empty–nester

situation arises, it's better to be in a smaller place and have a less complicated life and put your feet up and enjoy the wine or the cognac.”

For Mr. Bhatia and many others of his age and stage, downtown is the perfect spot to do just that.

Street Smarts: Central storeys in T.O. core

By Suzanne Wintrob

Steve Cameron lives with two university buddies in a rented townhouse near the Distillery District. But as a 27-year-old single guy working at a family-run real estate finance lending firm in the heart of the financial district, he wants to live where he works and plays. That's why INDX, a 54-storey, 700-suite condo project by Lifetime Developments and CentreCourt Developments at Bay and Adelaide looks so promising to him. From the bachelor-pad-type black kitchen counter tops to the poker room, golf simulation room and the lobby's shoeshine station and dry-cleaning drop-off area, it's a building that's hoping to beckon career-focused keeners like Mr. Cameron.

“I'm really dedicated to my career, really focused on putting in as many hours as I can to get as far ahead as I can in the next few years,” he says from his office. “To do that, the best place to be is down here. The financial district has become a place that is more conducive to a young professional's lifestyle, with a lot of great restaurants and pubs to go out to. ... My time is worth too much to be sitting on a Go Train or in traffic for two half hours every morning and every evening.”

As of February 2012, there were 13 active projects with 5,103 units in the downtown core between Bloor and the Gardiner Expressway and University and Church, according to RealNet Canada Inc. That's down slightly from the previous year with 15 projects and 5,848 units. Average price per square foot rose to \$939 from \$868.

Here's a sampling of what's on the go today:

88 Scott

58 storeys, 480 units Builder Concert Properties Location Scott and Wellington Suite Availability 400 to more than 2,000 sq. ft. and priced from the \$300,000s to \$800,000s Hot Tickets Designed as a “vertical neighbourhood” with amenities located on three levels so all residents can enjoy the views; lobby lounge and news café at street level and split-level Sky Lounge on floors 46 and 47 Status Registration Occupancy 2016 Contact 416-216-8588; 88Scott.com.

Aura at College Park

78 storeys, 985 units Builder Canderel Residential Location Yonge and Gerrard Suite Availability 98% sold. 2,335 to 11,370 sq. ft. and priced from \$2.3-million, 50 units just released on three new floors Hot Tickets Top-floor penthouse has five bedrooms, six bathrooms, direct access into a grand arrival hall, whirlpool/hot tub in an enclosed terrace and sunroom Status Under Construction Occupancy June 2013 Contact 416-962-8688; collegeparkcondos.com.

Backstage

36 storeys, 284 suites Builders Cityzen Development Group, Fernbrook Homes and Castlepoint Realty Partners Location Yonge and The Esplanade Suite Availability 90% sold. 531 to 1,039 sq. ft. and priced from \$390,900 to \$676,900 Hot Tickets Directly behind the Sony Centre, close to the financial district, the historic St. Lawrence Market neighbourhood and public transit Status Under construction Occupancy Spring/summer 2014 Contact 416-777-2533; backstagetoronto.com.

INDX

54 storeys, more than 700 units Builders Lifetime Developments and CentreCourt Developments Location Bay and Adelaide Suite Availability 356 to 821 sq. ft. and priced from mid \$200,000s to \$550,000 Hot Tickets Interior suite finishes designed as a modern day “bachelor pad” with open spaces and chic black counters; lobby offers dry cleaning and grocery drop off/pickup at concierge and shoe shine station Status Registration Occupancy December 2015 Contact 416-987-4639.

Karma Condos

50 storeys, 495 units Builders Lifetime Developments and CentreCourt Developments Location Yonge and College Suite Availability More than 90% sold. 277 to 819 sq. ft. and priced from \$200,000s to low \$600,000s Hot Tickets Approximately 3,700 sq. ft. of retail at grade including a preserved heritage home that's integrated into the at-grade level of the building Status Actively selling Occupancy September 2015 Contact 416-551-2744; karmacondos.com.

L Tower

58 storeys, 600 units Builders Cityzen Development Group, FernbrookHomes and Castlepoint Realty Partners Location The Esplanade Suite Availability 98% sold. 722 to 1,114 sq. ft. and priced from \$479,000 to \$762,250 Hot Tickets Penthouse floor has spectacular 10-ft. ceilings and views of downtown Toronto and Lake Ontario Status Under construction Occupancy Summer/fall 2013 Contact 416-777-2533; theltower.com.

Living Shangri-La Toronto

66-storey glass tower housing a 202-room hotel and 393 residential units Builders Westbank Corp and Peterson Group Location University and Richmond Suite Availability More than 80% sold. Residences from 1,537 to 1,833 sq. ft. and \$2.1 to \$2.4-million; Private estates from 891 to 3,306 sq. ft. and \$993,500 to \$5,643,500; Signature suite at 4,431 sq. ft. and \$7,540,500; penthouse suite at 3,336 sq. ft. and \$9,322,500 Hot Tickets Penthouse has 1,400-sq.-ft. terrace with hot tub, some suites have two-car private garages Status Under construction Occupancy 2012 Contact 416-599-0333 or 1-866-599-0333; livingshangri-latoronto.com.

Market Wharf

34 storeys, 465 units Builder Context Development Location Market Street and The Esplanade Suite Availability 90% sold. 885 to 1,738 sq. ft. and priced from \$535,900 to \$1,251,900 Hot Tickets 10,000-sq.-ft. private residents' amenities space Status Under construction Occupancy Now Contact 416-861-8181; marketwharf.com.

Massey Tower

61 storeys, 600 units Builder MOD Developments Ltd. Location Yonge and Shuter Suite Availability 378 to 882 sq. ft. and priced from the high \$200,000s

to \$800,000 Hot Tickets The four-storey portion of the historically designated 1905 Canadian Bank of Commerce Building (situated on the site) will transform into Massey Tower's elegant new entrance and lobby; builder is donating a portion of the property to neighbouring Massey Hall concert hall (also a historic site) for new space and restoration Status Registration Occupancy November 2016 Contact 416-966-0197; themasseytower.com.

Sixty Colborne

25 storeys, 281 units Builder Freed Developments Location King and Church Suite Availability Starting at 435 sq. ft. and priced from high \$200,000s Hot Tickets Entertainment spaces with modern open floor plan concepts Status Registration Occupancy 2015 Contact 416-601-0060; freeddevelopments.com

Trump International Hotel & Tower Toronto

60 storeys, 261 hotel condominiums, 118 residential condominiums Builder Talon International Development Inc. Location Bay and Adelaide Suite Availability 75% sold. Hotel condominiums from 571 to 1,641 sq. ft. and priced from \$978,000 to \$3.1-million; residences range from 1,310 to 3,273 sq. ft. and priced from \$2.3-million to \$6.3-million Hot Tickets 31st floor features STOCK Restaurant and Quartz Crystal Spa Status Hotel open, residential portion under construction Occupancy Hotel suites underway, residences closing in mid- 2012 Contact 416-214-2800; trumptoronto.ca.