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Yorkville's recipe for renewal: A tired corner of old Toronto is in line for a facelift



by Suzanne Wintrob
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If entrepreneur Joseph Bloor were alive, he would be astounded at the transformation of the quaint Village of Yorkville he founded in 1830.

Locals know that what started out as a residential suburb with a brickyard and several breweries became a run-down haven for hippies in the 1960s and later went upscale with such stores as

Holt Renfrew and Harry Rosen. Today it's a coveted destination for the rich and famous, with affluent residents tucked into swanky condominiums and million-dollar Victorian houses. Yet there are remnants of Mr. Bloor's village still standing, including the firehall bearing the original coat of arms, the Yorkville Public Library and the last continuous block of heritage buildings where business once flourished.

If all goes as planned, those heritage buildings will get a new lease on life, as 1 Yorkville plans to rise across the street from the old firehall and the new Four Seasons Hotel and Residences. In fact, it's just one of several new towers scheduled for the street. The 58-storey, 577-unit project — touted by the developer as Toronto's most prestigious address — is still awaiting final approval from the City of Toronto's planning department — a process that could take more than a year — yet traffic at its presentation centre has been steady for the past month as realtors and VIPs get sneak peeks. The project is a partnership between Bazis and Plazacorp, two established GTA developers that teamed up on Emerald Park in North York and Exhibit across from the Royal Ontario Museum.

The developers promise to add elegance and intrigue at Yonge Street and Yorkville Avenue when doors open in mid-2018, thanks to architect Rosario Varacalli's exterior, comprising 3,000 faceted metallic ribbons. He describes the look as “three-dimensional wallpaper” that moves, capturing sun, light and shadows for a constant shimmering effect. The ribbons extend down to the building's arcade, he says, while the balconies are tucked between the architectural finials located “haphazardly” throughout the façade.

“I've been interested in creating a new ‘ism’ for architecture,” says Mr. Varacalli, who lists Emerald Park, E Condos at Yonge and Eglinton, and No. 10 Bellair among his projects. “I've always been fascinated by graphics or patterns on buildings. I've been interested in how to do balconies on buildings. At the end of the day we deserve to look at something beautiful.”

The interior will ooze grandeur, too, the developers say, starting with the two-storey lobby that Mr. Varacalli calls “petite and precious, such a little jewel box.” Three floors of amenities boast a spa with outdoor pool, cold and hot plunge pools, a Zen garden, dance and fitness studios and more. The rooftop has an open-air cinema with stadium seating and outdoor heaters. The 24/7 Signature Concierge Service is being called “a capable, discreet private butler” that will walk and groom dogs, order concert tickets, book reservations anywhere in the world, comparison shop for cars or serve up whatever the heart desires.

The suites — ranging from 475 to more than 2,000 sq. ft., priced from the mid-\$300,000s to more than \$2-million — deliver what one would expect from the high life. Think nine-foot ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows and custom kitchens. The colour palette is neutral to create a sense of calm.

“In a lot of ways, texture and colour and lighting help to accentuate a mood,” says Allen Chan, a partner at interiors firm DesignAgency. “Any space you walk into should provoke some kind of emotion, otherwise it’s not even worth remembering.”

Scott McLellan, Plazacorp’s senior vice-president, says local folks — empty nesters planning ahead, first-time buyers with family money, and middle-aged people seeking a pied-à-terre — looking for a deluxe address are showing the greatest interest. They say they are in talks with two local buyers interested in the full-floor, 8,200-sq.-ft., \$13-million penthouse. They won’t know its exact floor number until the project receives final approval.

While 1 Yorkville is certainly creating buzz — including from wary residential neighbours concerned with noise and shadow — there’s another aspect to the project that is proving both exciting and contentious. 1 Yorkville Inc. owns the heritage buildings along Yonge Street between Yorkville Avenue and Cumberland Street that house longtime favourites The Cookbook Store and The Kitchen Place, plus several eateries. The buildings date to the 1860s; it’s the last continuous block of the historic Village of Yorkville.

The developers say they’re committed to restoring that block and adding boutiques and seven residential rental units within it. They plan a wide walkway along the block with benches, greenery and public art.

Still, there’s disagreement over the placement of the tower. Mr. Varacalli set the building 10 metres from Yonge Street — seven metres more than required by the City’s Tall Buildings Design Guidelines, he adds — because “I wanted to make sure the historical buildings were distinctive, that the mass was very clear.” But with city approval yet to come, Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam rejects his claim and is urging the developer to follow the minimum setback for sites with a heritage property, as required by the North Downtown Yonge Toronto Urban Design Guidelines. She would like to see the tower at least 20 metres back from Yonge “so the heritage properties are given proper relief and placement but also respected in situ.”

Whichever way it lands, heritage architect Michael McClelland of ERA Architects is excited about the proximity of old and new.

“It gives us a sense that Toronto has a long history and potentially a really great future,” he says. “There’s a pretty strong idea in heritage conservation that new work should not try to look like Disneyland and shake old things. You really want the clarity and distinction between the two. This is a good example of that pretty serious approach to conservation, that the new work will be distinctly modern.”