LUXURY CONDOMINIUMS

In Toronto, plenty of people will pay top dollar for life at the top



MARCUS GEE
mgee@globeandmail.com

Hunter Milborne takes in the spectacular view from the roof of the old Imperial Oil building at 111 St. Clair Avenue West. The handsome limestone-clad office tower with its lobby mural by York Wilson is being transformed into the Imperial Plaza, "the gold standard in luxury living." Glass-walled penthouse suites just went on sale for between $5.1-million and $8.4-million.

What sort of people will buy these cloud palaces? Mr. Milborne, the grey-haired dean of Toronto condo salesmen, smiles. "Rich people."

There seems to be no shortage of them. Dozens of urban aeries like the Imperial penthouses are going on sale in Toronto, catering to a new thirst for high-end, high-rise living. A 9,000-square-foot, 55th-floor penthouse at the Four Seasons project in Yorkville just went for $28-million, a Canadian record. Aura, at Yonge and Gerrard, which is to be Canada's tallest condo tower, is flogging a 75th-floor unit for $17.5-million.

Names like the Shangri-la Toronto, the Residences at the Ritz-Carlton and the Trump International Hotel and Tower all lure buyers with a vision of cosmopolitan downtown living. "Imagine a life so perfect it could well be a fairy tale," says the Ritz-Carlton's online come-on.

It's hard to not to feel a bit nauseated, or at least amused, at the *Bonfire of the Vanities* excess of it all. The bespoke Italian kitchens. The valet parking. The spas that would make Nero blush. At the Imperial Plaza, top-floor residents have their own express elevator because (says a representative) "people who buy these private residences don't want to be mixed in with just anybody."

Still, the flowering of top-floor luxury has to be a good thing for Toronto, a visible symbol of its rise as an international city. Toronto has the biggest condo market in North America, with one unit sold every 13 minutes. April high-rise condo sales set a record for that month. The recent action at the high-end is just the latest development in a maturing market that now offers a huge variety of prices and living styles, from downtown cubbyhole lofts to glittering waterfront high-rises.

Some of the luxury buyers are wealthy foreigners who see Toronto as a good place to hang their hat or to invest in real estate. "They've done their due diligence, they've looked around the world, and they're choosing Toronto," says developer Paul Golini, executive vice-president of Empire Communities. "That's an endorsement of the political, economic and social environment we provide."

The prices attract them, too. Compared to New York, where luxury apartments can go for $10,000 to $12,000 a square foot, the $2,000 to $3,000 that luxury units here are fetching is a bargain.

But, according to Mr. Milborne, the vast majority of luxury buyers are well-heeled locals – business owners who are trading in hard-to-maintain mansions in Rosedale or Forest Hill for a concierge and a rooftop terrace. Their success reflects Toronto's. A city that looked to get whacked in the global recession – its manufacturing base eroding, its economic pre-eminence under threat from Western up-and-comers such as Calgary – has bounced back smartly.

The Imperial, for all its pretensions, is a neat project. The developers are celebrating the building's heritage as "a masterpiece of mid-century International Style modernism." The wonderful glassed-in lobby is being preserved and spruced up. Units on the lower floors start in the $300,000s – but, sorry, you have to ride the elevator with everyone else.







Three works of art from Being She, a photo-based exhibit featuring the work of Canadian artists.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

One hundred years of healing

Celebrating the centennial of Women's College Hospital, an art exhibit at the Gladstone Hotel explores the culture of women's health care

KIM MACKRAEL

Dozens of portraits of women in starched white caps and crisp white dresses grace the walls of the Gladstone Hotel's third-floor gallery.

The images – from the pages of the Women's College Hospital nursing school yearbooks – appear innocuous at first. However, Toronto artist Nina Levitt pointed out that nearly all of the white-clad women in the photographs also have white skin.

Ms. Levitt, who teaches visual arts at York University, was commissioned to create a body of work about the history of the hospital.

In searching through the hospital archives, she found that women of visible minorities appear to have been left out of the school's yearbooks – even when some were clearly in class photographs taken in the same year. She found just four Asian women among the yearbook photographs.

Ms. Levitt said the hospital archivist told her the yearbooks were likely student-produced, which could help explain the anomaly.

"It's cliquey, so maybe some women were not part of the student body in the same way [as others] due to racism," Ms. Levitt said.

The yearbook pages, taken from 1959 to 1971, speak to the ways both medicine and the world have changed since the hospital was founded 100 years ago.

Ms. Levitt's work will be featured as part of an art exhibit called Being She: The Culture of Women's Health and Health Care Through the Lens of Wholeness, which includes photo installations and a juried art show drawn from local submissions.

The exhibit is being held to celebrate Women's College Hospital's 100th anniversary.

The Woman's Medical College was created in 1883 at the initiative of Dr. Emily Stowe, a Toronto woman who trained in the United States at a time when Canadian medical schools would not admit women. It built its first hospital in 1911 and changed its name to Women's College Hospital. It was merged with Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre for seven years, but became independent again in 2006.

The exhibit also features artists Meryl McMaster, Jane Martin and Sarah Anne Johnson.

Admission is free and the exhibit is open to the public until Aug. 1.

Promote your WEB SITE to upscale, leading edge prospects.

To advertise in Report on Business Internet Directory phone:
1.866.999.9237
THE GLOBE AND MAIL