

Corktown condo tower respects its Victorian neighbours

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Like all other corners of inner-city Toronto, Corktown and the east-side neighbourhoods bordering it have seen their fair share of gentrification and intensification over the last decade or so. Shiny new towers now loom over antique row housing, desolate parking lots have been carved out of formerly picturesque streetscapes. Only vigilant officials at city hall, it seems, stand between the district's surviving Victorian brick edifices and the development juggernaut.

One old building nobody need worry about any longer, however, is the former Christie, Brown & Co. Stables, located at 93-95 Berkeley St. Last year, in the course of considering a development proposal that could have meant the demolition of the handsome Romanesque industrial structure, city council voted to put it on Toronto's roster of culturally valuable properties, thereby registering its official frown on any scheme to tear it down.

After restoration and conversion to commercial purposes, it will become the Berkeley Street face of the mixed-use complex known as East United. (Some elderly houses on Parliament Street were not considered worth saving by the authorities. They will be knocked down to make way for the project's eastern facade.)



Designed for SigNature Communities, Berkshire Axis and Andiel Homes by Toronto architect Ralph Giannone, East United has been ingeniously tailored to slip into a tight L-shaped spot in the downtown grid. A robust, five-storey masonry podium, with a double-height lobby and retail space at grade, fronts onto Parliament Street. Above it, and set back some 30 feet (nine metres) from the podium's street-side edge, the residential point tower rises to a height of 21 storeys. The deep setback of the shaft, Mr. Giannone said, is meant to allow these two elements, podium and tower, "to be seen as two buildings."

On the Berkeley Street side, the massing is more complicated. Behind the two-storey Victorian structure beside the sidewalk, the volume steps up to six, eight, nine and finally 10 storeys before meeting the tower. This city-mandated progression from short to higher to high on the western end of the site, the architect told me, is meant to keep East United from "overwhelming" what's left of Berkeley's low-rise fabric. It's a welcome nod of respect toward the historic street, which was the eastern boundary of the townsite that city founder John Graves Simcoe laid out in 1793.



For the record: The project is slated to contain 279 residential units, ranging in size from 350 square feet to 1,400 square feet (32 square metres to 130 square metres). Prices start at around \$200,000, and the developers expect the suites to retail “in the mid-\$500s” per square foot. An existing laneway on the south side of the site will be pushed the whole distance between Berkeley and Parliament. A line of townhouses will open onto this pedestrian “mews.”

Though it embodies some interesting architectural ideas – such as the intricate sculpting necessary to satisfy the heritage people, investors and neighbours, and to accommodate the peculiar configuration of its site – East United is basically another podium-tower arrangement of the sort that has proliferated across Toronto since the onset of the current real-estate boom. Application of the formula to new tall buildings has been strongly encouraged by the city’s urban designers and planners, but the form has some critics, who see its official promotion as a drag on architectural imagination and invention. (I, for one, would like to see greater variation in the crafting and execution of skyscrapers than either the bureaucrats or most developers seem willing to permit.)

Ralph Giannone, however, has no time for the nay-sayers. The point tower on a podium, he said - citing the example of Vancouver - “is a good way to get density while respecting the scale of the neighbourhood.”



<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/home-and-garden/real-estate/corktown-condo-tower-respects-its-victorian-neighbours/article24073506/>

What he believes about this topic matters – and not just because he is designing high-rises on Toronto’s skyline. For the past eight years, Mr. Giannone has served on the city’s Design Review Panel, an advisory body that vets high-impact architectural proposals for sites in the urban core and in other key places scattered throughout the metropolitan area. In this capacity, he has scrutinized many of the tall and mid-rise residential projects that are giving Toronto its 21st-century shape and sense – and he thinks that, on the whole, we are headed in the right direction.



“The development that people are complaining about,” he said, “has transformed the city.” There are people on streets that, just a few years ago, were empty. “Expectations are being raised, developers are understanding that design matters. What happens next? It will be the mature American city model – real urban living.” That means couples raising families in downtown places once dominated by warehouses and factories. It means citizens content to dwell throughout the life-cycle in apartments (sometimes cobbled together from small units), and even to rent instead of own.

Could the architectural quality of Toronto’s tall buildings be better? Certainly, Mr. Giannone believes. It’s improved over the last while – though, still, he added, “good enough is not good enough.”