

ARCHITECTURE

Egotistical – for the right reasons

The new Giraffe condo tower is designed to stand out and stake a spot for Toronto on the international architectural landscape



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For years, the glass condominium tower has been the architectural epitome of urban chic. Its sleek surfaces gleam by day and glow by night, brightening the streetscape. The best glass high-rises of our time lend welcome sophistication to cities – and, as everyone knows, Toronto can use all the uptown ritz it can get.

But the glass condo tower's day in the sun may be passing. One challenge comes from the growing cohort of "green"-conscious home buyers, put off by the energy inefficiency of all-glass buildings. Another comes from developers and architects bored by abstract glass boxes and eager to invent new forms that respond more vividly to actual sites and urban conditions.

An interesting convergence of these market and creative forces stands behind the design of TAS DesignBuild's Giraffe, a 29-storey stack of 275 condominiums proposed for the odd-angled intersection of Bloor Street West and Dundas Street West in Toronto.

Hogtown has never seen anything like it.

Instead of standing straight and tall, like a conventional tower, this jaunty building throws a hip here, swings a cantilevered shoulder there, pokes out, tucks in. Instead of showing a flat, transparent face to the city, it sports a sculpted maze-like grid of balconies that resembles a computer circuit board flipped up against the skyline. Giraffe swaggers too much to be beautiful. But it just might bring a moment of scrappy toughness to its drab urban corner.

"What we did – and this is where it gets tricky – was the opposite of the suburban model," says Giraffe's architect, Stephen Teeple, "where you have a podium and you stick something separate from that on the top.

"The site [of Giraffe] has an acute angle at the intersection of Dundas and Bloor. [The building] tries to be very precise about relating to the geometry of the street, but when it takes it up and cantilevers it out, there's no doubt it becomes a constructivist sculpture. But unlike a constructivist form, which



An artist's rendering of the Giraffe condominium building designed by Toronto architect Stephen Teeple. TAS DESIGNBUILD

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Mazyar Mortazavi, principal in TAS DesignBuild

would be a pure composition, it's rooted in that urban geometry ... in the condition of the way the road meets the street. It's definitely a modern language."

The structure will come loaded with environmentally mindful features, starting with the skin. "We've conceived this building with two layers, glass and a sort of matrix of opaque surfaces," Mr. Teeple said. "So it's designed to have only about 60 per cent glass and 40 per cent solid. That puts your energy, right away, in line with the energy points we need for a LEED silver target."

(The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design green-building rating system is a third-party process intended to encourage environmental responsibility in new construction. A gold rating is top-notch; silver is just under it.)

In addition to LEED-compli-

ant cladding, Giraffe will offer energy-recovery ventilation units in each apartment, low-pressure plumbing and dual-flush toilets to reduce water use, energy-saving appliances and material finishes chosen for their low off-gassing properties. An 8,000-square-foot roof garden will afford resi-

dents the chance to grow their own vegetables and flowers.

But environmental concern must go beyond water and hydro, Mazyar Mortazavi, principal in TAS DesignBuild, told me. His company intends to contribute a share of the profits from Giraffe to the Waterkeeper Alliance, an

international service organization led by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., that aims to protect and conserve waterways and watersheds. (Mr. Mortazavi declined to tell me the amount TAS will donate.)

Closer to home, TAS will publish, at its own expense, a guide to businesses in the west Toronto vicinity of Giraffe.

Giraffe's most immediate and most visible addition to city life, however, will be its artistic design.

"As developers," Mr. Mortazavi said, "we believe we play a very important part in city-building, and the image and character and quality of our projects is often represented by the architecture of those buildings. The architecture of home is different from the architecture of tall buildings. What we wanted to do is press the envelope in defining what it means to live in an environment that has the character of home."

Part of supplying a new model for condominium living, he believes, is staying on what he believes to be the cutting edge of tall-building design.

