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## Street Smarts: Living like kings and queens



Adrian Ma, left, takes in the rays on his new condo's rooftop on King West. He's shown with Kaive Wong.

Tyler Anderson/National Post

**By Suzanne Wintrob**  
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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 third part of a lengthy series examining the GTA's new condo 'hoods.

Phil Carter adores his leafy Queen and Manning neighbourhood. In fact, he and his interior designer wife have lived, worked and played along Queen West for

almost four decades. They raised their children in a detached home surrounded by neighbours of Ukrainian, Polish and Portuguese heritage. They shopped at the local Portuguese fish market and bought their rye bread at the since-closed Future Bakery.

As their neighbours aged, many uprooted for Mississauga or other suburban spots closer to their children. But not the Carters. When their kids moved out, the couple couldn't imagine leaving. Instead, they moved into a three-bedroom apartment above a store along Queen that doubles as their home office. They rarely buy a week's worth of groceries, opting instead for day-to-day shopping at the corner grocer or tucking into one of the area's ethnic restaurants (they list Banu and Terroni as favourites). They also like the lively watering holes farther west on Ossington Avenue. Their friends call them crazy, but the Carters wouldn't have it any other way.

"When we first moved down here, we were considered oddballs and a little bit eccentric," says Mr. Carter, the 72-year-old chair of the West Queen West Business Improvement Area, who counts himself as "the exception to the rule" when it comes to seniors in his midst. "We would invite our friends over for dinner and they'd have the cab wait until we opened the front door for them because they were so afraid that something horrible was going to happen to them."

But nothing horrible has ever happened, he says. Just the opposite — his 'hood has got it all. It's fun, lively, and so safe that Mr. Carter sometimes forgets to lock his door at night. His only wish is for more parking lots to increase foot traffic at the area's retailers.

Adrian Ma is just as smitten with his King West Village digs. The 39-year-old computer engineer, who works from home, recently moved from a condo near St. Lawrence Market to a brand new two-bedroom, 800-sq.-ft. penthouse at Victory Condos on King just west of Spadina Avenue. He's thrilled that his large pad has a 1,000-sq.-ft. private terrace on the second floor and can't wait for the weather to warm up so he can venture outside to work and entertain friends. He's on a high floor overlooking a courtyard at the back of the building, so there's little noise compared to the fire engines he used to hear all night at his previous address.

Yet the bigger draw, he admits, is the alluring neighbourhood, the exciting nightlife, and the artsy vibe.

He's especially keen on the coffee shops and intriguing eateries where he can grab a meal, counting Sense Appeal Coffee Roasters on Spadina, Atelier Café Lounge on King, and Ghandi Roti and Pat's Homestyle Jamaican Restaurant on nearby Queen and Bathurst streets among his faves.

“The St. Lawrence Market neighbourhood never really got as vibrant as the King West side of the house, so at night it was always a little quieter,” Mr. Ma says. “Originally, I thought that was appealing, but it wasn’t compared to what King West could offer for entertainment and restaurants.”

Downtown Toronto is certainly rocking, with the areas between Spadina Avenue and Dufferin Street as well as Liberty Village and Fort York all grabbing attention. The streets are always busy — be it with pedestrians, bicycles or cars — and the multitude of cranes and hoarding are a clear indication that people want to move in rather than just visit on weekends. Condominium presentation centres and real estate agents are busier than ever selling new condos and townhouses plus older row houses and semi-detached homes, but they aren’t surprised by the momentum.

“I like to think of [these buyers] as ‘committed urbanites’ — people who really treasure a lifestyle that promotes living close to where you work, promotes being actively engaged in the culture around you, and being part of a pretty vibrant neighbourhood,” says Paul Johnston of Right at Home Realty, who walks his dog in Trinity Bellwoods Park and is a regular at Ella’s Uncle coffee shop on Dundas and Café Bernate on Queen.

The Drake and The Gladstone hotels are also big draws. Jeff Stober, 52, used to visit his friends in the area’s lofts and fell in love with the west side’s artistic spirit. Today, as owner of The Drake, he gives back to the community by employing locals, supporting area schools and hosting events such as free pancake breakfasts, spring and fall markets, and CAMH fundraisers. He also organizes art exhibitions and plans to add more surprises in the near future.

“There is an amazing assemblage of historic architecture, a great collection of impassioned creatives who live and work in the ’hood, great urban offerings from coffee shops to restaurants to galleries to vintage clothing to mid-century furniture to public spaces and parks,” Mr. Stober says. “It’s friendly, happy, always changing and forever interesting around here.”

His feelings are shared over in Liberty Village. Once the site of Central Prison and the Mercer Reformatory for Women (it was the first ground prisoners set foot on upon their release, hence its moniker), the area’s population will skyrocket over the next few years when a host of new condominium towers are ready for occupancy. If the King streetcar is crammed now, the commuter ride will be even cozier soon. Many riding The Rocket will be tech-savvy singles and couples between 25 and 45 years old who work in advertising, design and public relations, all drawn to the small-town feel and the sociable atmosphere.

“It’s not a gated community where nobody talks to each other,” says actor Todd Hofley, president of the Liberty Village Residents Association. “I go out and I

see the same people on the streets all the time and I talk to them. And within my building that's only exponentially increased. With social networking, people speak to each other on Facebook. If you need a cup of sugar, you just pop on to the Facebook page for my building and you'll have three people respond to you within three minutes. Last week, I needed an Allen key and asked if somebody had one, so I went downstairs and met a new neighbour. And then another neighbour popped on [to the Facebook page] and said, 'Can I borrow that?' This happens on a regular basis. So it's very much a community feeling."

Naturally, retailers and eateries are pleased with the growth. Robert Whitfield has owned Casalife furniture store for nine years. Liberty Village was "a mud pit" back then, he recalls, with no grocery store, no townhouses and few roads. Now that it's such a happening place, he still chuckles every time the bus passes his window.

With the folks in Liberty Village and Fort York frequenting West Queen West and King West, and vice versa, their enthusiasm is contagious. As Mr. Stober puts it: "I tend to have a number of favourite neighbourhoods in the city and it's why I love this city as much as I do. The opportunity to think out of the box and explore our many neighborhoods is truly unique. From the Annex to the Junction, from Roncesvalles Village to Dundas West to the emerging downtown scene, it's all amazing. Toronto is experiencing a major period of sustained growth, be it architectural, cultural, commercial or hospitality based, and it's a lot of fun to be a part of."