


[Learn More](#)

Open a BMO InvestorLine® account and get 1300 AIR MILES® reward miles.
 It's like a free flight to New York or Seattle!

BMO  InvestorLine®
 Making money make sense™



The new face of public housing

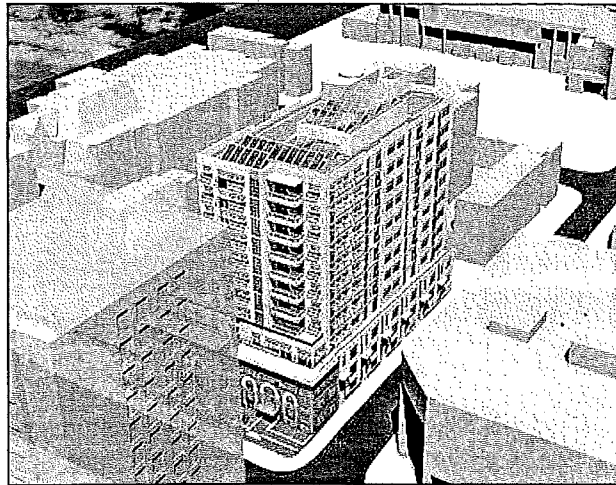
Downtown rental conversion stresses aesthetics, quality and eco-friendly technology

September 19, 2009

IAN HARVEY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

At first glance, the building under construction at 92 Carlton St. at Mutual St. looks pretty much like the half dozen or so condominiums in the area.

Look closer, though, and you'll start to see some cutting-edge features and design: Solar window shades, high-efficiency glass windows, a green roof with solar panels and high-quality finishes along with a design aesthetic that incorporates the facade of the 1920s era building that stood on the site.



With its green roof and high-tech features, the 110-unit Toronto Housing Corp. rental building at 92 Carlton St. "doesn't look like public housing and it's built better than most condominiums," says architect Drew Hauser.

But you won't find a sales office anywhere or any "for sale" signs that often clutter up a newly minted condo as preview buyers look to flip their units – even before other homeowners move in this December.

And that's the point, because this 110-unit building isn't for sale. It's for rent, aimed specifically at low-income earners who otherwise could not afford to live in Toronto.

It's all part of a strategy to change the way we look at public housing.

"Public housing doesn't have to look like public housing," says Drew Hauser of Stanford Downey Architects Inc., which specializes in preserving heritage buildings. "I'm proud of this project because it doesn't look like public housing and it's built better than most condominiums."

Commissioned by the Toronto Housing Corp., which bought it from a private landlord, it's part of a push to revitalize a slew of public housing buildings in the area.

Keiko Nakamura, acting CEO of Toronto Community Housing (TCH), says managing its stock of 58,000 units worth about \$6 billion brings with it some challenges, not least of which are repairs, maintenance and the decision whether to renovate or replace.

In the case of Carlton, she says, the project arrived about the same time the organization realized that its role was not simply to provide shelter at reasonable cost but to connect tenants to each other and the neighbourhood.

"We did some research and found services and amenities were lacking and tenants felt

Ads by Google

disconnected to where they lived," she says. "Carlton was interesting in that the systems were so antiquated it didn't make sense to repair."

At the same time, she says, there was a drive to raise the bar for social housing in terms of finishes and quality while investing in technologies that would make operating costs manageable.

As with the Regent Park redevelopment, which mixes commercial and private ownership units with public housing, design also came to the forefront as a key factor in pride and connection to place and space.

As remarkable as 92 Carlton St. is, Hauser recounts that the project didn't get off to an auspicious start in 2007.

"On a site visit to measure up, I literally went through the floor," recalls Hauser. "It was infested with termites. In fact it was so bad residents had them in their furniture. It was terrible."

The only solution was to rip every piece of wood floor and joist out of the privately owned, low-rent building. Next, the team set about to ensure the design was economically efficient and that meant rethinking some of the original premise, says Hauser.

"At first TCH said they didn't want to design for families," says Hauser. "But there are two schools, which suggests there are a lot of families in the area. And then when we looked at the costs, the building was economical at 12 storeys more than the original three storeys."

As a result, TCH agreed to up the scope. There will be nine at-grade, two-level townhouses – seven with a street entrance and address. Then there will be families in the first few floors and single units after that. The three-storey original building with its Italian art deco arches – first built to house the workers building Maple Leaf Gardens – remains with a 12-storey tower grafted onto the back.

Move-in is slated for this December, with rent geared to income. Units range from bachelors to three bedroom units, as well as one four-bedroom.

While TCH was prudent in how it allocated the \$20 million budget on the renovations, it didn't hold back on details. As a result the floors and interior finishes are far beyond what you'd find in most condos and light years from what has traditionally gone into public housing.

Even the heating and cooling is a cutting-edge geothermal system, using a series of 60 holes drilled 120 metres into the ground below, through which a liquid medium is pumped in tubes, which loop back. The medium draws heat from the ground in winter and uses it to heat the building and cool it in the summer, since the ground at that depth is always at a constant temperature.

The windows are also a super high-efficiency design, which not only filter UV rays that would otherwise fade rugs and furniture, but diffuse the light so the interiors are lit with a much softer effect. This seems to come from everywhere at once rather than a harsh, direct sunbeam.

Some windows also incorporate an exterior sunshade, which looks a little like a luggage rack or towel rack running around the edge. It's designed to shade out the sun during the peak days of summer and cut heat gain while still allowing the winter sun to warm the units, since during those months it rides lower in the sky.

There's also a green roof with passive solar panels, which preheat the domestic water supply for the units, further cutting costs and saving energy. While that area isn't accessible to tenants, there is another "green roof" area off the laundry room where children can play in safety while the washing is done.

"It's got the turf grass on it so it cuts down the noise if they are bouncing a ball and it feels like grass," says Hauser.

Investing in the higher quality finishings and technology wasn't just about aesthetics, it was a business issue, says Barry Gula, TCH manager of development and construction.

"We're not a condominium developer who is responsible for two years plus a day," says Gula. "We pay the bills. So early in the project it was obvious we needed to drive energy costs down and employ some green initiatives and at the same time reduce our carbon footprint"

Still, the green technology was also selected on the basis of whether it was proven and how quickly it could pay back the investment.

"Social housing doesn't get a lot of funding so we knew we had to be smart about the money but yet not compromise on the look or functionality and we've done that with a financial model that is working for us. It's a win-win. Who knew social housing would be winning design awards?" says Nakamura.

TCH has several smaller projects with similar design standards in the works and is currently gearing up for a massive remake of the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood, near Lawrence Ave. W. and Allen Rd., where all 1,208 units will be demolished. The plan is to design a new neighbourhood from the ground up with rethought roads, public transportation routes, stores and mixed housing.

TCH is also part of Mayor David Miller's Tower Renewal pilot project, which is investigating best practices and the cost involved in retrofitting highrise towers to make them more energy-efficient and livable without tearing them down.

"We have a lot of highrises in our system," says Nakamura, adding it will be a great stride forward if the buildings can be "re-skinned" and made sustainable with green technologies like the Carlton project.

Read more about the Regent Park project.