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Street Smarts: Life as a bona-fide east ender



Kirsten Schwarzkopf, Marina Johnston and Marie Klassen, with their dogs Leo, Stella and Stitch feel a sense of camaraderie in Leslieville. 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 fifth part of a lengthy series examining the GTA's new condo 'hoods.

Marina Johnston knew she had made the right move the day she looked out of her window and saw a deer jumping over her backyard fence.

A mental health nurse consultant, Ms. Johnston spent 14 years raising her two children in a small 1940s detached house in North Toronto's Allenby district. But when her daughter joined a church youth group in Leslieville, Ms. Johnston found herself trekking down there frequently and made friends with the other parents, many of whom lived in the area.

As she waited for her daughter's programs to end, Ms. Johnston often tucked into Queen Street East's interesting stores for funky clothing and fresh food. She liked the diversity, or what she calls "the changing neighbourhood." She liked the charming shops and cafés "and the warm feeling of the shop owners." It was close to The Beach's boardwalk and right on the streetcar line. When she stumbled upon the perfect semi-detached home on a small one-way street just steps from the action, Ms. Johnston was sold. Four years ago, the family and their two pooches moved in.

"My street is a hidden gem," says Ms. Johnston, 49. "It's quaint and quiet. I have great neighbours. There's a mechanic on the corner and one of my favourite restaurants, Le Papillon, is at the end of the street. There's a dog park on Queen. And some of my faves are all in a row together — Film Buff for DVDs, Queen Margherita Pizza and Any Direct Flight that has fab clothes with beautiful local designs and a European-feel coffee shop serving pastries and free trade coffee. Talk about handy!" she says. "And then the deer jumped my fence. That's how close nature is to us. It's an oasis in the city."

From Riverside by the Don Valley Parkway through to The Beach by Victoria Park Avenue, the long stretch of Queen Street East is a happening place. On weekdays it's where the locals shop, eat and do errands while on weekends it's a welcome escape for those looking for a downtown experience with a small-town feel. While the eclectic mix of hip boutiques and eateries draws similarities to those of bustling West Queen West, the street's east end feels just far enough removed from the city core to give it a tranquil yet trendy ambience.

"Leslieville is really interesting because it really was Nothingville," says Marie Klaassen, a 45-year-old public health nurse manager who moved to the area in 1993. "When we bought there it was working class, old East Enders, snuggled in between Chinatown East and Little India, and it was nothing. It was a little bit seedy. Now, when you look down at a corner like Leslie and Queen, you have that dichotomy happening. You have The Duke tavern right across the street from Gio Rana's [Italian restaurant], which are the two parallel groups in the neighbourhood — the old working class East End hangouts and the new gentrified yuppy-ish hangouts. It's an interesting mix."

Ms. Klaassen and her husband originally chose Leslieville for its ethnic and sexual diversity. Theirs is "a real porch street," with almost all of the houses sporting original front porches, which are generous and welcoming and used often ("It increases a sense of neighbourliness and community when people sit in the front of their homes versus the backyards," she says). They rarely go to the big grocery stores, preferring instead

to support businesses in Leslieville and Riverside. Among their stops are Rowe Farms for fresh meat, Leslieville Cheese Market for international cheeses, Brick Street Bakery for bread and sandwiches, one-year-old Hooked for fish and shellfish (run by a Leslieville couple who met while studying at the Stratford Chefs School) and Merchants of Green Coffee. Ms. Klaassen is a regular at Fuss Hair Studio. Her only wish is for a greengrocer to set up shop on the strip.

But it's not only shopping and eating that has people talking. The city-run South Riverdale Parent Centre in Riverside offers parents and caregivers the chance to share parenting and childcare issues and take related courses while their children play with other kids. Many longstanding friendships stem from the centre and brim over to local eateries such as Bonjour Brioche, Coyote Willie and Dark Horse Espresso.

Maggie McAdorey, a 37-year-old student and mother of two toddlers, frequents the Parent Centre regularly, often with her husband. She says it's better than going to parent-and-child classes elsewhere "because you really do get a sense of your neighbours." She loves living in Riverside because it's "friendly and unpretentious and still feels very involved in urban culture, like you're part of the beat of the city."

Over in The Beach, Angie Winstl and Mark Ackland are just as pumped about their 'hood. They moved eight years ago from St. Clair and Christie to start a family. Now they have a house in the Upper Beach and two small children, take the streetcar to work, and spend a lot of time in The Beach's playgrounds and cafés with other young families. There's a small pub near their house called McCarthy's and they know the owner by name, and he's happy having the children play while the parents relax with a drink.

