

Church converts find ready buyers

Transformed temples area hot commodity that sometimes sell out years ahead of their planned completion dates

BY SIMON AVERY, TORONTO

The jarring sound of jack hammers has replaced the sweet sounds of the Riverdale Presbyterian Church choir on Pape Avenue. In a few months, a handful of affluent city folks with a stylish bent will begin filling some of the 32 new condominium units going up in the cavernous space that for nearly 80 years was home to a dedicated congregation.

Similar church conversions are going on up town in Lawrence Park and over in Roncesvalles Village — further affirmation that Toronto has become a key part of North America's widening condo belt.

As congregations shut down or move out of the city, developers are moving in, converting houses of worship into lofts of luxury.

The gradual secularization of Canadian society has been recorded for years. Between 1946 and 2001, the proportion of adult Canadians attending regular religious services dropped from 67 per cent to 20 per cent, according to Statistics Canada.

But only in the last few years have developers begun to enter the scene. There are three completed church conversions in the city — two near Yonge Street just north of Bloor Street and one near Queen and Bathurst Streets. There are also several church halls that have been renovated and turned into condominiums.

Some of these transformed temples are a hot commodity, selling several years ahead of completion. Real estate insiders have been among the first to snap them up.

"It's the old saying, 'eat where the truck drivers eat,'" says Robert Mitchell, whose firm Mitchell & Associates is converting the former Riverdale Presbyterian Church into The Glebe condominiums. He has reserved two of the 32 units for his own investment purposes and three real estate agents or brokers have also bought units.

The conversion trend is just beginning, experts say. Edwin Brdlik, owner of Toronto Lofts Realty Corp., predicts that developers will undertake between three and seven new projects in the city during the next five years.

Prices for a unit in a converted church range between \$325 and \$500 a square foot, compared with \$275 to \$325 a square foot for other lofts, he says.

"You're going to pay top dollar. It's not for the bargain hunter."

The attraction of a conversion is the location, the space and the uniqueness.

Most loft developments occur in industrial buildings located on the city's fringes. But churches sit in the heart of communities, on leafy lanes and residential streets.

Their size and open design allow developers to carve out multiple level units with towering ceilings and arched windows running the height of the condominium.

"We have 24-foot ceilings, which gives what I call a volumetric effect," says the owner of a 5,000 square-foot unit in the former Church of St. Cyril & Methodius, who asked that his name not be used.

"It's an incredible feeling. The windows are so large that you can sit and look up at the sky. The light here is spectacular."

The unit, at 111 Robinson Street, is one of two in the converted Slovakian Roman Catholic church, which served the working-class immigrant community around Queen and Bathurst Streets for more than half a century before the congregation relocated to Mississauga in the 1990s.

In the age of cookie cutter condos, church conversions also offer uniqueness.

