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Street Smarts: Footloose and fancy in Toronto's Yorkville Why you should live in this historic hotspot



Yorkville is full of hotspots, such as Zaza espresso bar, where Bob Saunderson enjoys a laugh. Darren Calabrese/National Post

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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 second part of a lengthy series examining the GTA's new condo 'hoods.

Bob Saunderson may know when Hollywood's biggest names are strolling through his neighbourhood, but don't ask him to point them out.

The British-born Yorkville resident says word spreads fast when a celebrity is in town, with the concierge at his Bay Street luxury condominium quick to divulge where the actors are wining and dining. Still, Mr. Saunderson can't always keep up. In fact, he spent several mornings in a row

chatting about soccer with a friendly young chap at one of the area's eight Starbucks coffee shops. When the barista divulged that it was actor and *Dancing with the Stars* contestant David Arquette, "I still didn't know who it was," the 70-year-old chuckles. His friends are still ribbing him about it.

Though star sightings may be why many Torontonians flock to Yorkville — especially during September's Toronto International Film Festival — people like Mr. Saunderson simply call it home.

The area has long been a coveted destination for the rich and famous, with residents tucked into swanky condos and million-dollar Victorian houses. Yet amidst the shoppers perusing the high-end boutiques, the professionals grabbing lunch between meetings, and the growing number of luxury hotel and condo projects in various stages of construction, the neighbourhood is trying desperately to hold on to its village feel.

The firehall, built in 1876 beside the long-gone town hall, still stands proudly on Yorkville Avenue and bears the original coat of arms (circa 1853). Nearby is the 105-year-old Yorkville Public Library, the 130-year-old Gothic revival Church of the Redeemer and the historic Heliconian Hall.

There's a plaque on Pink Tartan's boutique pointing out that it was once the sheriff's house and the local jail. There's still a hint of history at home and decor store Teatro Verde, where the first Mount Sinai Hospital once stood. Several houses along the attractive side streets reveal signs designating them heritage homes. And while Canadian singers such as Joni Mitchell, Gordon Lightfoot, Ian Tyson and Neil Young moved on long ago with the rest of the hippie generation, the steps in front of Over the Rainbow jean boutique still conjure up feelings of nostalgia for those on the cusp of midlife.

John Caliendo, co-president of the ABC Residents' Association (an acronym for the boundaries of Avenue Road, Bloor Street and the CPR rail tracks), moved from New York into his Berryman Street home in the 1990s and has been carefully watching the dramatic changes taking place outside his door ever since. Though Yorkville was a popular place before he got there, he says the area was experiencing "a downturn in terms of its attractiveness" when he moved in. One "mega nightclub" was particularly irking residents and the area was losing its cachet.

But in the past few years — particularly when Whole Foods opened on Avenue Road — Mr. Caliendo has noticed new life in the air "that has completely revitalized traffic in Hazelton Lanes" and its surrounding streets. While many people living in the houses are singles or couples, he says parents working in the money management business have begun to move in. In a nod to the new kids on the block, the developer of the new Four Seasons Hotel is contributing funds to improve the playground and soccer field at the local elementary school that are used by students and the community.

Empty nesters, such as Mr. Saunderson, are also the new normal, drawn in by the dozens of condominium projects on the go or in planning stages. The buildings come in all shapes and sizes, from luxury low-rise structures like seven-storey 36Hazelton (rumour has it that actor Mark Wahlberg bought a place there) and 19-storey MuseumHouse (nightlife impresario Charles Khabouth is part-owner) to the 32-storey New Residences of Yorkville Plaza (the site of the iconic Four Seasons Hotel, which closes in March) and the long-awaited 70-storey One Bloor. Many dub themselves as luxury living, with suites priced into the millions of dollars.

Judging by sales, there seems to be no shortage of buyers, with many swapping large homes in such tony 'hoods as Rosedale, Forest Hill and the Bridle Path for a piece of the downtown action. They're loyal to the local businesses, gathering at L'Unita restaurant for a midweek bite, Pangaea restaurant for Saturday lunch, and Zaza Espresso Bar for hot drinks and conversation with the sociable owner. They enjoy walking their dogs or people-watching in Cumberland Avenue's Village of Yorkville Park, and they join visitors at the annual Icefest (taking place next weekend), at summertime's Music in the Park, and at the fairly new exotic car show held in June.

