

ARCHITECTURE

An artful addition to Queen West's changing landscape



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I am of two minds about the gentrification of Queen Street West between Dovercourt Road and the Gladstone Hotel. On one hand, the condominium projects rising on the south side of the avenue will bring more people into the once-desolate strip, boost local businesses, make the streets more lively by day and night – all good things, in my view.

On the other hand, the residential development of what's left of the industrial zone south of Queen is helping drive up neighbourhood real-estate prices from cheap to dear, to the detriment of the gallery owners, designers, artists and artisans whose presence made Queen West interesting in the first place.

Add to that the poor artistic quality of the new architecture we've seen so far down there – for example, Baywood Homes's faux-Victorian edifices now under construction across the street from the Gladstone – and you may find yourself thinking, as I often do, that the spiffing up of Queen West is turning into a sad affair.

Which leads us to Art Condominiums, the latest addition to the mix of residential projects on the go along this short stretch of Queen. Viewed with a weary eye, Art is just another instance of the intensification that is already making life too expensive for the long-time creative citizens in the area.

That said, it's impossible simply to write off this 11-storey building on Dovercourt south of Queen.

For one thing, I've rarely seen a new, developer-driven Toronto apartment block that tries harder to distance itself



Half of the 148 suites at Art Condominiums on Queen Street West contain two or three bedrooms, an unusually high proportion. TRIANGLE WEST DEVELOPMENTS INC.

from the run-of-the-mill conglomeration of tiny condos typical of Hogtown. Art features 148 suites, only half of which are studio or one-bedroom units. The rest contain two or three bedrooms, and the largest apartments (1,615 square feet) have dens. Prices range from \$213,000 for a 460-square-foot studio to about \$700,000.

These layouts and prices suggest that the target market is not merely the first-time buyer (though there is

plenty in this project for a would-be new homeowner to look at). Couples with one or two children could be comfortably housed here. This fact alone makes Art worth noticing. For, though Toronto is not yet ready, it's only a matter of time until we get used to the idea of families living throughout the adult life-cycle in a downtown apartment. If Art is a success, its popularity could prompt other developers in the inner city to devote large swatches

of their buildings to family-sized accommodations. This is something everyone who cares about Toronto's downtown vitality and diversity should wish for.

Another thing that's attractive about Art – though I have certain reservations – is the architecture. Designed for developer Gary Silverberg by David Olsson, principal in Olsson Worland Architect, and Sandro Zanini of Hariri Pontarini Architects, the north-facing building rises in

three movements: a stout base, over which floats a glassy, terraced shaft, and a cornice line that acts as a lid on the whole composition.

In an interview, Mr. Olsson told me he means to clad the four-storey, "very robust, elemental, simple" base in stone as a nod to the gruff industrial buildings that once stood round about the site. But if the historical context is important enough to merit a gesture of recollection, it's surely worthwhile to get right what one is remembering: The older structures were humble brick, not high-toned limestone. Brick makes sense in this area of the city; stone just doesn't.

At ground level, Mr. Olsson said, the base will contain 1,000-square-foot live-work units, each opening directly onto the street, each with 15-foot ceilings. On the second level will be a business centre. Both the live-work suites and the business centre are intended to attract the entrepreneurial people who have made Queen Street West the vivid place it is.

As the building goes upward from the base, the shaft steps back on the north face, creating terraces off some units up to 15 feet by 20 feet in size. In this move, we again see the developer's objective at work: to draw in families with children who could enjoy what amounts to a back yard, along with the many freedoms and conveniences of condo living.

I hope children will be born and grow up in Art. I also hope these children will find Queen Street the enjoyable place it is today, and not the overpriced, mediocre tourist wasteland that Yorkville (to cite another Toronto place that began as an artists' hangout) has become. Perhaps Art Condominiums will set Queen Street housing in a new direction, one more welcoming to the best that's already there. But like so many aspects of Toronto in this transitional moment, everything remains to be seen.

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ART

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