

NATIONAL POST

Saturday, April 12, 2008

At face value

Exterior Design; Developers focus on architecture to buyers' benefit

Lisa Van De Ven, National Post

Published: Saturday, April 12, 2008

Presented by



How the building interacts with the skyline. How it communicates with its surroundings. The materials that are used.

Ask Roy Varacalli -- director of design and construction, and partner with Bazis International -- what exactly needed to be taken into consideration in the design of the new 1 Bloor condo-hotel project at Yonge and Bloor, and he'll rhyme off a list of essentials. Designing a building, after all -- especially one meant to make a mark in the Toronto landscape -- isn't just about four walls with a roof. More and more -- at least for a select group of developers -- it's about creating something that will stand out from the crowd.

For those developers, introducing a new building to Toronto's market means distinct design. It's about leading Toronto's residents to a maturing appreciation of architecture. To do that, they're incorporating distinctive elements that will add something different to the city's condominium community. And for Mr. Varacalli and 1 Bloor, one of those singular standout features is something he calls its "second skin."

"I was very interested in establishing a residential vocabulary. And when you think of residential buildings, you think of balconies," he says. "But I didn't just want to have a typical balcony. I wanted to readdress, reinterpret, redefine what the balcony was. So what I did is I introduced another skin in front of the balcony."

That "skin" -- a second wall of glass along the outside of 1 Bloor's balconies, with panels that slide open and shut to create outdoor rooms protected from the elements -- provides a utilitarian function inside, allowing residents to get more use from their outdoor space throughout the year. From the outside, though, its function is purely aesthetic, creating a building with a facade that can change depending on whether residents want their balconies open or closed. "In the winter, it looks different than the summer. The facade is ever-changing," Mr. Varacalli says.

Unlike a sculpture or a painting on the wall, that combination of form and function is one of the things that sets good building design apart from other art forms, adds TAS DesignBuild principal Mazyar Mortazavi. As Toronto buyers get more sophisticated in their appreciation of architectural design -- and he sees evidence of that in the general acceptance of the design-savvy Ontario College of Art and Design building and the Royal Ontario Museum Crystal addition -- developers will have to push themselves more and more.

"Buildings in the city, unfortunately, tend to look the same," he says. "Design to us is a socio-cultural phenomenon. As society's expectations expand, and we become more culturally engaged with architecture that awareness helps enlighten the consumer, and begins to create expectations and push the envelope."

He sees the city beginning that slow shift toward innovation. And at TAS's M5V Condominiums at King Street West and Spadina Avenue, the developer -- with the help of CORE Architects -- has tried to lead the pack. The building features a curtain wall along its northern facade--previously a design feature used in Toronto only for commercial buildings -- as well as coloured glass panels that Mr. Mortazavi says breaks up the monotony of the city's building landscape. Most striking is a large red glass panel halfway up the building.

That red panel also hides M5V's mechanical room, which TAS moved from its traditional location on the main floor in order to reduce the energy needed to transfer air and water throughout the building (instead of pushing it up 30 storeys, it now only needs to move it up or down half that amount). "It just begins to speak to the overall process, and the importance of engaging in a thorough and comprehensive design," Mr. Mortazavi says. "So each of the elements begin to speak to each other in the building design, and then the building begins to speak to each of the elements within the broader neighbourhood or area that it exists in."

That form/function relationship, then, needs to have a broader meaning as well, keeping in mind how a building relates to the neighbourhood around it. "A site has to be designed following the urban landscape," says Paolo Palamara, co-president of Diamante Development Corp. "Every building doesn't just belong to its own land."

At Diamante's newest project, the Florian -- located at Davenport Road and Bay Street -- the shape of the building's exterior follows the curve of Davenport in front. But the developer did more than that: to push the design even further, architects Hariri Pontarini and Young + Wright also introduced glass curtain wall design -- offsetting it with warm-toned higher-quality brick-- to add drama to the site's exterior and additional light inside. The idea was to create a building that wasn't "anonymous," a place people could call home. "In our company, we really don't like glass boxes," Mr. Palamara says.

Mostly used in commercial office buildings, curtain walls involve a large expanse of unbroken glass set on to a frame. They come with their own challenges in residential buildings, Mr. Palamara adds, not only because they cost more than traditional glass walls -- where a series of glass panes are installed into mullions -- but also because of functional concerns like sound transfer, which need to be addressed. Balconies, as well, can't be installed into curtain walls. The aesthetic, though, as well as the amount of light coming into the suites themselves, made the process worth it for Mr. Palamara and his team.

He, too, sees the city --along with both its residents and its developers -- maturing in how they view building design. "Just 10 years ago, a lot of things being done today would have been unthinkable," he says.