Industrial architecture improves with age

Christopher Hume

In an old factory and warehouse, the east side of 363 Sorauren Ave., was historically little more than another abandoned industrial precinct, best ignored and, better still, avoided. No longer. The fact is that 19th-century architecture, even industrial architecture, just seems to improve with age. Given what architects did to this and every other city during the second half of the last century, that's not surprising. If for no other reason than the general availability of cheap labour, the 1800s were the last great period of architecture, certainly in Toronto.

Little wonder then that so many of these aging structures have found new life as office, residential and institutional centres. Sadly, we are simply no longer able to construct buildings of such quality. One of the best examples is the Distillery District, begun as the Gooderham and Worts plant and in recent years has been transformed into a major retail and cultural destination. As the owners have proved, even the most humble structures — barns, warehouses — can be turned into places of enormous character and endless flexibility.

So no one should be surprised that Sorauren has become a sought-after neighborhood, a place newly attractive to everyone from single yuppies to families with young children. Serviced by public transit and close to countless stores, it is proof that one of the qualities of the successful city rests in its ability to re-invent itself as circumstances and needs dictate.

CONDO CRITIC


Few residential reuse projects are as successful as this one. In addition to a restored circa 1903 candy factory, it includes a stunningly good set of additions that could — and should — serve as a model for all such projects in Toronto. The original building, which still bears the remains of the lettering that once adorned its facade, stands a modest five storeys but feels much more substantial, even imposing, than its height implies. With its large windows, organized horizontally, and neo-classical entrance and portico, it also possesses enormous dignity.

Indeed, the front yards that come with each of the ground-floor units seem almost out of place in such a grand setting.

Behind the main structure, architects have fitted a series of new buildings that manage brilliantly to make a virtue of an awkward site to create a residential complex that feels exactly that — residential. The main entrance, accessed from the south side of the property, leads to the former factory and the recent arrivals. On any given day, it is used by mothers and babies to chat with one another as well as cyclists coming and going.

At its extreme east end, the condo overlooks a heavy-duty rail line and a parking lot. But even these are handled well enough not to become a problem.

Equally important, perhaps, there has been no attempt to prettify the complex; its gritty industrial heritage is plain to see and even an old smokestack is happily incorporated.

Best of all, however, this is a place intended for real people, not some marketing department's notion of mythical young professionals or rich empty nesters returning downtown after nearly a lifetime in the suburbs.

There are bicycle racks, plenty of entrances and even a dog-poop bag dispenser. As Picasso said, albeit in different circumstances, it's all in the doing. In this case, it has been done extraordinarily well.

GRADE: A+

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