

# CONDO LIVING

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**NEW LIFE:** Claremont Hall, at 34 Claremont St., near Queen St. W. and Ossington Ave., was turned into condos by Bob Mitchell.

RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

## The Tao of building

Bob Mitchell has been turning vacant buildings into 'astonishing' living spaces for 19 years and counting

*"Though clay may be moulded into a vase, the essence of the vase is the emptiness within it. Though doors and windows may be cut into a house, the essence of the house is the emptiness within it. Therefore, taking advantage of what is, we recognize the essence of what is not."*

—Lao-Tzu, Chinese philosopher

BY JENNIFER BAIN  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Bob Mitchell is almost embarrassed to admit it — but he recently captured his design philosophy in words and laid it down on his Web site for all who care to see.

He starts by quoting Lao-Tzu, the Chinese founder of Taoism, who declares the essence of something isn't its shell, but its emptiness. Mitchell then opines that creating "extraordinary loft spaces" is not about actual buildings, it's about the space contained within them.

As the Toronto developer/builder explains in an interview, building is essentially about spatial volume and light. So converting industrial and institutional structures offers the potential "to create astonishing living environments."

His latest project is Printers Row, in residential Riverdale. Mitchell is converting the brick-and-concrete building into a row of six, double-stacked, two- and three-storey lofts. All 12 units — originally priced at \$219,900 to \$319,900 — face south and open on to private roof gardens or terraces. Ten have already been snapped up through referrals. Two remain for \$309,900 and \$329,900.

Old factories, churches and even schools have large volumes of space, high ceilings, long, clear spans and visible structural elements like brick arches and timber beams or columns.

To subdivide this kind of space,



JENNIFER BAIN PHOTO

**PHILOSOPHER KING:** Bob Mitchell, seen at Printers Row project, has some opinions on the meaning of space in buildings. Below, his 41 Shandly St. project.



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

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# Developer bringing lost spaces back to life

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Mitchell considers not just the existing structure, but the external environment, planning and building code constraints, and the people who are going to live in it.

"Maximize space and light," Mitchell writes. "Work with and not against existing structure. Be aware of the surrounding environment. Listen to the answers. Consider colouring outside the lines."

Tao — the way or force that flows through all life — also encourages people to work with natural forces, not against them; to master circumstances without controlling them.

Mitchell must be acting in accordance with the universe, because he has earned a steady living creating more than 150 unique living spaces in the city since 1980.

He works quietly, almost anonymously. His projects sell almost exclusively by word-of-mouth.

With a bachelor's degree in applied science and engineering, and a masters of science in urban and regional planning — both from the University of Toronto — Mitchell started his career in 1973 working for architectural and consulting practices. Four years later, he launched Mitchell & Associates to do property development.

He got into renovating and converting "by accident" when he and his wife Beverly moved into the Annex in the 1970s, enjoyed renovating so much they decided to do more of it. She worked with him for a while, and now has her own Internet-based gardening company.

Mitchell's "company" of one handles design, marketing, sales and construction — subcontracting out to structural engineers and architects only what he can't personally do, but retaining the final say on all decisions.

"Design by committee" — at least with other professionals — is not Mitchell's style. Design by "co-operative thought" with buyers is. Thus he doesn't create 12-unit condominiums, but 12 custom homes within a building.

By offering only customized living spaces in his projects, Mitchell creates "a variable equation. It's what I am and what you are. And if the 'you' always changes, the sum of it is always something different."

Take, for example, 670 Richmond St., constructed in 1950 for Decca Records, and later used as a garment factory. Mitchell converted it into 12 residential two- and three-storey lofts with roof gardens in 1997.

Here — and next door at 676 Richmond — a tour reveals entirely different layouts, vibes and styles.

Gorette Costa and her husband/business partner Denis Leclerc bought a 3,200-square-foot space here in 1996. The entrance foyer opens into a large space for their graphic design company, Costa Leclerc, which employs three people.

A second entrance off the foyer opens into a library with steps leading to an upstairs living space with a large kitchen, bathroom, bedroom and deck.

"It was still a raw space when we bought, so we were able to break down the space the way we envisioned it," remembers Costa. "I've been in almost all the suites here, and it's really kind of neat to see how the spaces are so different and distinctly individual."

Mitchell's passion is for finding buildings in well-defined neighbourhoods that are "past life cycle, vacant, derelict, not contributing to the city and bringing them back into play."

Each conversion calls for a historical study of past uses and, if warranted, an environmental audit studying soil sam-



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

**KNITTING PRETTY:** 676 Richmond St., which began life as a knitting mill, is now a 19-unit condominium.

ples for any dangerous residue.

This was the case with 41 Shanly St. in Dovercourt Village, an ugly and obsolete industrial building originally constructed for Dominion Felt Co. Clouds of snow-like pollution had long been part of this residential area.

In 1982, Mitchell turned it into 10 multi-storey loft condos (each with roof terraces and fireplaces) later winning an Ontario Renew Award for design excellence for what was the first legal residential loft/condo conversion in Toronto.

**'The Canadian public was not ready for lofts — not back in those days.'**

Walter Potts, then a graphic designer, was one of the original owners there.