"Our first-generation shoppers are moving down here, and our second and third generation shoppers are coming to visit them," says Over the Rainbow owner Joel Carman, who has spent 37 years watching the changing landscape from the window of his landmark store. "In some cases, it's a big circle, what comes around goes around. There's only one Bloor Street and only one Yorkville."

Sure, it hasn't all been rosy for residents and businesses given the construction of the past two years that gave the main thoroughfare a facelift. The Bloor Street Transformation Project from Avenue Road to Church Street — a \$20-million initiative fully funded by area businesses — has resulted in wide granite sidewalks and curbs, planting of 134 London Plane trees and 20,000 tulip bulbs, a sustainable soil cell system to promote optimal growth, and new bike rings and benches. A \$1-million permanent art installation will go live at the Bloor/Yonge intersection later this year. Briar de Lange, executive director of the Bloor-Yorkville Business Improvement Area, calls it "the icing on the cake."

"It's a gift to the city from the Bloor Street community," says Mr. Saunderson, chair of the Bloor Street Business Improvement Area that was formed exclusively to secure funding for the transformation project.

Now that the beautification project is complete, residents and businesses are continuing to focus their attention on the residential construction. Ms. de Lange says her group is monitoring the new developments to ensure they are "human-scaled buildings" that lessen shadow and impact to create a pleasant pedestrian-friendly look and feel.

"The challenge is maintaining a village charm," she says of the high-rise construction.

Being a tight-knit bunch, both businesses and residents alike credit the BIA for its tireless efforts.

Mr. Carman is thankful for "some very bright and optimistic people" who are working hard to retain the area's warmth and vitality. And it gives him hope that his stomping ground will maintain its allure into the future.

"If things are done properly and in scale and thoughtfully, I think Yorkville in five years can [still] be a wonderful area with great shopping, lots of vibrancy and outdoor cafés," he says.

She won't be taking possession for at least two years, but Vickie Zemelman is already excited about her new pied-à-terre.

The North York mother of three school-aged children has just bought a one-bedroom, \$500,000 condominium at the New Residences of Yorkville Plaza, Camrost Felcorp's 32-storey, 500-unit tower on the site of Toronto's renowned Four Seasons Hotel. When it's complete in 2014, Ms. Zemelman plans to use it as her weekend getaway so she and her husband can have some alone time or entertain friends on their terrace. Her parents, who winter in Florida, have bought a similar unit down the hall and will use it whenever they're in town.

"When I was much younger, we used to hang out in Yorkville," reminisces Ms. Zemelman, 39.

"[My friends and I] used to go to Remys and hang out on the steps at Over the Rainbow. It was always a hip place to be. I love it there," she says. "I love the fact that the street itself is very quiet but yet you're two steps away from Bloor, near a lot of the major attractions in the city — it's the heart of our city and I'm looking forward to living there."

With hundreds of brand new condominium suites up for grabs in Yorkville, developers are banking on people such as the Zemelmans to snap them up; the purchases will afford them an exciting entry into Toronto's growth.

Hotelier and man-about-town Charles Khabouth doesn't live in the 'hood but once owned six Yorkville venues and now has Bloor Street's La Societé Bistro on his roster. He's looking forward to Yorkville's future.

"I'm jealous a little bit of the cosmopolitan big American cities where the density is so exciting, there's so many people, [there's an] energy level, and I'm happy that this is happening to Toronto and that specifically the Bay-Bloor-Yorkville area is moving in that direction," he says. "I'm more for density and more traffic and more energy, people and better sales. It all translates into happier residents and happier commercial tenants. Overall it's a great experience."