"Toronto is ready for a change. We believe architecture speaks to change more than anything else does. We are a city with strong identity, and our buildings should speak to that. I find it very hard [that] we don't have a single building, at least at the residential level, [that] Toronto has contributed to international architecture. If we're claiming to be a world-class city, we have to be doing world-class buildings, and I believe [Giraffe] will be the first true world-class residential building to be developed and built in Toronto."

If this sounds a little egotistical, it's supposed to.

"I think ego is very important. But our city needs ego for the right reasons. The developer's ego has been far too much driven by his pocket-book instead his role as a city-builder. That's the ego that's needed in this city right now."

NEWMARKET AND AURORA » DETACHED

Home markets shaped by the Moraine fight



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If there were one event that has recalibrated suburban development in the Greater Toronto Area as we know it, it was the battle over the Oak Ridges Moraine.

The moraine, a vital and fragile aquifer that feeds a natural supply of water to streams throughout Southern Ontario, stretches across the northern GTA from just south of Peterborough to Caledon. Scientists, conservationists, urban planners and farmers took a stand on the moraine in the late 1990s, suggesting that if suburban development were allowed to carry on with massive tracts of low-density housing, the groundwater supply for half the province would be in jeopardy.

The battle against the developers lasted several years, but was largely settled in 2001 when the Ontario government stepped in to impose a moratorium on development in the area until a land-use plan could be adopted. Two years later, the developers who owned land they wanted to build on (and in some cases had already sold houses off blueprints) were told they would get to build only about 10 per cent of the houses planned. In exchange for the land they owned on the most sensitive part of the moraine

in northern York Region, developers were given land owned by the province to develop in neighbouring Durham Region.

In order to prevent further flare-ups, the province also implemented the Southern Ontario greenbelt strategy in 2005 with rigid regional planning measures designed to move builders toward higher density communities.

Northern York Region's Aurora and Newmarket would be very different places today had the Oak Ridges Moraine struggle gone differently. They are located right in the middle of the moraine, and low-rise development in both towns is now on a much smaller scale. It's very unusual to see a low-rise project take shape here with more than 100 houses.

It's also very unusual to find a new detached house in these communities for less than \$500,000 – Aurora especially. Small-scale new low-rise development didn't resume here until 2006.

In Newmarket, new low-rise development is almost exclusively focused on formerly rural land now within town limits on Mulock Drive, west of Leslie Street.

On Mulock just west of Leslie, Street Rodeo Fine Homes' Ecologic community has been among the most sought-after projects in Newmarket. Detached models on 40-foot-wide lots have sold out, but there are 21 models available starting at \$555,000 for 2,191 square feet of living space, rising to \$784,000 for 3,561 square feet on lots ranging from 45- to 60-foot wide.

A short distance away is the

Walker Farm Estates, by Menkes, which has been known more for its high-rise projects of late. This was a closely watched project when it was released last year because it was on the last piece of Newmarket land available for residential development on a large scale.

Walker Farm has been a hit with buyers. Only one of its 60-foot lot models remains for sale out of 35 launched, at \$645,000 for 3,175 square feet of living space. Other models are on smaller lots, relatively speaking, of the 40- and 50-foot-wide variety, ranging from \$435,000 to \$599,000 for between 1,988 and 3,211 square feet. Of the 88 lots initially available in this category, only 15 remain for sale.

Aurora, a few kilometres north, has always been the more upscale community, and one that has held on to its rural roots a little more aggressively. New homes are marketed to upscale buyers.

That's definitely the case at Fernbrook Homes' Belfountain, featuring single detached models inspired by French chalets. Prices range from \$960,000 to \$1,390,000 for models ranging from 4,089 to 6,015 square feet, with about 43 units remaining.

Not far away, in a former farmer's field at Bathurst Street and Bloomington Road, Ballymore Homes' Renaissance Estates is taking shape, with 29 units left for sale out of 60 launched in 2007. These are on unusually large 85-foot-wide lots ranging in price from \$795,000 to \$900,000 for between 2,350 and 4,300 square feet.

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