

Architects pull together in amazing feat of city-building

Results far greater than sum of parts as housing block reaches out and embraces its neighbourhood

Happy endings are hard to arrange even under the best of circumstances. Where architecture is involved, they become nearly impossible.

Which makes what has happened on The Esplanade between Church and Market Sts. all the more amazing, miraculous even.

The block is the site of four housing projects, each designed by a different firm to meet different needs, yet each belonging to the larger whole.

This is one of those rare instances in which architecture transcends itself as well as the messy particulars and banal necessities of its own creation.

The results here are so much greater than the sum of their parts that they qualify more as an exercise in city-building than as examples of mere architecture.

In place of the usual cacophony of competing styles, materials, intentions and scale, there is co-operation and harmony.

By limiting themselves to a specific vocabulary, the various architects have ensured unity within diversity and enhanced their own efforts immeasurably.

The four firms involved — Quadrangle Architects (Old York Tower, 85 The Esplanade); Stone Kohn McGuire Vogt (Cityhome, 1 Church St.); Roger du Toit Architects (New Hibret Co-op, 2 Market St.); and Oleson Worland Architects (115 The Esplanade) — have set a standard that will be hard to match.

Their new togetherness can be seen dramatically where the Older Women's Network (OWN) apartment building (115 The Esplanade) and Old York Tower (85 The Esplanade) meld imperceptibly into each another.

Wandering past, one could easily read the two structures as a single facade extending the length of the block.

Ground level is designed for retail outlets from end to end of the Esplanade frontage — though what that means right now is a string of a dozen empty, unfinished storefronts.

One assumes that tenants eventually will be found and the complex will be able to realize fully its potential as an exemplar of urbanism.

Not that there has been any problem renting the apartments above.

They are totally occupied and the waiting lists grow longer. It's not hard to understand why.

"For me and many others, coming to the co-op is the answer to a long-time search for safe and affordable housing in the city," says Ann Farrell, retired journalist and resident-member of the OWN co-op.

"Its downtown location puts us in easy walking distance of entertainment, transit, shopping and the lake."

Farrell's building, just south of St. Lawrence Market, is not only ideally situated, it also was uniquely designed



BORIS SPREMO/TORONTO STAR

VIEW FROM THE MARKET: "We could shift property lines and introduce elements common to all four buildings," says David Oleson, who designed one of the housing facilities — the OWN co-op at 115 The Esplanade — with Oleson Worland Architects' colleague Heather Taylor.

Architecture

CHRISTOPHER HUME



to enable women seniors to live as independently where the Older Women's Network (OWN) apartment building (115 The Esplanade) and Old York Tower (85 The Esplanade) meld imperceptibly into each another.

Architects David Oleson and Heather Taylor like to call it "aging in place."

"Urban areas work much better for seniors," Taylor argues.

"Originally, OWN was offered a site in Etobicoke, but they said, 'No, this isn't the place we want to be.'"

"They're active and they wanted to stay active. Seniors who are dependent on the car become housebound. Feeling shut in is a perennial problem for seniors."

Yet the fact is that many of OWN's 142 units are inhabited not by older women but families and single mothers.

The beauty of this Esplanade complex lies in its urbanity. Within steps of their front doors, residents can find virtually everything they need.

Even better, the scheme comes with a courtyard that knits the four component buildings together, giving them coherence and putting something in the middle of what was — and what would have remained — nothing.

Reminiscent of a more European model, the block manages to combine huge densities and small spaces, communal facilities and private areas.

It celebrates the city and reaches out to embrace it.

Compared with the 1970s Cityhome project next door — south of The Esplanade on the west side of Church St. — the new complex represents enlightenment.

Although Cityhome, the agency that operates city-owned rental housing in Toronto, was involved in both developments as a client, the two couldn't be more unlike.

The older building sits well back from The Esplanade, separated from the street by a parking lot. The living space is perched atop a five-storey parking garage, giving the whole place an especially nasty look.

This is unquestionably one of the ugliest buildings in the neighbourhood, if not the city. Everything about it is wrong from the ground up.

The philosophy behind it clearly valued cars over people, drivers over residents.

In fact, the building, which has little relationship to its surroundings, does its bit to stop urbanism dead in the street.

The difference between it and the newer block is night and day. Rather than a parking lot, there is a courtyard; rather than isolation, there are connections; rather than being vehicular in its orientation, it is pedestrian.

"We went through all the issues," says Michael Spaziani, the Toronto architect hired by the city to co-ordinate the project.

"The process started a long time ago, 1987 or '88, and the intent from the very beginning was to be as consultative as possible.

"We went through eight years of meetings and talked to every possible group, from local residents to merchants.

"It was a heavily illustrated process. We sweated over the issue of diversity, because we were trying to create a liv-

able private condition in the midst of a noisy and very busy area downtown."

Spaziani sat in on countless sessions with representatives of all four firms to work out details such as cornice heights, exterior materials and the over-all scale and massing of the buildings.

"You never, ever, get that kind of an opportunity," Oleson says.

"We could shift property lines and introduce elements common to all four buildings — such as the arcade that runs along Market St. and, of course, the courtyard, which is pretty unusual for Toronto."

No one would confuse the housing complex for a luxury development — for one thing, it's accessible — but there's no mistaking the attention that has been paid to the big picture as well as the tiny touches.

For example, it takes advantage of the view from Crombie Park to the east and plays off the historical architecture of the market district, which tends to red brick and glass.

Such displays of sophistication and good urban manners are exceedingly rare in this city, which is becoming increasingly suburban every year, thanks to developers who can't see beyond the edge of their lot or the bottom line.

The proposed redevelopment of the railway lands between Spadina Ave. and Bathurst St. north of the Gardiner Expressway is a perfect instance of how wrong things can go when the profit motive gives way to profit madness.

Surrounded by hostile provincial Tories, who have long since killed the program under which the Esplanade housing complex was built, Toronto needs all the help it can get.

But unless we're careful, what Queen's Park doesn't destroy, we will.