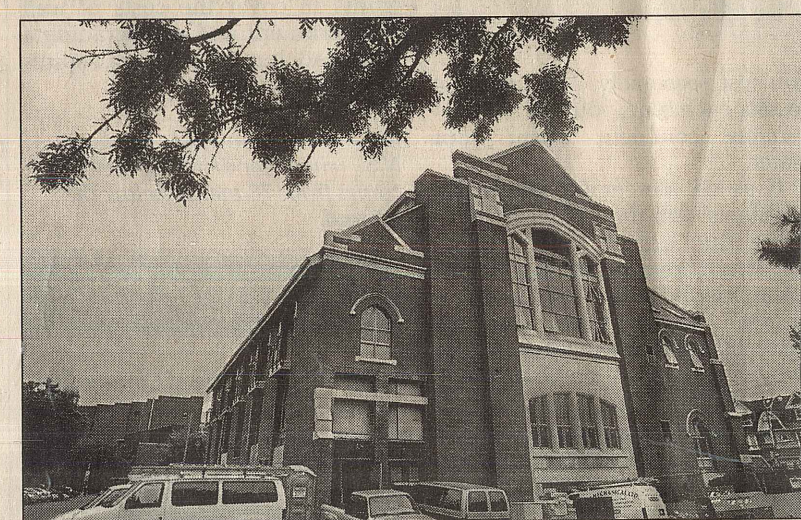
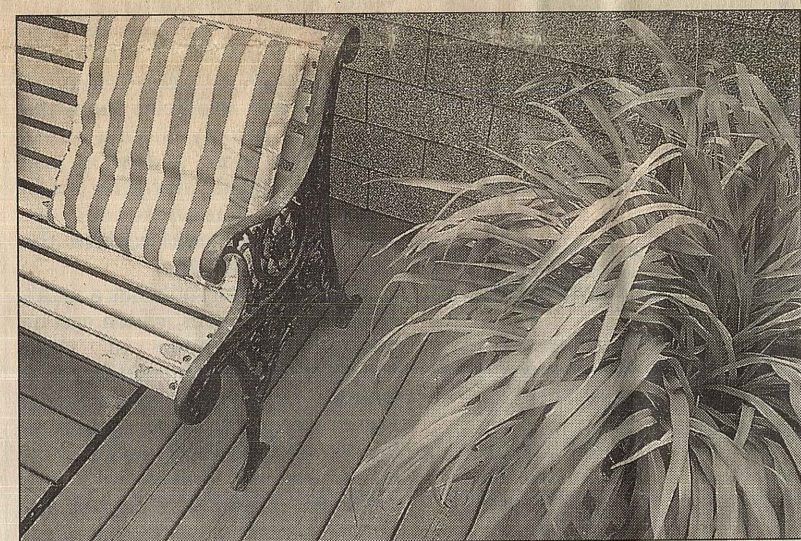
At 111 Robinson, the loft blends remnants of church life with an industrial design. The main living area maintains the original maple floor, but the kitchen and bathrooms are lined with red and black industrialized rubber flooring. In the bedroom, an original church fresco has been uncovered on one wall.

Outside, the deck has been cut into the old church roof and features corrugated sheets of metal and industrial support beams. A glass-block wall lets light into the living area below.

The owner and his wife recently listed the property for sale for \$2.2 million through Toronto Lofts Realty.



One of the big benefits of a home in a converted church — space. The 5,000-square-foot condo at 111 Robinson St. boasts 24-foot ceilings and a rooftop deck (below).



The Glebe, at Pape and Danforth, is nearing completion. Real estate agents, sensing a hot property, have been among the first to buy.

The listing is one of the first church conversion projects to hit the resale market, and the owner expects it to be more difficult to sell than a regular home.

"There are only a half dozen people in the city who this would appeal to," he says. "Most people who have the money for this would want to go to Rosedale or Forest Hill. We figure we're in for a long haul."

Church converted lofts are "character properties," says Lynn Robinson, an associate broker with Bosley Real Estate Ltd., who is waiting to take possession of one of The Glebe units this fall.

She purchased her 1,340-square foot unit at the design stage in 2000 for \$289,000. The three-year wait to move in has exposed her to the ups and downs of the volatile condo market, but she says the opportunity to customize her own unit and the uniqueness of the space make it worthwhile.

"People's eyes light up when I mention it," she says. "A church touches an emotion for people."

The concept of living by the altar where thousands of people were baptized, married or eulogized may seem strange to some.

But the holiness of the church is removed when the building is deconsecrated and the congregation moves out.

"We're a totally irreligious couple and give it no thought," says the owner of 111 Robinson, where a two-level mezzanine rises above the former location of the altar.

