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Street Smarts: I love North York, Toronto's 'second downtown'



Lisa Kay, a North York resident, relaxes in a park on Humberstone Drive. "I like that the neighbourhood is evolving."

Matthew Sherwood for 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 eighth part of a lengthy series examining the GTA's new condo 'hoods.

Lisa Kay has lived in the Yonge and Sheppard area for almost 20 years. She has moved around several times, settling last summer in a three-bedroom townhouse in the Avondale community, a popular collection of condo towers and townhomes near Yonge and Highway 401.

"I like that the neighbourhood is evolving," says Ms. Kay, a 45-year-old mother of two teenagers who works for a general contractor at Finch and Highway 400 and uses the freeway regularly to shuttle between client appointments. "There will be more restaurants coming in. We're close to the theatre and skating," she says. "The movies are great for my kids. It's really a great area. It has a very urban feel without being downtown. And it's a very safe area, too."

Roman and Julia Marants concur. The young couple grew up in Vaughan and their families still live there. He works in Etobicoke as a chartered accountant and she works downtown as a pharmacist. When they decided to buy their first home, a 700-square-foot condo near Yonge and Sheppard proved ideal.

"We didn't want to be too far from our families, but at the same time we liked the area," says Mr. Marants, 29. "It's a very young area and close to everything. It's not as busy as downtown but still there are lots of things to do ... It's a central spot. I'm not really a city person, so I don't like all the cars and beeping you find [downtown]. It's quieter here, but still very accessible."

It helps that the subway is a seven-minute walk from their home "so it saves on one car," he says.

With the area's detached homes on standard 50-foot lots selling for \$1.2-million, people like Ms. Kay and the Marantses are opting for condominium living with easy subway access. To their delight, the North Yonge Corridor between the 401 and Steeles offers a wide selection of new addresses. With so many places to eat, drink and be merry, the area is constantly buzzing with residents, visitors, office employees and construction crews finding plenty to do.

“What makes North York interesting — whether it’s the North York Centre or the Sheppard corridor — is that it really is the centre of the region now,” says Leo DeSorcy, manager of urban design in North York District for the City of Toronto’s planning department. “We were at the northern fringes when North York was laid out in the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s. But now with the development north of us in Markham and Vaughan and all of the development east and west within the greater GTA, if you kind of make a geographical centre it is Yonge and the 401.”

Though singles, young couples and families are buying into newer buildings where suites average 800 sq. ft., those downsizing from nearby houses are opting for older buildings where 1,500-sq.-ft. units feature larger kitchens, as well as living and dining rooms.

“They’re willing to renovate these older buildings that were built in the ’80s or ’90s,” explains Mark Oulahen, a realtor with Re/Max Realtron’s The Oulahen Team that specializes in the North Yonge Corridor. “They’re more open to the practicality of buying something that they can do themselves, vs. some younger clients that just want to buy it finished and maybe can’t afford the renovations.”

But whatever the demographic, those living there find it quite appealing. One of the things Ms. Kay especially loves about the Yonge–Sheppard area is its cultural diversity, evident in the numerous nationalities walking about and the different ethnic restaurants dotting Yonge Street. Because she and her kids like Asian food, she stocks her kitchen with ingredients from several nearby Korean and Japanese grocery stores or takes a short drive to Galati Market Fresh or the 20,000-sq.-ft. Sunny Supermarket at Leslie and Finch. Soon, she’ll add Whole Foods Market to her favourite hangouts, given its impending move to the 60,000-sq.-ft. retail space at Tridel’s two-tower, 682-unit Hullmark Centre at Yonge and Sheppard.

The area’s multiculturalism is also reflected in the events and festivals held throughout the year at Mel Lastman Square. Named after the man who reigned over North York as its mayor for 25 years, the square comprises 20,000 sq. ft. of open space, a garden court, an outdoor amphitheatre, fountains and a reflecting pool. Heather Atherton, the City of Toronto’s supervisor of

community recreation for Wards 23 and 24, says many of the family-oriented programs attract people from all over the city yet they “are very representative of the neighbourhood.” She points to the annual Hispanic Fiesta, Korean Harvest Festival and Iranian Fire Festival as prime examples.

During winter, the square’s outdoor ice rink also attracts locals, as does the farmers’ market from June to October and the annual Canada Day fireworks. Swimmers and those new to the sport flock to Douglas Snow Aquatic Centre’s Olympic-size swimming pool for laps, lessons, leisure swim, aquafit classes and whirlpool therapy. Families also head to the new Edithvale Community Centre on Finch Avenue for athletics, fitness, dance, crafts, youth and seniors programs. The North York Central Library is a popular hub for book lovers and students. And the lush parks offer attractive tennis courts, baseball diamonds and trails.

Since every urban centre must have an entertainment district, this uptown downtown boasts two movie theatres, concerts and dancing in Mel Lastman Square, and live performances at the Toronto Centre for the Arts. The latter contains three impressive halls — a 200-seat studio for small performances, the 1,036-seat George Weston Recital Hall modelled after recital halls in Europe and the 1,727-seat Main Stage that’s just wrapping up *Shrek The Musical* and getting set for a production of *West Side Story*.

