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Under-\$1M Toronto house-buying budget? There's still plenty of choice



Architect Les Klein on Richmond Street in Toronto, with his Studio condos behind him.
Photo: Aaron Vincent Elkaim

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They say if you can't go big, go home. But with Toronto's skyrocketing real estate prices showing little of settling down, big may not be all it's cracked up to be.

"When people come to me and say, 'I need you to design me an addition of 500 square feet on my house' or 'I'm looking for a place to live that's got at least 1,800 square feet,' I say to them, 'Don't tell me how big it is. Tell me what you want to do there. How are you going to live there? Give me scenarios for living that we can then focus on,'" says Les

Klein, founding principal of Quadrangle Architects in Toronto. “Because, there are people who are perfectly comfortable living in 600 square feet. It just depends on their lifestyle.”

But this isn’t a story about living small. It’s about living large. Not \$1-million-plus large, which is what a typical single-family house in Toronto costs these days, but with room to move nonetheless.

Mr. Klein gets it. Raised in the United States, he arrived in Toronto in 1975 with a Master of Architecture degree from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and noticed that people either owned a house or rented an apartment. Of the 25,000 housing units he recalls being built in the city that year, about 20,000 were single-family homes and the rest were rental apartments sized around 800 sq. ft. — “massive” by today’s standards where 300 sq. ft. isn’t unheard of for a starter condo.

Fast forward four decades and Mr. Klein notices there are still about 25,000 housing units being built annually — “to barely keep up with the growth of the city in terms of immigration and migration,” he deadpans — yet now some 20,000 are condominiums and 5,000 are single-family homes. Though the City of Toronto urges developers to include 10% of a condo project as “family-size” units with three bedrooms (or two bedrooms plus den), these larger suites often come with premium price tags, he says. And that can put people off buying big.

“Restricting single-family homes makes prices go up because they ain’t making more land, and the pressure for condos is to somehow remain affordable,” Mr. Klein says. “... In the city you can get \$200 per square foot more [than in the suburbs] which allows [a developer] to add features but forces you to worry about affordability.”

Yet all is not lost. Mr. Klein — who has done a lot of work for local developers — marvels at the city’s wide range of living choices today, from rental apartments and condos to low-rise and stacked townhouses, single-family homes and buildings catering to seniors. Condos and townhomes aren’t quite as large in terms of square footage compared with yesteryear, but there are certainly satisfying options that feel spacious and airy, don’t require an old house’s \$100,000 in renovations and won’t break the bank.

Take Chaz Yorkville as an example. The 47-storey condominium tower near Yonge and Bloor streets is currently promoting seven three-bedroom units situated on its lower floors within the six-storey podium, just above the amenity space. The units range from 1,128 to 1,308 sq. ft. and are priced at about \$700,000, providing a reasonable alternative to the building’s similar-sized but more luxurious and pricier penthouses.

Though they lack the panoramic city views common to sky-high living, they’re closer to the amenities, have superb sound insulation from the podium’s limestone exterior, and they’re cheaper. (Potential buyers will be able to tour them beginning April 25; chazyorkville.com).

“There are a lot of beautiful condos in the neighbourhood at the tops of buildings with large units — that’s the expensive market,” says Chaz Yorkville developer Jason Fane. “The impression I had was that there were more apartments in that market than there were buyers. I based that on the observation that you had many buildings where they would sell out all of the smaller units and then there would be a lot [of bigger ones] left at the end of the selling process. What I decided was that it would make more sense to put those apartments at the bottom of the building.”



At Chaz Yorkville, where the amenities are on the higher floors and larger suites on the lower floors.

Aspen Ridge, too, is touting larger suites in the podium of its downtown Studio2 condo tower near Richmond and Duncan streets. At more than 1,300 sq. ft. and about \$760,000, developer Christene De Gasperis says the Quadrangle-designed suites offer “a third-bedroom option” ideal for a child’s room, guest room or den (aspenridge.com). Townhouses are another great alternative in and around the downtown core, Mr. Fane adds, with developers increasingly tearing down small loft buildings and putting in modern, luxurious townhouses in their place.

“Aside from providing high-end living, just because they’re relatively small and because they’re wood construction they can be on a per-square-foot basis less expensive than a condominium,” he explains. “They’re selling quality of space but also location, close to amenities that people who live downtown like to have: eat, live, work, play.”

Townhouse living offers up many of the advantages of condo living but with more space for a more pleasing price.

“You’re not cutting the grass, you’re not having to do the maintenance,” says Ross McKerron, spokesman for The Brownstone Group of Companies. “You’re getting brand new built form that has brand new appliances, and you’re also having your own space. You’re getting below-grade parking but you don’t have to maintain [it]. You usually have some level of green space. You’re getting a lot of the features of a single-family house. You just happen to have neighbours very close by.”

Brownstone has two townhouse projects on the go in Toronto’s Junction neighbourhood: Heritage Towns, the seventh phase of its Davenport Village project, comprising 56 three-bedroom, 1,650-sq.-ft. townhouses with 300-sq.-ft. roof decks costing \$650,000; and Brownstone on the Trail, with similar offerings .

Many developers are incorporating townhouses at the base of their condominium towers, such as Aspen Ridge’s Scenic 3 project in Leaside, where two- and three-bedroom townhouses range from 1,300 to 1,600 sq. ft. and cost less than \$1 million (aspenridge.com). Phase 1 and 2 are sold out, with buyers a mix of empty nesters from the neighbourhood and young couples starting a family. Phase 3 is currently selling.

“Stacked townhouses sell out at a rate far greater than condo towers, but, on the other hand, the projects are usually smaller in scale,” says Mr. McKerron of typical townhouse projects with 50 to 100 units. “It’s not unusual for those to sell out in six to eight weeks. Whereas you get a rush at the beginning of a tower, with more investors, ... and the next time you see a rush of buyers is when they actually see the building emerging from the ground. With a stacked townhouse, there’s usually a feeling that, hey, this project is really going to happen, and on time. They don’t have to pre-sell as much. The developer can [create] a different relationship with their buyers.

As for those willing to put in some bucks to go big, think vintage. Mr. Klein is noticing more and more Baby Boomers selling their homes and buying units that hark back to his early days in Toronto, when apartments were much bigger than they are today. From 1,200 to 2,400 sq. ft., they’re in desperate need of a renovation but have good bones.

“They will not have many of the features that we have in the newer buildings, namely higher ceilings,” he says. “But they will have space, and many of them will enjoy many great locations on the edge of Rosedale, on the edge of Forest Hill, on the edge of downtown. These buildings are incredibly unnoticeable. They don’t scream out at you, but many of my friends who have purchased units in these buildings have put money into them and are perfectly comfortable living in these larger apartments. It’s a very interesting and gentler transition down from a single-family home to apartment living.”