

DEVELOPMENT

Toronto's River City project: A sober-sided urbanism

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Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Jan. 28 2010, 5:24 PM EST

Last updated Thursday, Sep. 06 2012, 4:07 PM EDT

For adventurous home-buyers looking for digs in Toronto's old industrial zones, the junction of King and Queen Streets East, just west of the Don River, is one of the city's last frontiers. But don't wait too long. The gruff brick factories and warehouses that dot the area, and the Victorian storefronts along King and Queen, are being rapidly changed into chic dwellings and offices for people who don't mind, or actually like (as I do), the rugged streetscapes left to us by the great Machine Age.

But along with the overhauls, much new housing is coming on stream in the district. Waterfront Toronto, the crown corporation conducting the transformation of the city's harbour lands, will shortly see the first residential development in the desolate 80-acre West Don Lands go to market. It's called River City and, when built out fully, it will contain 950 units. For the record: 330 units will go up for sale in February. They will range in size from a tiny 349 square-foot studio apartment to 1,050 square-foot two-bedroom suites on two levels, and are priced at \$500 a square foot.

If River City lives up to its promise, this very fresh, intelligent project will probably raise the bar of architectural excellence for innovative multi-family residential work in Toronto.

Designed by the celebrated Montreal firm of Saucier + Perrotte Architects for Urban Capital Property Group, the development will occupy a long rectangular site bounded, on the north, by King Street East, and on the south by River Square, a public meeting place lined with cafés and restaurants, adjacent to Waterfront Toronto's new Don River Park. The eastern limit is the Don corridor, with the little Don River flowing alongside traffic and train routes. On the west side, the boundary will be a southward extension of River Street, which currently stops at King.

All the old construction on the location has been bulldozed, except for one mighty thing: the elevated

traffic deck of the Eastern Avenue flyover, which cuts right through the middle of the River City site. This large, obtrusive piece of infrastructure, I imagine, would have daunted some architects. But not Saucier + Perrotte. Their proposed solution to the problem takes the form of a graceful ribbon of mid-rise architecture and courtyards that extends south from a 14-storey building on King Street, gives way to new parkland and recreational facilities below the traffic decks, then resumes on the other side, flipping up into a tower 20-odd storeys tall.

River City's five buildings, to be phased in over the next few years, are expressions of architectural variety within a framework of sober-sided urbanism. Nothing here shouts. The mid-sized profile of the structures north of Eastern Avenue strikes the right scale in a district of warehouses and factories. (The taller tower south of the flyover will be a good match for the development schemes Waterfront Toronto has in mind for the land around Don River Park.) The expanses of grey-tinted glass in dark aluminum frames, the balanced opacity and transparency of the facades, the hard geometry of the buildings - all these design moves help ease the way of River City into its architecturally tough neighbourhood, and give it aesthetic unity.

But this complex is hardly demure. While maintaining the concord of the project by means of colour and glass textures, and an overall stringent modernism, Saucier + Perrotte have carefully chiselled each building into a distinctive form. In plan, for example, the shorter tower on King Street is an irregular pentagon, creating interesting suites with strong, raking angles and wide views of the surrounding city. The row of four connected, short condominium cubes at the centre of the site, in contrast, is sturdy and resolute in general shape, but the ensemble is enlivened by the gently playful sculpting of their facades. Each building, in its turn, has been uniquely imagined, but matched in style and appearance to every other to make a coherent whole.

There are many ways to construct a city, of course, some of them downright awful, others merely mindless and uninspired. By assembling some of the best architects, planners and urban designers in the world to give advice and direction, Waterfront Toronto has apparently avoided the worst ways of making new urban landscape, and found ways of doing so that work well. The structures and green spaces in River City add up to thoughtful city-building at a high level, and provide a testament to Waterfront Toronto's careful oversight of the land in its keeping.