

CONDO LIVING

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Checking out the small stuff

Loft-style condos right at home in compact buildings

BY JENNIFER BAIN
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Some folks firmly believe that smaller is better in the condo world.

It's the principle that guides them when they're searching for a funky old building that's poised to be converted into a limited number of one-of-a-kind homes.

And while this niche market — let's call them the conversion crowd — opts for intimate buildings, that's not usually the case when it comes to their actual living space.

Deborah Brent's new digs are a perfect example of this duality.

She, her husband, two teenagers and two dogs recently moved into an enormous 2,400-square-foot three-bedroom, three-bathroom condo in 387, a converted office building on Bloor St. E. near Sherbourne.

It may be large by most condo standards, but it's one of only 10 homes in the low-rise building and one of just two suites per floor.

"We wanted to be in a small building, and the fact that there will only be 10 owners was a plus because it's more exclusive, cozier and more neighbourly," says Brent, a former lawyer who's now studying art.

"And as far as the condo corporation goes, 10 owners is easier. It's not so political or time consuming."

Opting for a small building has other advantages.

Developers are usually willing — even eager — to let buyers customize their space. And that means looking at floor plans and moving walls — not just selecting finishes.

Since most small projects are conversions of existing buildings, they give grand old structures a new lease on life and sometimes help revitalize communities.

But there are also potential pitfalls for those who want the small stuff.

First off, small projects aren't as easy to find as those seen in large colour newspaper ads boasting elaborate sales centres.

Brad Lamb of Brad J. Lamb Realty Inc. is selling 387 without a



JENNIFER BAIN PHOTOS

LOFTY IDEAS: Developer Bob Mitchell of Mitchell & Associates in front of 670 Richmond St. W., a building he converted into condo lofts. Units in his projects, such as the one below, are sold mainly by word-of-mouth. Most are multi-level and have outdoor spaces.

model suite, sales centre, sales team or even much of an advertising budget.

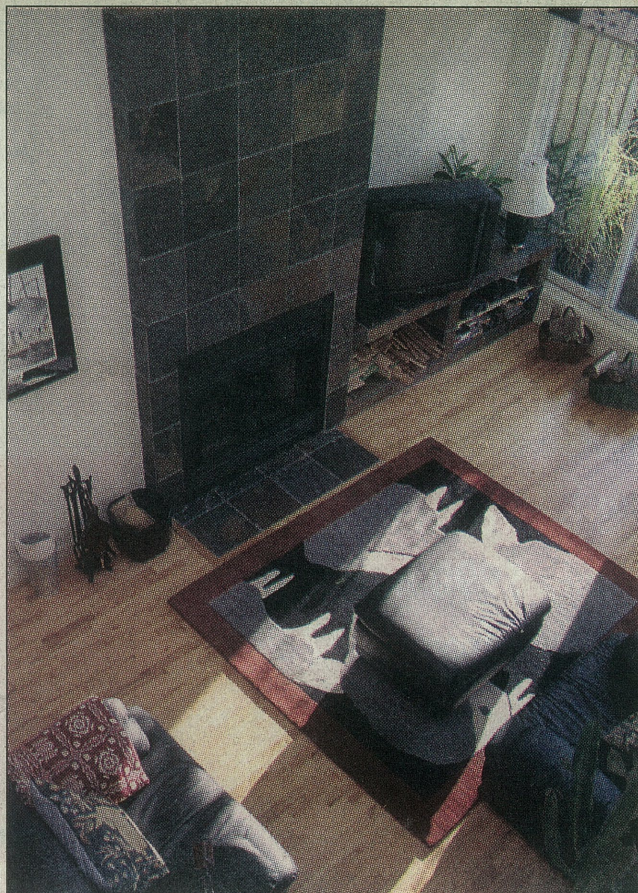
"We did about 1,000 flyers, put up a big banner on the outside of the building, took out a few small ads and are relying on the Multiple Listing Service (MLS) run by the Toronto Real Estate Board," says Lamb.

As a broker/member, he posts properties on MLS for real estate agents to see. The system works well for homes — but isn't as suited for condos, especially new ones that are sold almost exclusively through their own sales centres.

Lamb estimates that less than 3 per cent of new condo buyers enlist the help of a real estate agent. That means most people don't have access to MLS.

But MLS is a great place to find conversion and resale condos.

So far Lamb has found two buyers for the seven suites at 387, which are now on the market, but he has faith in the project which is in a glass-skin building originally



'It's a satisfying thing to be involved in designing a building that isn't cookie cuttered out. We don't build 12-unit condos, we built 12 custom homes simultaneously.'