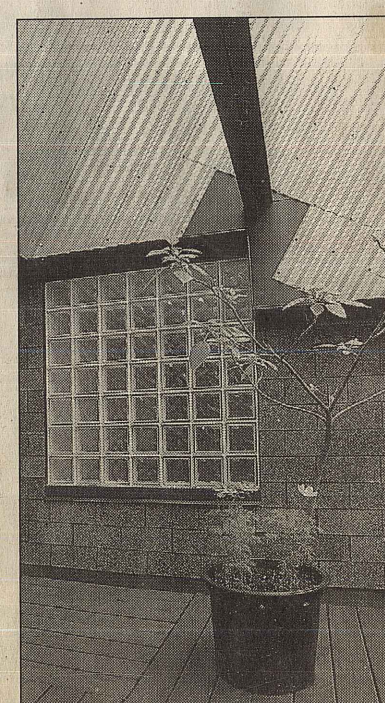
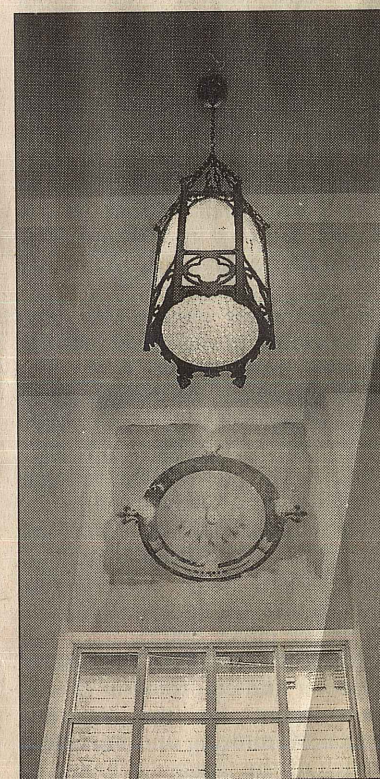
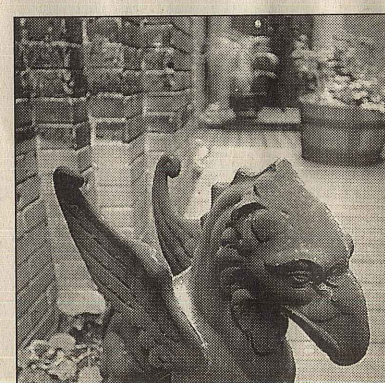
"I haven't encountered any spiritual connotations to [church conversions]," Mr. Brdlik adds.

Indeed, the religious organizations themselves have been content to divest themselves of the churches they can no longer afford.

Perhaps the biggest controversy around the developments has come from neighbourhood opposition to the added density the projects can bring. Neighbours opposed the plan to convert the former Eglinton United Church on Sheldrake Avenue into a 35-unit condominium. The plan includes underground parking for 75 vehicles in the Lawrence Park neighbourhood. The city's Planning Department ultimately approved the project, deciding that the development would preserve and reuse a significant neighbourhood landmark.