So what's on the go? Here's a sampling of what's making headlines in Yorkville:

CHAZ.Yorkville on Charles

A 39-storey, 420-unit glass highrise with a five-storey podium **Builder** 45 Charles and Eden Shaw Homes **Location** Charles St. E. and Yonge St. **Suites** Two-bedroom-plus-dens ranging from 378 to 1,300 sq. ft. and \$300,000s to \$2.5-million **Hot Tickets** The Chaz Club on the 36th and 37th floors has a VIP Room where tenants can cook, wine and dine up to 20 guests, and a two-storey Grand Room with soaring glass windows and an outdoor terrace where they can bring their own drinks and entertain friends **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** June 2013 **Contact** 416- 922-0045; chazyorkville.com.

Exhibit

A 32-storey, 204-unit project across from the Royal Ontario Museum **Builders** Bazis, Metropia and Plaza **Location** Bloor St. W. and Avenue Rd. **Suite Availability** More than 90% sold. A handful of

suites remain averaging \$1,500 per sq. ft. **Hot Tickets** The dynamic architecture designed by Roy Varicalli features four cubes stacked on top of each other, with each cube slightly angled from the one below **Status** Starting construction this spring **Occupancy** 2014 **Contact** 416-967-7778; exhibitresidences.com.

The Florian

25-storey, 100 suites **Builder** Diamante Development **Location** Davenport Rd. at Bay St. **Suite Availability** 85% sold. 1,500 to 5,000 sq. ft., starting at \$1.5-million **Hot Tickets** The \$12-million 5,500-sq.-ft. penthouse suite with 3,500 sq. ft of outdoor terrace and lap pool has just been released; unique wine club has professional wine storage opportunities and private tasting room **Status** Nearing completion **Occupancy** June 2012 **Contact** 416-599-7667; theflorian.com.

Four Seasons Private Residences

Two towers combining luxury hotel and residences **Builder** Bay-Yorkville Developments **Location** Bay St. and Yorkville Ave. **Suite Availability** 75% sold. The 55-storey West Tower incorporates a 23-storey, 253-room hotel plus private residences from floors 24 to 55. Only two units remain for sale, both 2,874-sq.-ft., two-bedroom-plus-library with large corner terraces and priced at \$5-million. The 27-storey East Tower includes fourth floor suites with terraces and corner penthouses with terraces ranging from 1,265 to 1,578 sq. ft and ranging from \$1.9- to \$3.6-million **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** July through October 2012 **Contact** 416-775-7500; yorkvilleresidences.com.

MuseumHouse

A 19-storey, 27-unit building clad in limestone and glass **Builder** Veisman **Location** Bloor St. W. and Avenue Rd. **Suite Availability** 81% sold. From 1,604 with a 117-sq-ft. terrace beginning at \$1.675-million to a 5,618 sq. ft. two-storey penthouse with interior private elevator and four terraces totalling 1,152 sq. ft. for \$12.8-million **Hot Tickets** Residences have terraces with suites occupying full and half floors, and all suites have private direct elevator access **Occupancy** Now **Contact** 416-925-9191 for private viewings; museumhouseonbloor.com.

New Residences of Yorkville Plaza

A 32-storey tower with under 500 units is being billed as “the ultimate pied-à-terre address” **Builder** Camrost Felcorp **Location** Yorkville Ave. and Avenue Rd. **Suite Availability** 370 to 2,800 sq ft from the mid-\$300,000s to more than \$2-million **Hot Tickets** The distinguished brutalist style architecture of the longstanding Four Season Hotel will be anchored by a contemporary two-storey glass podium featuring an impressive retail envelope **Status** In sales, grand opening on Feb. 25 **Occupancy** May 2014 **Contact** yorkvilleplaza.com.

One Bloor

70 storeys, 735 units **Builder** Great Gulf **Location** Yonge and Bloor streets **Suite Availability** 92% sold. From 744 to 1,727 sq. ft. starting at in the low \$700,000s. Some two-storey city suites are available in the podium **Hot Tickets** More than 27,000 sq. ft. of resort-inspired interior amenities

plus 19,000 sq.ft of outdoor amenity space **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** December 2014
Contact 416-922-0081; onebloor.com.

