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Eastside Toronto, or is that Downtown East, or “That area around Ryerson”? Whichever, it’s hot



Sebastian Mizzi: "One thing that drew us to this spot is how diverse it really is."

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Special to National Post

Sebastian Mizzi spent much of his childhood roaming downtown Toronto’s east end to soak up his family history. His grandparents had settled on Sackville Street when they immigrated from Italy in the 1950s and his father, Santo, had grown up there. By the time

Sebastian came along, the family had moved to the Danforth but Santo often took his young son back to the area to reminisce.

“I remember going down there on a Saturday or Sunday,” Mizzi recalls. “We’d go to St. Lawrence Market, King Street, Queen Street. My Dad would show us where he grew up, where he went to school, where they went to church. He’d say, ‘This is where we used to get coffee in the morning, but now it’s not there.’”

While studying urban planning at Ryerson University, Mizzi often found himself wandering back to the neighbourhood during class breaks. He eventually began building homes and condominiums in the 905 region and the United States but he retained a soft spot for the east end. So when he and his partners at SigNature Communities were looking for a new venture recently, Mizzi looked back to his roots.

“One thing that drew us to this spot was how diverse it really is,” says Mizzi, 34. “It’s got such a community feel being so close to the hustle and bustle of downtown, which is something that I grew up in and I feel is really important. We’re trying to embrace the community by developing here. We’re not trying to change it, that’s for sure.”

Mizzi is counting on others feeling equally smitten when East United opens its lobby doors to residents in 2018. The 21-storey, 279-unit building at Berkeley and Adelaide streets, which is now selling, will incorporate the historic Christie, Brown & Co. stables built in 1906. Plans call for an outdoor movie theatre and jamming studio as well as a pedestrian mews and six two-storey townhomes.

With hot spots near the financial district and the CN Tower practically built up and new land scarce, it looks like downtown Toronto’s east side is finally ready for prime time. East United is just one of a host of new residential condominium projects on the go or in the works that are set to inject some much-needed TLC between Yonge Street and the DVP. Just this spring several more sales offices began selling units in towers stretching from Bloor Street down to the lakefront and from Church Street out to the Don River, with others rumoured or in the planning stages.

“The development community, us included, has been late to react to the incredible neighbourhood that exists there today and all the activity and exciting things that are happening in that area,” says Shamez Virani, vice-president of CentreCourt Developments that’s behind the 47-storey, 528-unit Grid Condos project near Dundas and Jarvis streets. “Today it is an incredible neighbourhood that is really driven by Ryerson’s urban campus ... It has had a shortage of new residential development for a number of

years now. There's a great existing urban fabric in the neighbourhood, and we really just found a seam in that fabric."

According to the City of Toronto's official plan that examines where highrise growth is expected, dozens of towers are already planned by the City or in approvals. That's 13 in Downtown East (bounded by Carlton to Queen and Jarvis to Sherbourne streets); seven in the West Don Lands' Pan/Parapan Am Games site; four near Queen and River Street; 13 in the St. Lawrence area south of King Street; 14 in Regent Park comprising market condos and assisted buildings, and three in North St. Jamestown (around Bloor and Sherbourne streets).

Remember King and Spadina a decade ago? It almost feels like that. Architect Ralph Giannone, principal of Giannone Petricone Associates, has worked in that area for 20 years and is continually astounded at its metamorphosis from what he calls a desolate place with "scorched earth" to today's "fertile land with wonderful flowers blossoming that are condominiums and parks and restaurants and lots of people." Now he's excited to be working on East United (the firm's fourth residential project east of Yonge Street and its second in the Corktown district), not only because the Berkeley Street project is so intriguing with its heritage and modern components, but also for its spirited locale.

"It has always been an interesting area, and Berkeley has always been a special street," says Giannone. "The church, the theatre, the castle, they were always interesting little destinations that were there. And [nearby] Corktown was always there, like this little secret pocket of the city. It was more of a destination place for people in Toronto who didn't live there but would go for specific things like showrooms or theatre or a special function and they would say, 'What an interesting little neighbourhood.' Finally what was kind of on the edge is now becoming something else. It's not as much an edge or an in-between space — [people would say] 'between Corktown' or 'between St. Lawrence' — but it's now becoming something of its own special character."

In some pockets, campus life is what has things humming. Besides Ryerson, the east side of Yonge is home to George Brown College, the National Ballet School, the Canadian Music Centre and the Digital Media Zone. Add in teaching hospital St. Michael's and a 42,000-square-foot sports facility at Dundas and Jarvis Streets being planned by MLSE Foundation for Toronto community housing residents, and it's no surprise that builders have taken notice.



The Grid Learning Centre will have 8,400 square feet of indoor and outdoor space with wifi, modular seating, breakout rooms and a café.

CentreCourt Developments

In fact, Grid Condos is CentreCourt Development's second foray into the Dundas-Jarvis area, having sold most of the 221 units in its Core Condos project over one weekend back in January 2014. Virani has dubbed the area "The Learning District" and, as such, promises that Grid's amenity space will include the Grid Learning Centre featuring more than 8,400 square feet of indoor and outdoor space with wifi, modular seating, breakout rooms, photocopiers, scanners and even a café — what he calls the tools student crave as part of their daily routine. Says Virani: "It's somewhat outside the box but we know what's happening in the neighbourhood. It's a learning environment."

One person who isn't surprised by all the attention the east side is getting is Steve Gupta. As president and CEO of Eastons Group/Gupta Group, he has been buying up land there since the 1980s and unabashedly crowns himself among the first to recognize it would one day be downtown Toronto's "it" spot.

Gupta has been buying up buildings east of Yonge for almost 20 years and turning them into hotels and condominiums. His latest project at Dundas and Jarvis is the 47-storey Dundas Square Tower and the 17-storey Garden Tower (the latter featuring five rooftop gardens and terraces exceeding 16,000 square feet). Now that everyone's talking about what he's known for years, he's itching to get started on a 52-storey, 380-unit tower

called The Rosedale near Bloor and Sherbourne streets, with a 170-room boutique-style hotel at its base. It's now in approvals but he hopes to take it to market by the fall.

“Every city in the world goes through this in phases,” Gupta says of the east side's transformation. “In the '70s, Parkdale or Dufferin or King or Queen – nobody could even think that there would be that kind of development there. It's all demand and what people look for, the availability of land for development and also where people want to live ... so all this works. No question!”