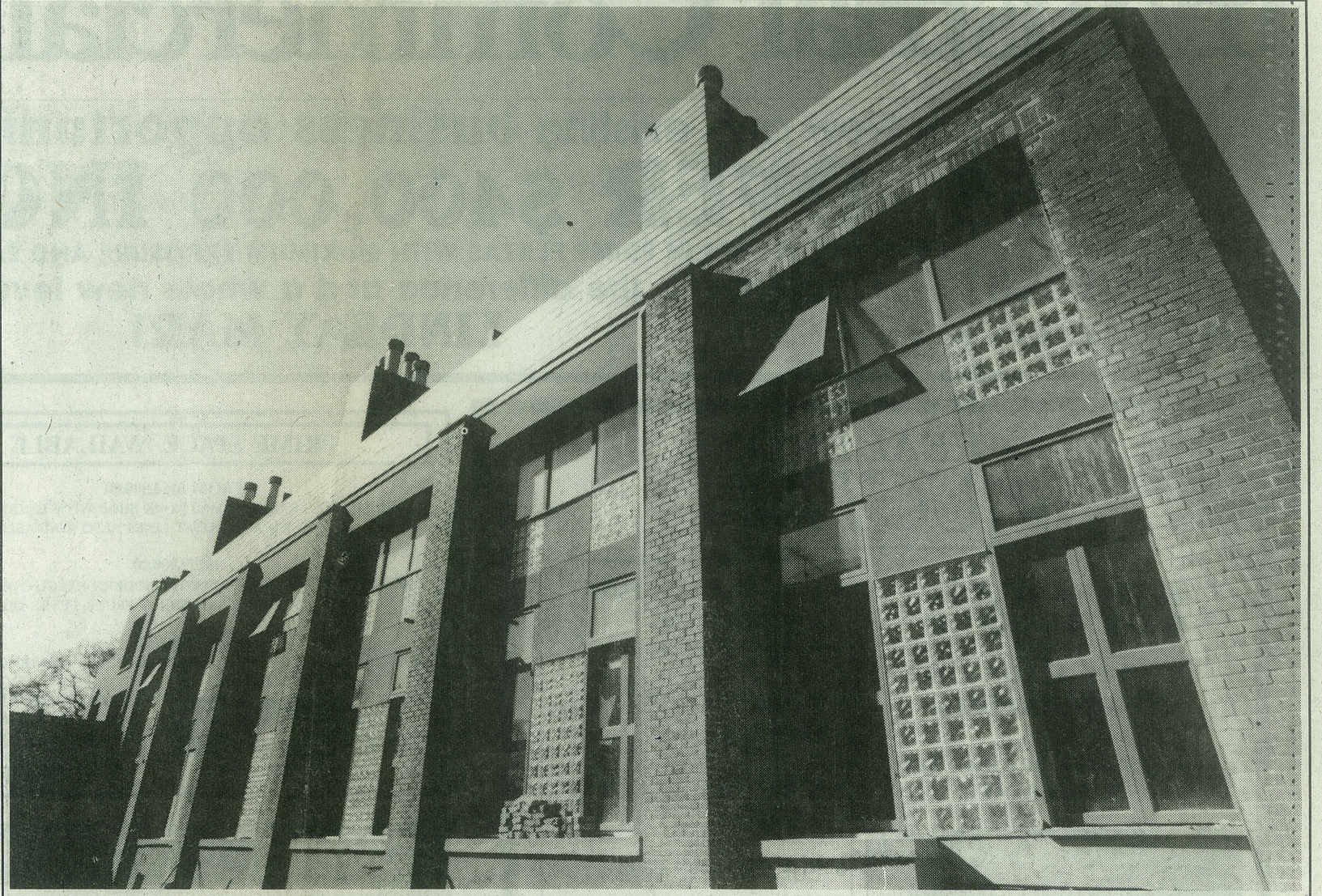
An exterior view of the repurposed church at 111 Robinson St.



One of the lamps from the church hangs in the master bedroom (above), lighting a painting uncovered during renovations. Outside, the deck (left and top) has been cut into the old church roof and features corrugated sheets of metal and industrial support beams. A glass-block wall lets light into the living area below.

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FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



A building reborn

Former church hall to become condominiums



Developers Robert Mitchell (left) and Michael Stewart.

By Iain Wilson

Two Toronto developers have faith that their latest project — the conversion of a former church hall in downtown Toronto — is going to be a success.

Claremont Hall is "an ideal building for developing because it's well-built and it can easily be divided," says Michael Stewart, referring to the former hall on Claremont Street near Queen Street West.

The Toronto development community, sensing a partial solution to ballooning office vacancies, has openly embraced the idea of converting tired buildings into residential living spaces.

Several people involved in the handful of retrofit projects already approved, however, caution that the process isn't meant for every old building whose time has come and gone.

Brad Henderson, vice-president and sales manager in a large real estate company's commercial services division, says that only a handful of buildings in Toronto are truly suited to conversion.

With that in mind, developers Robert Mitchell and Michael Stewart were enthused when they came across Claremont Hall close to the arts community on Queen Street West.

The two developers thought the building was ideal for the kind of living conditions favored by those in the artistic community.

They are currently working to convert the building into a 13-unit residential project.

Interiors customized

Features will include customized interior designs and finishings; large window walls with a southern exposure; and double french doors to walled gardens.