Neda Moussavi lives up the road from the theatre, though admits she works too many hours to take advantage of everything the neighbourhood offers. Instead, she socializes at work. Ms. Moussavi has worked at Alegno Italian restaurant for 16 years, initially as a waitress and the last seven years as the owner. When she’s not overseeing the wood-oven pizzas, fish, meat and pasta dishes or running around the neighbourhood to buy supplies, the 52-year-old delights in chatting up her customers. Though the area has changed dramatically over the past few years in terms of intensification, she says, it’s the people who give it a dose of small-town feel.

“I’ve seen kids growing up from five or six years old and now they’re 16 and come themselves,” she says. “The parents know me, so if the kids want to celebrate their birthday, they come and then the dads pay with their credit

cards. The area is like a family. If you've been there for a while, people know you. It's like being at home."

If Mr. Lastman is watching, there's "nooooo" doubt he's tremendously proud of Toronto's other downtown.

Street Smarts: New in North York

By Suzanne Wintrob

Jeff and Mark Oulahen grew up near Yonge and Sheppard, went to the local public schools, and spent their teenage years watching construction crews build condominiums and movie theatres. Today, the brothers spend hours working and playing just steps from their homes.

They love strolling the streets with their wives and small children, stopping in at local pubs and restaurants where they know many of the owners and regulars by name. Government services such as renewing passports or paying taxes are down the street, as are several parks where they play baseball and hockey and help their children manoeuvre the jungle gyms. With the subway right there, Jeff's wife hops on to get to her downtown job and Jeff hops on at the end of the day to pick up their daughter from daycare.

"[This area] is really convenient for walking, for subway, for driving," says Jeff, who works with his brother and parents at Re/Max Realtron's The Oulahen Team near Yonge and Highway 401 where condos rule the landscape. "You feel like you're in the centre of the city."

According to Urbanation, there are eight condominium projects — some with multiple towers — on the go or in the works in North York City Centre (between Highway 401 and Steeles Avenue and on or near Yonge Street), comprising 2,820 units. Here is a sampling of those with suites still up for grabs:

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35 storeys, 371 units plus 16 townhomes
Builder Minto Location Yonge and Sheppard
Suite Availability From one-bedrooms starting at \$292,380 to two-plus-dens from \$564,380, townhomes from \$798,900
Hot Ticket Private

water feature adorned with seating areas in the back of the building Status Now open Occupancy January 2015 Contact 416-915-3805; minto.com

Avonshire

Master-planned community with three condo towers plus townhomes Builder Tridel Location Yonge and Highway 401 Suite Availability Six 1,052-sq.-ft units at Avonshire Tower (Phase 1) priced from \$496,500 to \$506,500; Aristo Towers (Phase 3) has 483- to 964-sq.-ft. units available, priced from \$290,000 to \$525,000, 79% sold; one 2,420-sq.-ft. townhome remains for \$910,000 Hot Ticket Large private green space Status Avonshire complete, Aristo under construction Occupancy Avonshire and townhomes occupied, Aristo occupancy Spring 2014 Contact 416-730-0300; tridel.com

The Celsius

18-storey, 208-unit building plus 20 townhomes Builder Shiu Pong Developments Limited Location Yonge and Churchill Suite Availability Only three condo units available from 730 to 900 sq. ft. and priced from \$415,900 to \$509,000; only six townhomes remaining from 980 to 1,400 sq. ft. and priced from \$519,900 to \$739,000 Hot Tickets Outdoor terrace in condo building, private rooftop gardens in townhomes Status Construction to start in April Occupancy March 2014 Contact 416-218-8877; celsiuscondo.com

Gibson Square

Two 42-storey towers Builder Menkes Location Yonge and Park Home Suite Availability 89% sold. From 567 to 1,356 sq. ft. and priced from \$341,990 to \$881,990 Hot Tickets Towers have white roof caps and share a five-storey mixed-use podium; two-storey lobby houses 20,000-sq.-ft. Gibson Club with fitness centre, pool, party rooms, theatre and more Status Under construction Occupancy Fall 2013 Contact 416-730-9722; menkes.com

Savvy

22-storey condominium incorporated into a master plan with townhomes Builder Menkes Location Yonge and Sheppard Suite Availability 90% sold. 480 to 1,030 sq. ft. and priced from \$265,990 to \$482,990 Hot Tickets Community's design includes landscaping with naturalized Ontario planting, arbours and trellises, gazebo, walking paths and private terrace with a serene

water and rock garden Status Complete Occupancy Spring 2012 Contact
416-730-1600; menkes.com

The Palm

23 storeys, 216 units Builder Castle Royale Development Ltd. Location Yonge
and Finch Suite Availability 75% sold. Two-bedrooms starting from 717 sq. ft.
and \$399,900 to 823 sq. ft. plus balconies from mid-\$400,000s; penthouses
from 1,208 to more than 1,700 sq. ft with up to 720-sq.- ft. terraces starting
from \$799,900 Hot Tickets Boardroom, business centre and executive
concierge Status Under construction Occupancy Fall 2012 Contact
416-306-1000; thepalmcondos.com