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## Breathing Easy: Condo living, really living



A Benchmark yoga class at Charlie Condos: How happy would you be this winter to have exercise classes right in your condo building? Exactly.

Tyler Anderson / National Post

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**Special to National Post**

Living downtown sure beats living in the 'burbs, especially when you're young and eligible like Andrea Petrak. At 24, Ms. Petrak has been ensconced in a 600-sq.-ft. unit at Charlie Condos for almost a year and she loves every bit of it.

Gone are those long Go Train commutes from her parents' home in Oakville. Now it takes her just minutes to walk from her sales job at Toronto's swank Shangri-La Hotel back to her rented condo near King Street West and Spadina Avenue. She doesn't cook much because there are so many cool bistros en route, and she has given up her gym membership in favour of Charlie's new bootcamp and yoga classes.

And now that there's talk of introducing occasional cooking classes and wine tastings in Charlie's spiffy lounge, she's looking forward to getting to know her neighbours over food and drinks.

"It's a great way to meet new people in the building," says Ms. Petrak, whose friends regularly hang out at her place because it's so central. "It's really creative."

That's music to Mark Stables' ears. For the past few years, the personal trainer, certified wellness coach and founder of Benchmark Group has been touting the benefits of a "holistic lifestyle" to condominium developers throughout downtown Toronto. His sales pitch is straightforward: If developers are spending oodles of money on snazzy lounges, gourmet kitchens and gyms, why not build in programming to engage residents and bring the amenity space to life?

"I'm fully invested in condo living," gushes the fitness buff and entrepreneur. "It's time to think outside of the gym and cultivate a sense of community. It's great to design these amazing fitness amenities and have people come and use them, but I want to take it one step further. ... It's about extracting as much of an experience of living in a condominium as possible."

According to Mr. Stables, developers have been selling lifestyle in their sales and marketing collateral for years "with fancy brochures depicting people all dressed up in ball gowns using these fancy amenity spaces. But the reality is they often go unused. ... If you're going to depict people using these amazing amenity spaces, let's actually get people using them."

These days, Mr. Stables' efforts have been focused on the King and Spadina area, which he dubs "the epicentre in Toronto when it comes to lifestyle" due to the multitude of trendy boutiques, bars and eateries and the young urban professionals such as Ms. Petrak who flock there to work, live and play.

These are busy people who are willing to squeeze into smaller units just to bask in downtown living, he says. A chic lounge, games room and pool deck become extensions

of their living space, while a sleek and active fitness facility lets them ditch expensive gym memberships.

Mr. Stables knows his audience well, having lived in half a dozen downtown Toronto buildings over the past 14 years. By his estimates, only 25% of condo residents actually use a building's gym, yet all condo owners must absorb the cost of a full- or part-time program co-ordinator and any fitness classes offered. Benchmark Group's branded Movement Haus condo gyms use a pay-per-use approach for intimate group fitness classes ranging from yoga and Pilates to barre, bootcamp, spinning and TRX suspension training. Still, all condo owners must pay for upkeep of the fitness area and equipment as part of their maintenance fee.

“The 100 people that want to engage in personal training, or have a holistic nutritionist, or have a private yoga or Pilates [session], or do any of the classes — they're paying for it out of their own pocket,” Mr. Stables says. “The other 300 people in the building don't have to subsidize [those people's] exercise habits. Not only are the owners not paying for [these classes] in their condo fees, but the condo corporation doesn't have to pay a cent. It's adding value because it's cultivating healthy community within the building.”

Benchmark Group runs fitness classes, personal training, nutrition coaching and rehab/treatment services at 12 downtown Toronto towers including Charlie, Minto775, Couture and One St. Thomas, with seven Movement Haus locations opening soon in Ottawa, Waterloo and Miami. Another 46 buildings in those cities will have a Movement Haus presence soon. Some developers have hired Mr. Stables to design their health and fitness centres during initial stages of construction, while others have called on him post-construction to source equipment and arrange fitness and lifestyle programming.

Now, having made his mark on the exercise front, he is encouraging developers to extend socializing beyond the gym. In his opinion, the impressive lounges with gourmet kitchen are ideal for cooking classes, wine and Scotch tastings, and even juice bars and cafés. It's the perfect place for sassy singletons to meet their counterparts, he says. In fact, as a condo dweller himself he considers it his social responsibility.

“You have all these ... singles that don't know how to look after themselves,” Mr. Stables says. “Rather than eating fast food,” he foresees them “tapping into something not only to meet people in the building and socialize but also [to learn] how to look after themselves better.”

Stan Moneta is particularly excited about introducing such social gatherings at Charlie Condos. He says residents of the 36-floor, 314-unit Charlotte Street tower refer to it as a “high-end hotel,” so it’s critical that the building delivers on that.

“What’s happening in the evolution of condos is that as prices are going up and suites are getting smaller, the units themselves are effectively bedrooms and the amenity space in the building is where people actually live and entertain their friends,” says Mr. Moneta, president of Sherwood Park Property Management, which oversees Charlie Condos.

“[The developer] Great Gulf has presented a full floor of amenity opportunities that we have to put some life into, that people have to use in a positive way. ... Every building has its own personality, and we’ve got a good opportunity to create that use of [our amenity] space.”