

DEVELOPMENT

A condo for ART's sake



TERRENCE BELFORD
GIMME SHELTER

tbelford@globeandmail.com

Developer Gary Silverberg faced a challenge with his new ART condo on Dovercourt Road just south of Queen Street West. To make suites affordable for the widest range of buyers he would have to offer in the mix studios measuring less than 500 square feet.

So how do you create comfort in small living spaces? In retrospect his decision seems like a no-brainer: He recruited interior designers with experience in boutique hotels.

Hotel rooms, after all, have

to combine efficiency and comfort; spaces to sleep, bathe, relax and maybe even do a bit of work on the road.

With 3rd Uncle Design Inc. Mr. Silverberg got an added bonus. The 15-year-old firm also knew the neighbourhood and its special arts and design culture. 3rd Uncle had previously done the interiors for the Drake Hotel, which with the nearby Gladstone, serve as the rocks on which the local neighbourhood is built.

"It just made a lot of sense," says Mr. Silverberg. "To get the most out of smaller spaces you can't take a traditional design approach. You need a special understanding of how to make small spaces seem larger and to make every detail count.

"At the same time I wanted a design team that understood we were doing something different with ART. It is very

much a neighbourhood-focused condo; its look and feel had to reflect the character of Queen West's special culture."

John Tong, a partner in 3rd Uncle said there were some advantages going in. Architect David Oleson of Oleson Worland Architects had delivered a structure with nine-foot ceilings and balconies or terraces on many suites. Both lend to the feeling of spaciousness.

"Then we had to find ways to make all open spaces seem part of a larger whole rather than separate defined spaces," he says. Use traditional ways to define living, dining and sleeping spaces and you would wind up with tiny chunks instead of one roomy open area.

3rd Uncle did that by extending millwork to encompass the entire space and limiting bulkheads and protrusions from the walls. In

areas like bathrooms the company set the medicine cabinet and lighting into a recess and flanked the mirror with recessed shelving. The vanity appears to float above the tiled floor, which allows room for storage. Wall and floor tiling are the same size and colour and present no visual barriers.

And yet life in a single room can limit a sense of privacy so 3rd Uncle created sliding doors to separate sleeping space from living space if necessary and also designed a bed, which incorporates side tables and storage drawers. Mr. Tong says his company is now working on pricing with a manufacturer for both the bed and a television cabinet.

But innovation in studio design is only one part of where ART diverges from the rest.

Mr. Silverberg is an artist of some note himself. He wanted

ART to be something much more than another condo. He wanted it to be a celebration of a distinct neighbourhood at a specific point in time. That meant providing a complete range of suites to meet the needs of anyone who loves the area – from singles through to families and especially artists and creative types who want to work from home.

"We wanted them to be able to live above the shop just like people do on Queen Street," he says.

To do that Mr. Oleson replaced traditional concrete walls on the ground floor with pillars. That simple design change meant buyers of ground floor units could essentially create their own suites, something usually limited to pricey penthouses.

"They can decide how many square feet they need or can afford and then arrange interi-

ors so rooms are all on one floor or two," says Mr. Oleson. "Each ground floor suite will have its own separate address and entrance so in effect you have perfect live/work units."

While there are small suites there are also large three-bedroom ones too – they come in at more than 1,600 square feet, big enough for a small family. ART also offers two-storey suites on its upper floors, each with a large terrace, a backyard in the sky.

All those terraces face to the north, a small but important touch for artists seeking northern light.

"In essence what we are creating is a manageable size vertical village with all the elements you would expect in a village," says Mr. Silverberg. "At just 11 stories and 147 units ART is neither high- nor low-rise and really does reflect the neighbourhood."