133 Hazelton

A nine-floor, 38-suite classic-looking building **Builder** Mizrahi-Khalili **Location** Hazelton Ave. and Davenport Rd. **Suite Availability** From 1,500 to 2,500 sq. ft. and \$1.8-million to \$3.5-million, and three two-storey, 2,000-sq.-ft. townhomes at about \$2.5-million **Hot Tickets** Many suites have indoor/outdoor fireplaces **Status** Actively selling, construction to begin this spring **Occupancy** Fall 2014 **Contact** 416-926-9900; 133hazelton.com.

Pears on the Avenue

20 storeys, 150 units **Location** Avenue Rd. and Davenport Rd. **Suite Availability** 75% sold. From 486 to 2,745 sq. ft. and \$380,990 to \$3.4-million **Hot Tickets** Three-storey lobby with dramatic spiral staircase, spa-inspired indoor pool and whirlpool, and yoga/meditation deck **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** June 2014 **Contact** 416-323-0100; menkes.com.

77 Charles

16 storeys, 50 units **Builder** Aspen Ridge Homes **Location** Charles St. W. and St. Thomas St. **Suite Availability** 70% sold. Ranging from \$2.2-million for a 1,200-sq.-ft. two-bedroom to the largest penthouse at just under 4,000 sq. ft. for \$5.9-million **Hot Ticket** Architect Yann Weymouth was the chief design architect of Paris' Grand Louvre Museum **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** Summer 2012 **Contact** 416-203-7034; 77charles.com.

The Perry

11 storeys, 45 units **Builder** Mansouri Group **Location** Pears Avenue **Suite Availability** Condos and two-storey townhomes from 650 to 3,950 sq. ft. and priced from \$550,000 to more than \$5-million **Hot Tickets** All suites have either terraces or a full-height glazed sliding façade component **Status** Sales centre launches in mid-March **Occupancy** December 2014 **Contact** 416-837-8689; theperry.com.

36Hazelton

Seven storeys, 18 unique residences on residential street **Builders** Alterra Group of Companies & Zinc Development Corp. **Location** Hazelton Avenue **Suite Availability** 72% sold. From 2,089 sq. ft. at \$2.8-million to a 4,693-sq.-ft. penthouse at \$12-million. There's also a 4,154-sq.-ft. townhome for \$6.7-million **Hot Ticket** The building will maintain the neo-Gothic schoolhouse heritage façade yet mix both heritage and contemporary design **Status** Construction to begin this spring **Occupancy** December 2013 **Contact** 416-216-4717; 36hazelton.com.

U Condos

Two contemporary high-rise condominium towers encompassing just over 900 suites **Builder** Pemberton Group **Location** Bay and Bloor streets **Suite Availability** 95% sold. From the mid-\$600,000s for 892-sq.-ft. (two-bedroom) to more than \$1-million for 1,458-sq.-ft. (two-bedroom + den) **Hot Tickets** 4,500-sq.-ft. rooftop amenities with party room wrap-around terrace and 360-

degree city views, library, billiards, exquisite three-storey lobby and fitness centre with steam rooms
Status Under construction **Occupancy** November 2013 **Contact** 416-546-6605;
pembertongroup.com.

The Uptown Residences

A 48-storey Art Deco-inspired condominium **Builder** Pemberton Group **Location** Balmuto Street
Suite Availability 95% sold. From 1,270 to 2,110 sq. ft. and \$941,900 to \$1.5-million **Hot Tickets**
Two-level atrium lobby with columns and Art Deco chandelier, virtual golf room **Status** Complete
Occupancy 120 days **Contact** 416-326-4100 for private viewings; pembertongroup.com.

The Yorkville

31 storeys, 233 units **Builder** Lifetime Developments **Location** Davenport Rd. and McMurrich St.
Suite Availability Only one suite remaining. From \$999,900 for 961 sq. ft. with a 1,116-sq.-ft.
terrace **Hot Tickets** Grand two-storey lobby with three-sided fireplace, Club Yorkville with
residents' lounge and piano bar, wine cellar with private lockers **Status** Under construction
Occupancy September 2014 **Contact** 416-987-3322 for private viewings; theyorkville.com.