— SMALL CONDO PROJECT SPECIALIST
BOB MITCHELL



JENNIFER BAIN PHOTOS

URBAN SPACES: Realtor Brad Lamb stands in front of one of the condo conversion projects he's promoting in Cabbagetown. Below, developer Fred Dyer in front of his High Park area project, St. John's Lofts.

Creating unique spaces

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designed by Toronto architect John Parkin.

A well-known player in Toronto's condo scene, Lamb's creed is: "If I'm going to promote a property, I'll only take interesting ones."

He hopes MLS, flyers and a few small ads will help him find a buyer for another small condo project at 31 Winchester St. in Cabbagetown.

Here a yellow brick, six-unit apartment block built over a century ago, and converted to four luxury apartments in the 1980s is being transformed into four condos. One unit is being kept by the building owners. Two smaller ones were quickly snapped up when the project hit the market in the summer.

What's still available is a two-storey, 2,000-sq.-ft. home for

\$369,000.

But those bare facts don't do the space justice. Ceilings soar to 12 feet and so do the front doors. There are a maze of rooms, cutaways, skylights, interesting windows and a deck.

"I think it would be fun coming home to a place like this," admits Lamb. "But I would say less than 50 people have seen this building, and less than 20 have seen this condo. Most real estate agents still don't know it exists."

Even so, enlisting the help of a real estate agent makes sense if you're searching for a small building off the beaten track.

A good agent will know the dirt on any project and the people behind it.

They can also put clients in touch with developers like Bob Mitchell of Mitchell & Associates, whose coveted lofts are sold mainly by word-of-mouth.

Mitchell created Toronto's first legal loft — a 10-unit conversion of an obsolete felt factory at 41 Shanly St. in the Bloor/Dovercourt area — in 1981/82.

Since then he has converted buildings at 289 Sumach St., 75 Markham St., 110 Hepbourne St., 195 Poplar Plains, 34 Claremont St., and 670 and 676 Richmond St. W.

His creations feature a scant six to 19 units each. Most units are multi-level and have outdoor spaces.

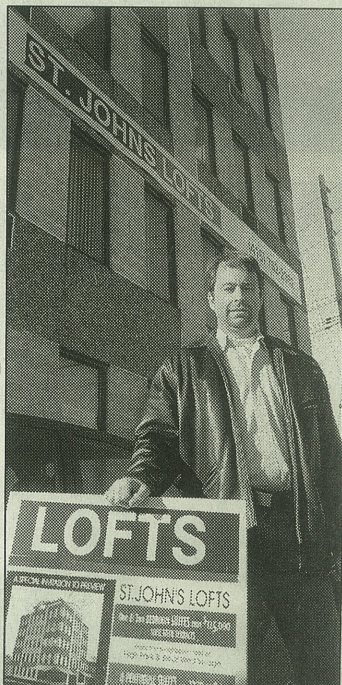
"It's a satisfying thing to be involved in designing a building that isn't cookie cuttered out," says Mitchell. "We don't build 12-unit condos, we build 12 custom homes simultaneously."

Indeed the conversion crowd is driven by the desire to customize their homes.

At 387, suites are now being subdivided and drywall put up. But they won't be actually finished until they're bought and that gives buyers a lot of creative clout.

Likewise Mitchell — who handles every facet of his projects as developer, builder, general contractor, designer, marketing whiz and more — relishes co-creating with buyers.

After 16 years doing creative conversions, he can physically show potential buyers his portfolio. But some small projects are the work of newcomers.



That's the case over at the 15-unit St. John's Lofts, an office conversion on Dundas St. W. between Keele and Runnymede in Malta Village.

While developer Fred Dyer and his business partner Joseph Santos are experienced home builders and real estate brokers, this is their first condo project.

They wouldn't dare launch it in condo-saturated downtown, but believe their High Park neighbourhood is starved for condos.

"We're not Tridel, so we have to communicate to people that they're buying quality," says Dyer. "We show that in our model suite."

With no budget for an interior designer, Dyer and some friends decorated the model for use at twice weekly open houses.

People are drawn in by colourful sandwich boards set up on the street, a large banner on the building, flyers mailed to nearby homes and a few small ads.

"You can blow your brains out by taking out a full-page ad in a local newspaper," observes Dyer, who has sold eight suites since October. "Fifteen units just doesn't warrant that. You can't go with that one-day madness approach."

To offset their newness to the condo world, Dyer and Santos hired a top condo lawyer and architects experienced with conversions.