

Factory a condo complex in its second life

BY ADELE FREEDMAN
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TO HEAR of another condominium building going up on Bay Street or at Harbourfront could hardly raise an eyebrow, but how about an old picture frame factory in an ethnic neighborhood being converted into 16 "New York loft-style condos" to be known as The Oxford-on-Markham? That's the project Mitchell and Associates

BY DESIGN

are in the midst of completing, and it promises to be a honey. (It is also completely sold.)

Mitchell and Associates are Robert Mitchell and his wife, Beverley, both in their thirties. He is an engineer and a town planner; she studied architecture. "I guess we're developers," says he, she being absent, "but I don't like the connotations of the word. We're more like design-builders — we do all the design work, the construction supervision, and most of the selling — but we only have ourselves for clients. We're our own bankers, too."

The Mitchells' shared career, whatever they choose to call it, started out innocently enough. They bought a house for themselves in the mid-seventies, and renovated it into a duplex. Next they renovated a number of houses in the Annex for the rental market. In 1981, says Mitchell, "rental stopped making sense and we went into condos." Their strategy was to acquire non-residential buildings in the downtown and make them into residences. This made sense on two fronts: they wouldn't be displacing rental accommodation, and they would be in a position to capitalize on features like thick walls and high ceilings.

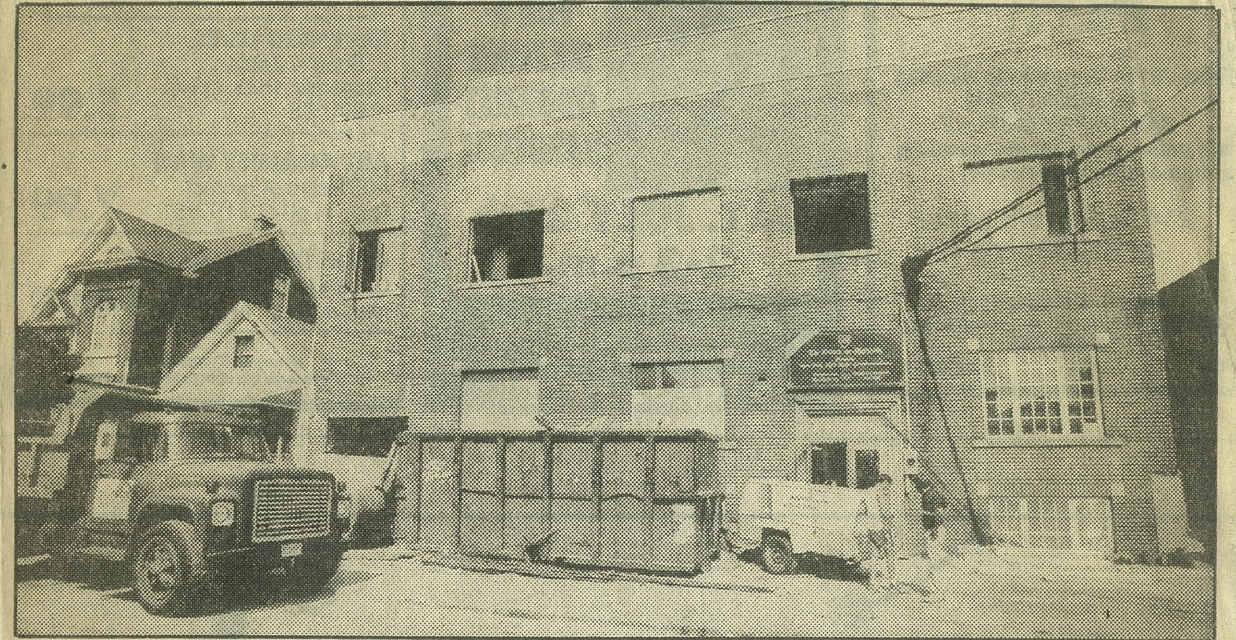
The picture-frame factory on Markham Street has both of these in abundance, and a lot of other things going for it, too. It may look like a little industrial building, but it makes a snug fit with the dainty, well-kept houses around it — and the street is within walking distance of Bathurst, Dundas and Queen streets. The Mitchells added a third story to the structure, raising the existing parapet with



salvaged brick, and they carved out underground parking for 19 cars. These were the major moves, although what they accomplished inside by way of layouts and organization is just as commendable.

No two condos are alike at Oxford-on-Markham, named not for the English university but the former picture-frame company. Each is orchestrated differently and each is custom-finished.

However, they all share certain characteristics. The top units are all skylit, although the skylights can appear over a livingroom, a bathroom, a kitchen. (The amount of natural light in the place is just this side of overwhelming.) All are on at least two levels, with some rising to three. Thirteen units walk out onto the roof, where someone has even decided to install a hot tub; the others walk down onto patios. Each unit has a



BARRIE DAVIS/The Globe and Mail

Mitchell, left, inside his converted factory. Deceiving from the front, the building goes back 140 feet.

fireplace or two and a generous dab of glass block for privacy. Everywhere you look, you see eccentric things like cupboards tucked under staircases, niches, even exposed ductwork.

Needless to say, these condos don't feel like the stacked, blanched boxes normally answering to the name. They aren't cheap, ranging from \$90,000 to \$170,000, nor are they excessively large, being 900 to 1,800 square feet. But, as is commonly agreed, it isn't what you pay that's important, but what you get for what you pay. Oxford-on-Markham delivers value-for-money, with value defined as character, atmosphere, workmanship and materials. The units are not quite houses, not quite apartments, but somewhere in between.

The Mitchells aren't the only people turning factories into condos, but they're certainly among the leaders. Previous projects have included the recycling of the old Ontario Medical College for Women in Cabbagetown, and the conversion of a machine shop on Shanly Street. Where are they going to strike next? Are they thinking of tackling bigger buildings? "It's hard to say where you're going to grow," Mitchell responds. "This kind of work is time-consuming. You're limited

by the type of buildings, the level of complexity required. Oxford-on-Markham is a nice threshold size. It's nice for people: there's a sense of community right in the building. Of course, I'm always looking for new things to do, but I don't want to see my good ideas printed in a newspaper."

The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada would like to see some good ideas in print, however. They've just published a handsome 120-page booklet outlining the 26 projects selected for awards this year, 10 receiving the Governor General's Medal for Architecture. Not only does this serve as a concise review of contemporary Canadian architecture, although some very old projects have managed to sneak in, but it also prints the comments of the international jurors retained by the RAIC to judge the awards. These are often valuable.

In his comments, W. Randle Iredale, professional advisor to the jury, notes that "very few projects are photographed with people," picking up on juror John Andrews' remark that "there is a tendency towards presenting the project as a piece of art as opposed to a piece of architecture and to me these two things are very different."

Iredale also mentions the diffi-

culties the jury had making awards to commercial buildings, office buildings and shopping centres, a point made by another juror, Kurt Forster: "The design of modern high-rise office buildings may well have fallen victim to the most inflexible investment calculations, which reduce the architect's role to that of a *couturier* scissoring a flashy wrapping from familiar patterns."

But perhaps the most perceptive observations come from Fumihiko Maki, who couldn't help but notice the country is very large and the population dispersed. "In order to heighten architectural culture," Maki writes, "I feel that there should be more interaction between architects, journalists and critics. By bringing out more criticism via media and press, architects, developers and clients will become more sensitive to what is expected and will also be helpful to the younger generation."

Maki recommends a "monitor system" in which architects, journalists, and critics are assigned on a regional basis to survey completed work and recommend projects for RAIC awards, instead of the usual practice of architects submitting projects on a voluntary basis. There's one to think about on a long summer's night.