There will also be roof-top decks and private walled courts; European-style kitchens; skylit master baths with deck-mounted whirlpools; and woodburning fireplaces open on two sides.

Some of the building materials will include wood plank and ceramics; glass block and brick details; and solid masonry sound wall construction.

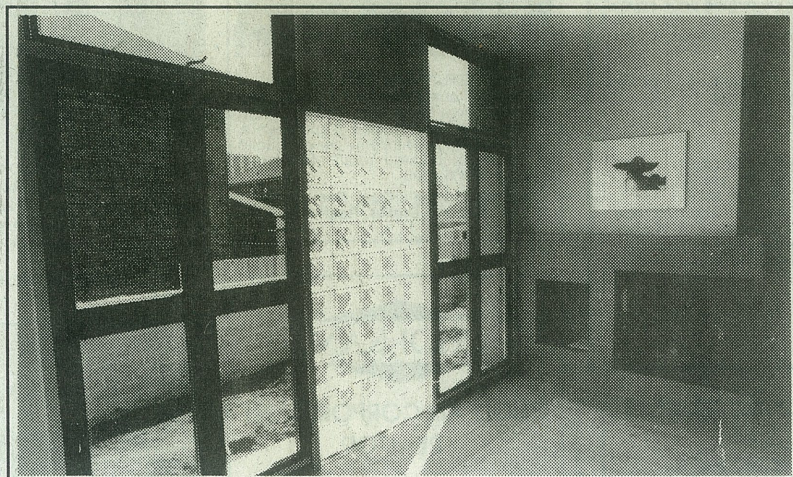
Lighting in the suites has been accomplished with halogen and low-voltage lights. There is also prewiring for alarm systems, ensuite laundries, indoor garage parking and large storage lockers with each suite.

"Each building you deal with is unique. That's why I don't think this will be a major development-type market," Mitchell said.

Major market or not, Claremont Hall's refurbishing required its own inspiration.

The developers found themselves dealing with a huge space in the box-shaped building. That, and appealing structural elements such as solid all-masonry construction and pre-cast concrete flooring, made the building uniquely suited to conversion.

"Solutions presented themselves very clearly," Mitchell said of the conversion process. ●



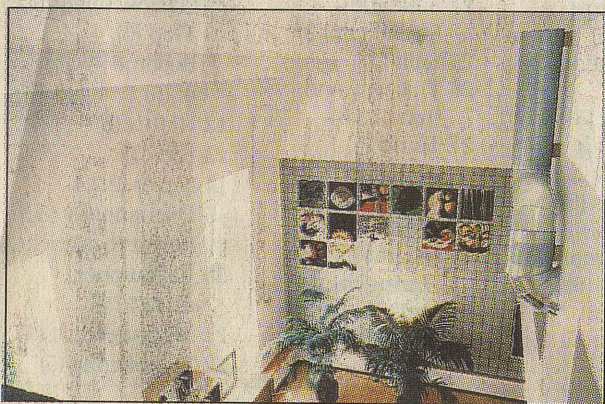
LIVING SPACES

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Side entrance (above) and interiors (below and right), which show the large volume, huge windows and high ceilings the owners wanted in converted 50-year-old Slovakian Catholic Church in Toronto (bottom page).

TINNISH ANDERSEN/The Globe and Mail



Dwelling entrance (above) and interior (below) of old saddlery/textile warehouse on Richmond in Toronto. The building was divided into rooms so that there is the "appearance of big space although the volume is low."



TREND

Downscaling boomers are moving out of the burbs and away from traditional eight-foot box houses. Young techies don't want to mow an acre of lawn or shovel a mile of driveway. The result: a growing interest in converted banks, bakeries, churches and warehouses.

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STEPHANIE NOLEN
Lifestyle Editor, Toronto

It takes a powerful imagination to see sunny, soaring flats in the hulk of a derelict banquet hall that has not hosted a wedding bash in 20 years. Toronto real-estate developer Steven Fudge has just those kind of sharp eyes. A pioneer in "adaptive reuse conversions," Fudge has been involved in the conversion of a church, several banquet halls, factories, a movie house, a stable and some warehouses into living spaces.