"We used to go up to the cottage all the time in the summer, but last year, and after having [our second child], we realized how nice it was to actually live by a lake and go in the water. ... It's a great excuse to get outside."

Dogs are another big deal on Queen East, with doggie shops with names such as The Bone House, Soggy Dog and Tails drawing crowds and off-leash parks hectic. There's one right by The Beach's boardwalk, where owners catch up with neighbours or take in the striking ice formations created on the rocks during cold winters.

Yet despite the praise for Queen East, there's one contentious issue: Given all the attention, condominium developers have taken notice. Ward 32 Councillor Mary-Margaret McMahon says she favours buildings that top off at six storeys, have more brick and less glass, and are environmentally friendly. Two weeks ago, she led 100 concerned residents on an interactive walk along a strip of Queen that has been particularly popular with builders. During the walk, she presented them with an independent "segment study" of the area that will feed into a Queen Street East Visioning Study coming soon.

Among the controversial proposed sites is the iconic Lick's restaurant, a fixture on Queen East since 1980. When it was announced last year that it would be demolished to make room for a six-storey condo building, residents were afraid it would undermine the small-town feel. It prompted the formation of Friends of Queen Street in The Beach (FoQS), a group that is monitoring ongoing development discussions for the main thoroughfare. FoQS stresses its members are not trying to prevent change nor are opposed to development. They simply want to protect the look of their 'hood.

Still, not everyone is opposed to development. Ms. Klaassen, for one, welcomes it.

"Building up instead of out is wonderful for community vitality and is the best plan when it comes to urban expansion," she says. "It beats urban sprawl, which leads to segmentation of communities as opposed to integration. We are all for the condos and in-fill housing being added to our neighbourhood. It also draws a wider variety of socio-economic dynamics into a neighbourhood, which enriches it for everyone."

Street Smarts: A view of the east

By Suzanne Wintrob

Paula Fletcher loves meeting new people. Naturally, the Ward 30 councillor finds Queen Street East the perfect place to do just that given the abundance of independent coffee shops that serve as community hangouts.

"I like being outside on the street and riding my bike," says Fletcher, who oversees the Riverside and Leslieville neighbourhoods. "In the summer I like to see everybody, have a coffee, get some flowers, visit people, go to Ralph Martin Centre, stop in at the park. There are just great things to do along that street."

But the one thing she and her constituents are distressed about is a condominium project called Film Studio Lofts at Queen and Pape that has been sitting idle for several years. The exterior of the fenced-off mid-rise building sports yellow drywall and it appears there's little movement on the construction front. But alas, the builder has a building permit and there's not much anyone can do.

"There's no legal remedy," says Fletcher, who is trying to have the scaffolding removed. "As long as someone is doing a little bit of work they still have an open permit. I find that very difficult. ... I think it's a problem when people run out of money or run out of steam and then something like that is left on the street."

But the good news is there are plenty of projects rolling. Here's a sampling of those on the go:

Beach Club Loft

Six storeys, 47 units **Builder** Zen Homes **Location** Kingston and Woodbine **Suite Availability** 35% sold. Studios to two-level townhomes and two-level penthouse lofts from 457 to 1,375 sq. ft. priced from low \$200,000s to \$890,000 **Hot Tickets** Front windows are subtly angled to create a curving ripple effect evoking the gentle play of waves on water; oversized terraces with lake and city skyline views **Status** Pre-construction **Occupancy** Summer 2014 **Contact** 416-901-7333; beachclublofts.com

The Carlaw

12 storeys, 320 lofts **Builder** Streetcar Developments **Location** Carlaw and Dundas **Suite Availability** 460 to 1,561 sq. ft. priced from \$244,900 **Hot Tickets** "Woven" vertical and

Carmelina Condominiums

12 storeys, 148 units **Builder** Fusioncorp Developments **Location** Woodbine and Danforth **Suite Availability** 72% sold. 512 to 1,018 sq. ft. priced from \$239,900 **Hot Tickets** Residents lounge with fireplace, lockers on each floor, bicycle parking **Status** Construction starts in June **Occupancy** Fall/Winter 2013 **Contact** 416-423-8500; carmelinacondos.com

