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A rather unusual Zendo: Creating a calm condo oasis in the hectic city core



TeaHouse condos will be at 501 Yonge Street, between Alexander and Maitland.

by Suzanne Wintrob, Special to National Post

If Mark Mandelbaum had his way, he'd start many of his conversations with the words "Once upon a time..." That's because he believes every high-rise residential building should have its own unique narrative, especially when there's enough space to make it a bestseller.

“A lot of projects on Yonge Street, or across the city, are little postage-size pieces of land where you put a big tower and you really can’t create a theme and an architectural story,” says the chairman of Lanterra Developments, who has watched downtown Yonge Street transform from rundown to respectable over the years. “... Once you have a full city block, you can create a story out of it. We like doing that, taking projects that you can actually do something with and create part of the cityscape.”

These days, Mr. Mandelbaum is talking up TeaHouse Condominiums at 501 Yonge St. in downtown Toronto. Set for occupancy in June 2018, the mixed-use project will comprise two towers — 52 and 25 storeys — with a total of 776 suites ranging from 318 to 913 sq. ft. and priced from \$199,900 to the mid-\$600,000s. A seven-storey podium with retail and extensive amenity space will link the two towers (teahousecondos.com).

When complete, TeaHouse (tagline: Where East Meets West) will extend along Yonge Street from Maitland to Alexander streets, south of Wellesley. With so much square footage, enthuses Mr. Mandelbaum, it will be that much easier to fully develop the building’s Asian-inspired narrative.

Why Asian? Because in the hustle and bustle of urban living, adding a zip of Zen can only be a good thing.

“[Downtown] is a busy hectic place,” says Mr. Mandelbaum, whose large-scale projects include Maple Leaf Square by the Air Canada Centre; Roman-influenced Treviso, under construction in a North Toronto Italian neighbourhood; and 11 Wellesley. “But people come home. These units are relatively small, there’s no doubt about that. But we still wanted to create a living environment that once you go in your front door there’s a feeling of calm. You go home as a refuge, to get away from the hectic. The concept of tea is something that people savour, they kind of calm down with it, it relaxes them, so we thought it would be a really cool name — in a single word, to be able to tell a big part of the story of what we’re trying to accomplish.”

He says the Zen-like atmosphere will extend from the outside in. The first four storeys of the taller tower, set for construction first, will be wrapped in horizontal

wood-coloured, screen-like banding to hide the 235 above-ground parking spots. From lobby to amenities and into the suites, materials will be a mix of wood and stone, tone-on-tone colours and simple, clean lines to evoke a feeling of tranquility. “We’ve dressed up the building with a skin that is reflective of symmetry and materials and the kind of look combining the traditional nuances of Asian design, but with a contemporary interpretation of that, because obviously we’re living in today’s world,” the builder says.

Alessandro Munge knows that style well, having travelled to Asia frequently for his firm’s hotel and condominium work.

“We understand the culture there,” says Mr. Munge, principal at Toronto interior design firm Munge Leung. “... You could [make] clean and minimal almost cold but that’s definitely where we didn’t want to go. We wanted to be clean and minimal, but warm, and that’s why we’re using some of the darker woods and contrasts with some of the antique bronzes and metals, those lighter stones. [It’s] ... almost seagrass kind of wall coverings, that wonderful texture that almost feels like stone or limestone that has a wonderful peace to it.”

Knowing residents crave extra space to relax and entertain outside their suites, TeaHouse’s common areas will be designed with peace in mind, too. Four indoor onsen pools, with varying temperatures and ideal for dipping, plus an adjacent outdoor lap pool will all sit atop the glassed-in podium connecting the two towers and, at night, the water reflecting on the ceiling will turn the pool area into what Mr. Munge describes as “an illuminated jewel box” that he’s sure will look awesome from Yonge Street. Also on tap are a Zen Lounge perfect for chilling, an outdoor Zen Garden, the requisite Yoga Room, and a small Rock Lounge with boulder-like fabric furniture.

“Units today are getting smaller and smaller because of affordability, so amenity areas and areas to retreat from the everyday that happens in your unit is important to buyers,” Mr. Munge says. “... That’s part of this Zen-like area, which is a small space but it’s good enough to have that kind of quiet moment while you’re living in this condo. It becomes like a little inner city.”

As for an actual tea house, Mr. Mandelbaum hopes that a retailer specializing in tea will snap up one of the retail spaces available off the lobby to extend the Zen to visitors or those passing by.

“Yonge Street was never Bay Street,” he says. “It was always a people place. I recently walked from Bloor down to College and there were, like, a hundred little restaurants along that strip. It’s a place where people hang around, eat, walk up and down. There are a lot more people on the street than you see on Bay Street. It’s much more of a community.”