"The Canadian public was not ready for lofts — not back in those days," recalls Potts, who had toured Robert DeNiro's loft in New York city before discovering 41 Shanly. "They wanted the artsy feeling of the loft, but they didn't have the (nerve) to move in."

"I have the greatest respect for Bob Mitchell as a concept guy who had the (nerve) to go

ahead and do lofts."

To Mitchell, 41 Shanly was "sort of a win-win situation, creating something of value and at the same time not displacing anybody to do it. It's almost a philosophical thing. If there's a way to do it (build) and not be at odds with social policy, it's easier to do it that way and get it approved."

"If you're putting factory workers out of work, there will be an outcry. But if you take buildings whose uses are not appropriate in a residential neighbourhood, and have moved somewhere else, it's recycling."

"All you're doing is creating additional home supply."

That's the case with Printers Row, Mitchell's work-in-progress at 523 Logan Ave. in residential Riverdale. Designed in 1911 by architect W. F. Carmichael for the Bell Telephone Co. world headquarters, and recently vacated by ABSO Blue Prints, the building is a "vintage architectural gem."

Potts — now a builder who has lived in several places since 41 Shanly — has snapped up a suite in Printers Row.

"I've got the best unit in there," he raves. "You know the door with the fancy brick cobbling? That's my unit."

Mitchell is ecstatic about the existing floor in Printers Row — six inches of concrete and 12 inches of terra-cotta tile and steel grid that will acoustically separate units.

Not to mention the brick detailing and original fire-escape (a portion of which will be recycled next door for Loft House, a loft-style, steel-frame home that Mitchell is building for a creative client on a rare vacant lot).

In conversions, existing buildings of some architectural note are typically gutted, leaving only the shell and foundation intact.

Some may wonder about conversions, which retain only the shell of buildings but aren't covered under the Ontario New Home Warranty Program. Simply put, conversions allow developers leeway that wouldn't be available by knocking down a building and rebuilding on the site.

The 17-metre high Printers Row, for example, went up in the pre-building code era. A

residential neighbourhood sprang up around it that complies with rules about height (10 metres in the area), property lines (front, back and sides) and maximum square footage of living space.

"The factory is three storeys, each with internal mezzanines, and it covers the entire site," Mitchell points out.

"If we were to knock it down, we would probably be allowed 1,500 square feet over two to three floors, so it would have become a townhouse or a pair of semis. That would change the character of the site."

Instead, the larger volumes of space give Mitchell more flexibility to create what he calls "non-conventional residential space."

You can also circumvent existing zoning bylaws by finding buildings that have been condemned and demolished, says Mitchell.

That's what he did with 15 Glen Manor Dr., a three-storey apartment building beside the boardwalk in the Beach.

He bought the "famous lean-

ing building on the waterfront" when it was "vacant land" and was allowed to rebuild into 11 condos.

There have been many other conversions along the way, usually in the manageable 10- to 30-unit range in highly desirable downtown spots.

But now Mitchell has set his sights on the somewhat overlooked Riverdale. He's negotiating to convert an unused portion of the 1912-built Riverdale Presbyterian Church, at 662 Pape Ave., into 32 lofts.

The man who kept a low profile for two decades, hoping competitors would be slow to catch on to conversions and snap up all the best properties, is still reluctant to talk in detail about the future.

But he concedes that "We do know where we're going in five years. We just can't tell you until then."

For more information on Printers Row, visit [www.mitchell-lofts.com](http://www.mitchell-lofts.com), E-mail [design@mitchell-lofts.com](mailto:design@mitchell-lofts.com) or call (416) 698-7174.

## What's on deck in conversions

Bob Mitchell's conversion projects are detailed in words and pictures at [www.mitchell-lofts.com](http://www.mitchell-lofts.com).

Here's a list of his projects:

- Current and upcoming:**
- Printers Row, 523 Logan Ave., 12-unit conversion of Bell Telephone building
  - Loft House, 525 Logan Ave., new construction of loft-style house
  - Mayfair Walk, 910 Logan Ave., proposed 9-unit freehold townhouse development
  - Riverdale Lofts, 662 Pape Ave., proposed loft conversion of a church

- Completed:**
- (1980) 300-302 Ave. Rd., 6-unit conversion of historical residential manor
  - (1982) 41 Shanly St., 10-unit conversion of obsolete felt factory

- (1984) 289 Sumach St., 11-unit conversion of historically designated medical college
- (1986) The Oxford-on-Markham, 75 Markham St., 16-unit conversion of picture frame factory
- (1988) Lowther Mews, 190 Lowther Ave., 10-unit infill project
- (1992) Hepbourne Hall, 110 Hepbourne St., 21-unit conversion of existing church hall
- (1994) 15 Glen Manor Dr., 11-unit infill project
- (1995) 195 Poplar Plains, 6-unit conversion of historic residential property
- (1996) Claremont Hall, 34 Claremont St., 13-unit conversion of church hall and manse
- (1997) 676 Richmond St. W., 19-unit conversion of knitting mill
- (1998) 670 Richmond St. W., 12-unit conversion of garment factory

### TIME FOR CHURCH:

110 Hepbourne St., once a church hall, is now a 21-unit condominium, following a Bob Mitchell conversion.



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