Flatiron Lofts

10 storeys, 97 units **Builder** Lamb Development **Location** Dundas and Carlaw **Suite Availability** Eight residential units remaining. 761 to 1,214 sq. ft. priced from \$411,900 to \$650,900 **Hot Tickets** Flatiron-shaped loft building **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** May 2012 **Contact** 416-368-5262; flatironlofts.ca

Lakehouse Beach Residences

Six storeys, 28 units **Builder** Reserve Properties **Location** Kenilworth and Queen **Suite Availability** 90% sold. One- and two-bedroom open concept floor plans from 550 to 1,880 sq. ft. priced from \$415,000 **Hot Tickets** Grand terraces and wraparound balconies up to 1,058 sq. ft. **Status** Actively selling **Occupancy** n/a **Contact** 416-546-3294; lakehousecondo.com

Lofts on Degrassi Park

10 units contemporary live-work 3½-storey townhomes **Builder** Zen Homes **Location** Dundas and Degrassi **Suite Availability** 70% sold. 1,651 to 1,836 sq. ft. starting from \$689,000 **Hot Tickets** Two-storey, 17-ft. authentic loft and floor-to-ceiling windows, backs onto Degrassi Park **Status**

Construction starts in March or April **Occupancy** Late 2012 **Contact** 416-645-3868; degrassilofts.com

The Ninety

Nine storeys, 222 lofts and penthouses **Builder** Harhay Construction Ltd. **Location** Broadview and Queen **Suite Availability** 82% sold. 777 to 1,240 sq. ft. priced from \$367,900 to \$621,900 **Hot Tickets** Half the lofts and penthouses overlook a contemporary garden **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** September 2012 **Contact** 416-489-8070; theninety.ca

The Queen Rushbrook

10 townhomes **Builder** Manorgate Homes **Location** Queen and Rushbrook **Suite Availability** 1,600 to 1,650 sq. ft. priced from \$649,000 to \$659,000 **Hot Tickets** Rooftop terraces **Status** Actively selling **Occupancy** February 2013 **Contact** 1-888-342-5955; manorgatehomes.com

Riverside Towns

63 Victorian-styled stacked towns **Builder** Hyde Park Homes and Lamb Development **Location** Broadview and Queen **Suite Availability** 70% sold. 712 to 1,328 sq. ft. priced from \$354,900 to \$609,900 **Hot Tickets** The chance to live near avant-garde galleries, great restaurants and eclectic boutiques **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** April 2013 **Contact** 416-214-2000; riversidetowns.com

Showcase

Seven-storey loft-style building with 230 units **Builder** Aragon Properties Ltd. **Location** Carlaw and Colgate **Suite Availability** 60% sold. 427 to 1,090 sq. ft. priced from \$231,900 to \$547,900 **Hot Tickets** Penthouse suite has skylight, all suites feature reclaimed brick wall **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** December 2013 **Contact** 416-778-8488; showcaseliving.ca

The Swanwick

10 three-storey townhomes on converted church property **Builder** Buildcrest **Location** Main and Kingston **Suite Availability** One remaining unit at 1,743 sq. ft. with 900-sq.-ft. backyard for \$749,000 **Hot Tickets** Original stained glass and wood details, rustic look and feel **Status** Complete **Occupancy** Now **Contact** 416-699-9292; theswanwick.com

The Synclofts

Eight storeys, 98 lofts **Builder** Streetcar Development **Location** 630 Queen St. E. **Suite Availability** 792 to 945 sq. ft. priced from \$384,900 **Hot Tickets** Built-in iPod docking station, pre-wired speakers, wireless Internet connectivity and high-definition TV **Status** Under construction **Occupancy** Summer 2012 **Contact** 416-690-2988; synclofts.com

Two Hundred the Beach

Six storeys, 24 luxury suites **Builder** Reidel Group and Mitchell and Associates **Location** Queen and Woodbine **Suite Availability** 30% sold. 700 to 2,300 sq. ft. priced from \$400,000 to \$1.8 million **Hot Tickets** No amenities so low maintenance fees (39¢/sq.ft.) **Status** Actively selling **Occupancy** November 2014 **Contact** 416-698-0707; twohundred.ca

Work Lofts

11 storeys, 31 commercial studio lofts and 129 live-work lofts **Builder** Lamb Development **Location** Carlaw and Dundas **Suite Availability** Two residential units and eight commercial units left. 761 to 1,018 sq. ft. priced from \$376,900 to \$495,900 **Hot Tickets** Industrial-styled building with brick and glass façade **Status** Registration **Occupancy** Immediate **Contact** 416-368-5262; worklofts.ca