

## ARCHITECTURE



The crown of Herzog & de Meuron's tower, 56 Leonard St. in New York. Penthouses occupy full-floor glass boxes that have the effect of being staggered and shifted atop one another. HERZOG & DE MEURON

## How Teeple's tower stacks up

A revolutionary Toronto tower design goes head-to-head with a deluxe New York project from Bird's Nest architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron



### JOHN BENTLEY MAYS THE PERFECT HOUSE

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A couple of weeks ago, I reported in this column on an intriguing new Toronto boutique hotel/condominium tower called Gansevoort. Designed by architect Stephen Teeple, the 36-storey project is a brusque artistic departure from the common run of new tall buildings we've been seeing around town during latest real estate boom.

It's neither a shiny modernist glass plinth, that is, nor a pastiche of yesteryear's deluxe apartment-block styles. Instead, Mr. Teeple has cast his building as a jaunty, jagged stack of horizontal chunks that tuck in and jut out as the structure rises, creating numerous terraces planted with full-sized trees.

If the architect's renderings are anything to go on, Gansevoort will be look-at-me architecture in the best sense: urbane, muscular and chic, and forcefully argumentative toward the top, which Mr. Herzog and Mr. de Meuron have broken up into cantilevered volumes pulling back and jutting outward.

Critics of this project have noted that this dashing arrangement is perhaps meant to evoke a number of glass-walled, modernist single-fami-

ly residential slabs – Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's famous flat-topped Farnsworth House is mentioned – stacked up helter-skelter in the sky. The comparison is apt, and 56 Leonard's effect on the skyline, like that of Gansevoort, is fresh and pleasing.

But apart from this formal similarity at their summits, the designs of 56 Leonard and Gansevoort are quite different, in both inspiration and result. The New York building is basically a glass tower topped off in a striking manner. But there, its novelty stops. All the suites, from bottom to penthouses, for example, are glazed floor to ceiling in the classic modernist residential style. This deployment of a heat-wasting glass skin immediately dates the project, inasmuch as it speaks of a time when energy was dead cheap and wonderfully plentiful – a time we clearly live in no longer.

The project also perpetuates the traditional urban role of the sleek, neat glass tower as a

critique of the untidy tumble and dirt of the city. In crafting the facades of Gansevoort, by way of contrast, Mr. Teeple has rejected the all-glass aesthetic that has dominated advanced tall-building design for the past half-century, and set in place surfaces – only 50 per cent glazed – meant to make Gansevoort thrifty in its consumption of energy.

The structure's largely opaque cladding also serves the artistic purpose of deliberately linking the building to the hard, opaque surfaces of the city – its sidewalks and roadways and gritty laneways. The trees that constitute Gansevoort's vertical park similarly evoke our tough urban forest, flourishing (like the city's human inhabitants) despite car fumes, road salt and other harsh conditions.

While 56 Leonard presses forward the old modernist agenda of making shiny tall buildings that stand aloof from the city, the Gansevoort aesthetic nestles the building down into the urban fabric of downtown Toronto.

### HORROR STORIES

## Tales from the condo crypt



### DEREK RAYMAKER NEW DIGS

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Terrible towers, construction nightmares, shocking subterranean surprises, frightening facades and scary streetscapes. Halloween seems like the right time to take stock of the horrifying blunders on the high- and low-rise scene that can make your blood run cold and your spine tingle.

There are some obvious "Nightmares on Condo Street" lurking in the shadows – usually their own discordant, overwrought, grandiose shadows – though, thankfully, developers and architects are making a concerted effort to make new projects easy on the eyes and fit seamlessly into their surrounding communities.

But even the gems have produced blood-curdling shrieks of despair, thanks to construction delays, prolonged waiting periods, lazy or overzealous city bureaucrats, shady financing arrangements or even unexpected geological formations.

It's a fine line between inspi-



Left, University Plaza, called 'Soviet-style' architecture. Centre, Radio City and, right, Tip Top, both award winners, but not without headaches.

ration and degradation, masterpiece and macabre. Everybody has their favourite boil they think deserves the lance of the wrecking ball, but consensus is elusive.

One fairly new project that has earned special scorn for crimes against architecture and design aesthetics is University Plaza at University Avenue and Richmond Street West. Plaza Corp. built the 16-storey condominium on a prime piece of downtown real estate but couldn't be bothered to think beyond the square cinder block of the 1960s.

"It gives nothing to the public realm," said a marketing director for a major residential

developer. "It's Soviet-style architecture on every level, from the exterior to how it fits into the neighbourhood. It's just a nightmare."

What starts out as a thing of beauty on the blueprints can turn into a nightmare in the light of day. Context Development's Tip Top Lofts was an ambitious conversion of an iconic garment factory on the lakeshore just west of Bathurst Street. Launched in 2002, it was spectacularly well-received in the initial stages, scoring the Greater Toronto Homebuilders Association's 2003 condominium project of the year award.

Once construction was complete, the building's five-storey,



A rendering of the Gansevoort condo/hotel planned for Richmond Street by Toronto architect Stephen Teeple. TEEPLE ARCHITECTS

all-glass addition, along with the tilted "Tip Top Tailors" sign, left a sour aftertaste among design mavens. It was "like a man wearing a tuxedo and a baseball cap," said one. Fair enough. But it is still an admirable effort to give new life to an old building.

Tip Top Lofts has become infamous in condo circles, however, for the lengthy list of small repairs and construction deficiencies that have lingered since buyers moved in. This is hardly uncommon in a tricky conversion of an older building, but the pace of repairs has been distractingly slow.

I don't want to pick on Context Developments too much because it is a leader in em-

phasizing groundbreaking design and recycling landmark buildings with noble purpose and vision.

But one of its truly excellent projects – the two handsome glass-and-concrete towers blending in with historic facades on Jarvis Street called Radio City – faced enormous delays in getting built after it was launched in 2001.

The reason was that an underground stream was discovered in the excavation process. As a result, a lot of early buyers waited five years before taking possession so that engineers could come up with a solution.

Getting back to aesthetic horrors, there's not much that

can compare with Be Bloor, a two-tower monstrosity at Bloor Street and Lansdowne Avenue in the west end. At least it was supposed to be two towers. After the first one went up – a long, sad slab of dreary brick that would not have been out of place in a postwar ghetto and completely out of proportion with the low-rise neighbourhood surrounding it – the second tower was shelved.

This is especially unfortunate since the neighbourhood in a formerly industrial pocket is a largely blank canvas with a lot of available space for well-planned, affordable mid-rise condominiums. It's also on the Bloor subway line, making it a prime location for easy sales and valuable resales.

Many of these projects have found their way into the annals of the Pug Awards ([www.pugawards.com](http://www.pugawards.com)), a grassroots effort by architects, interior designers and builders to get Torontonians to express their views on what they like and loathe in the parade of enormous residential and commercial projects popping up.

The Pugs have taken on a more positive tilt in the past year, preferring to celebrate and promote the good stuff. When they were launched four years ago, the awards were not afraid to berate the architectural disasters.