



KIER GILMOUR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

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AN EDGY INFILL FOR TIMID OTTAWA



RHYS PHILLIPS

Sometimes even a modest project can bundle together a number of salient issues about how we build a worthy city. This is the case with The Midtowns, eight new townhouses on High Street near Britannia Beach.

First, their unabashed Modernism recalls an earlier era when Ottawa embraced residential design that looked confidently forward rather than nervously backward. Second, they rise to the challenge of the city's "Ottawa by Design" guidelines for strong architectural character, even if they also eschew a number of desired conventions with their own alternative solutions. Finally, the row's bold palette of raw, often gritty industrial materials coupled with the rejection of tract housing's generic templates defies the stereotype of the notoriously timid Ottawa consumer.

In one other way, the Midtowns may also represent a modest salvo in what might emerge as a more potent challenge to the depressing banality of most residential architecture. The project's developer, whose name, the Urban Collective, mixes bohemian artiness with imperious entrepreneurship, is led by the design talents of Carleton architecture graduate Brian Saumure.

Saumure, originally from the Niagara Falls area, selected Carleton over the universities of Toronto and Waterloo because of its emphasis on creative design. Serendipitously, at a real estate development class, he met Ottawa native and commerce student Fred Carmosino. The

two soon discovered they shared a strong interest in the potential for developing urban infill based on design panache.

Being a developer/designer, admits Saumure, also offered an attractive option to years in design purgatory "designing toilet stalls" while crawling toward professional certification. While he hopes to eventually become a certified architect, the chance to both design and build using ideas honed through six years of grueling, but creative, study proved irresistible.

Saumure and Carmosino founded Maple Leaf Design and Construction in 2001. While at first they specialized in custom homes for clients, the idea of doing edgy urban infill with full creative control generated the Urban Collective and The Midtowns. The operation is based on a creative, eclectic, changing mix of contributors from such areas as the construction crafts, graphic design, architecture, web page design and so on.

The initial result of the collaboration is impressive. The eight units bring robust definition to a short street dotted with a gaggle of modest houses crammed between two heavy traffic routes. Shallow lots for all but two of the units required Saumure to jettison the city guidelines for street-level entrances, emphasizing front doors over garages.

He took his lead from Montreal's ubiquitous townhouses with their dominating front steps ascending a full story. The stairs at Midtown are monolithic concrete "bridges" trimmed with galvanized caps and detailed with fine metal balustrades.

The influence of eight months of study in Finland is evident in his adroit mix of humble industrial materials such as raw concrete and Galvalum metal sheeting with rich western cedar. The last is used to break-up and define the front façades, while on the back the wood softens the face offered neighbours across very nar-

row yards. The units' first levels are clad in Nichila, a textured concrete composite panel imported from Japan.

Saumure has engineered interior spaces that are both invigoratingly spacious and generously washed in natural light. While the units boast 10-foot ceilings on the second level containing the kitchen and living room, the floor above has been drawn back from the front window to create lofts in various configurations and a voluminous double-height space of 18 feet along High Street.

Like townhouses of 20 years ago, the Midtowns use a solid concrete wall between each unit. Unlike those earlier units, however, the concrete has been cleaned and left entirely exposed. The result is a compelling datum wall that is both wonderfully tactile and a fine contrast to the unit's otherwise white walls and maple floors.

There is a recent history of young Carleton grads attempting to prime the design pump as developers. Ottawa native Chris Lemke's Alloy Homes in Calgary is an explicit model for Saumure and Carmosino, while Montreal architect Henri Cleinge, also a Carleton alumni, has recently self-developed a much praised triple unit residential complex in an old wine storage warehouse in Montreal's Little Italy area.

One of the most promising firms is Montreal's Build Inc. and its parallel design operation Atelier Build. Even the Canada Council for the Arts recognized their contribution to residential design/development by awarding its two design principals, Danita Rooyackers and Michael Carrol, the council's prestigious Professional Prix de Rome in 2004.

This kind of architect/developer may well provide the kind of cutting-edge design capable of galvanizing a community.

RHYS PHILLIPS is an Ottawa-based architecture commentator whose column appears every four weeks.