"It requires a huge sense of vision," Fudge says, "to see a home in the shell of a disused church." Also required: the ability to relinquish traditional ideas. "We are socially conditioned to think of home as four walls and a pointed

roof, to want a detached house with a yard and a place to park the car."

But remaking industrial, commercial or institutional space in the heart of urban areas into non-traditional living environments is one of the hottest trends in real estate today, fuelled by changing demographics and urban land use, and encouraged by changing zoning laws. "Conversion is the major urban phenomenon," says Barry Wellar, professor of urban geography at the University of Ottawa.

Conversion has glamour. Fudge notes the influence of media images and movies, creating a craving for unusual space. "People look at their semi-detached house, and they realize that the eight-foot boxes they are in don't do it for them."

The first major conversions in Canada were done in Montreal, in the early 1980s when large manufacturing sites fell into disuse. Much more non-traditional residential space is available in the core of Montreal today than in other cities. But the market

has exploded lately in Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver.

Ottawa's first conversion was done three years ago, to an old hospital turned military barracks called Wallace House. It was adapted into more than 50 condominium-type units. Two days after the building was opened, every unit was sold.

Eager to keep people in the already serviced downtown, and check a nasty case of urban sprawl, Ottawa City Council waived the \$10,000-per-door development fee. Since then, a fire station, a Brewer's Retail, several Art Deco office buildings and turn-of-the-century schools have been converted — an addition of 1,100 dwelling units in the downtown area in three years.

While the capital's booming high-tech industry is located in the tidy suburbs, its employees are mostly young people with no interest in a four-bedroom palace in Kanata or Orleans. "There is a huge thirst for lofts," explains Ottawa urban planner Alain Miguez. "Young high-techies and empty-nesters don't want to mow an acre of lawn or shovel a mile of driveway in February." So hot is the demand that a developer is trying to get zoning permission to put up a building that looks like a factory in the Sandy Hill neighbourhood, in order to immediately sell it as converted living space.

Many of Fudge's clients are what he calls "downscaling boomers," moving out of the burbs. They love the mental leap of moving into an old bank or bakery. "These folks want you to be confused, they want that when you to pull up to some weird building, you don't get an immediate read on who's living there," he says. "It allows people to reinvent who they are."

Michael Rac, 33, of Toronto's AKA Design, did the design of an old saddlery turned textile warehouse on Richmond Avenue, as part of his fourth-year design project. He loved the fact he was "converting space when it was just a hulk." There are two stories, he left the original steel beams exposed, it's divided into different rooms

with interesting use of colour. There is the "appearance of big space," he says, "although the volume of space is low."

Architect Richard Drdla converted a 50-year-old Toronto church for friends of his, a couple in their 60s. The Slovakian Catholic Church had lost its population; the diocese sold the building to a developer, and the pews and icons were carted out to Mississauga, Ont. The enormous interior was divided into two units. Drdla's clients had been looking at spaces like this for more than 10 years. The church had everything they wanted: large, simple volume, huge windows, high ceilings, a chance to be enormously creative with their use of space.

Drdla carried the ziggurat theme of the church's ceiling into the windows and the other rooms (two bedrooms, two offices, a studio, a wonderful hidden rooftop terrace), with square shapes and angular details. Features of the church have been preserved as well: a gentle mosaic high on a bedroom wall, and gilt lanterns hung in unexpected corners. The effect is breathtaking, exciting — and yet, still homey.

Drdla believes that the lack of diversity in housing stock means that people who have atypical or even slightly unusual housing needs are not being served. "The traditional family is in the minority, but the building industry is still building for that family. We don't have housing for non-traditional families, for empty-nesters who still have active lifestyles, for co-operative groups who want to live together, for younger people on their own."

Wellar agrees that is true, but predicts the next few years will see people moving away from reliance on the car, out of deadening suburbs, and into interesting houses, he says. "No more cookie-cutter stuff."

