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Interior designers take condos to new level

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Designers were once the shoeshine boys of the commercial condominium market. With a little spit and polish, they helped developers spiff up a project and bring it to market, choosing shower tiles and kitchen counter tops. But they had little input into overall style.

No more. A saturated condo market has meant that developers are clamouring to stamp the brand name of the country's most coveted designers onto their newest condo projects.

"The repetitious cookie-cutting of a few years ago just doesn't cut it any more," says Anna Simone of Cecconi Simone Inc., a Toronto interior design firm. "The condo developer of the 1980s is a dying breed. Toronto is becoming a very sophisticated city and purchasers no longer want to be given zero options. They want to feel like their home is unique, sexy and provocative."

The late 1990s has ushered in the era of the anti-trend, says Paolo Palarama, a partner at Toronto-based builder Diamante Development Corp., which has recently completed the Roxbury project at Bay and College streets and is currently building a development in Yorkville called Domus.

Because consumers are now more educated — they are bombarded with media images from far-flung spots of the world and through their own travelling — they are much more demanding in choosing designs and styles in their living space that reflect that multicultural diversity, Mr. Palarama says.

"The more society tries to make us the same, the more we try to be different. The home is just one expression of that," he says. "We try to help people capture their dream."

What that means is that to be successful condo projects will have to offer myriad layouts that cater to consumers' needs.

Kathy Kinnear, president of Cresford Developments, a Toronto firm responsible for converting the Merchandise Building at Dundas and Church streets into condominiums, says the company offered 69 different layouts and designs for its 490 units.

The trend to diversity is being driven by the broadening condo market. Empty nesters are scaling back on their space needs, there are more single dwellers, and a burgeoning army of people working longer hours is opting to live in the urban core to cut down on commute times. All of this



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JOHN MORSTAD/The Globe and Mail

means that the one-size-and-style-fits-all model just doesn't apply any more, Ms. Kinnear explains.

However, wish lists typically include a few common elements, says Ms. Simone, whose firm recently helped design both the Merchandise Building and the Camden Lofts in Toronto.

Natural light and high ceilings to create the illusion of space are at a premium these days, whether a development is classical in design or modern. What designers can help developers with most is constructing living spaces that reflect consumer needs. The demands of the home office worker, the single dweller and the family with young children are radically different.

For example, a single person living in a condominium may be more intent on entertaining, says Fenwick Bonnell of Powell & Bonnell Design Consultants Inc. in Toronto. In design terms, that could translate

into a smaller bedroom and more space given to the main living area with an open-kitchen concept where guests can talk to the condo owner while she or he prepares a meal.

A home office worker, on the other hand,

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may want to make an office environment part of the main living area to make the best use of natural light, Mr. Bonnell adds.

Ms. Simone likes to think of getting back to the basics: The four ancient elements of

earth, wind, fire and water. Because many condos have neither a balcony nor a back yard, her firm has recently designed kitchens with an area for a herb garden.

Because people are spending more time in the loo — soaking in the tub to eliminate stress from a demanding day — the bathroom is also taking on an added significance, she adds.

In a model presented at the recent Interior Design Show in Toronto, Cecconi Simone presented a stunningly different take on the bathroom of the future. It was installed in the centre of the condo, representing both its newfound prominence in condo dwellers' lives, as well as the trend toward tearing down boundaries between functions in the home.

"Toronto is becoming a very sophisticated culture. Today's condo developer works with a designer to create a sanctuary from a world that is moving at a much faster pace."