

Core Condos goes for upscale look while maintaining a casual vibe

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Peter J. Thompson / National Post Elaine Cecconi and CentreCourt's Shamez Virani at the Cecconi Simone offices.

In the architect's renderings for Core Condos, in development at the corner of Shuter and Church streets, the building's west facade is comparatively unusual for a downtown condo tower. Narrow black architectural elements snaking up the sides of the 24-storey building make it look like it's been loosely wrapped in a sheet of paper with the corners turned back — or like a shirt with the top couple of buttons undone. And that's squarely the type of buyer the building is aiming to attract: a demographic that the developer, CentreCourt Developments, dubs "button-down, not buttoned up."

In the competitive world of condo tower development, knowing thy customer is as important as it is in any other type of retailing. CentreCourt scored another hit recently by doing just that. INDX Condos, in the Financial District, was 2012's fastest-selling condo. For that building, as CentreCourt vice-president Shamez Virani explains, they began by visualizing the kind of buyer who might be attracted to a condo in INDX's otherwise residential-lite neighbourhood: a young professional on his or her way up in the business world (who might not, however, necessarily have the big bucks yet), who puts in 12- to 16-hour days on the job, and would be attracted by, among other things, the prospect of a five-minute walk to work. The strategy appeared to strike a chord: INDX's 800-odd units sold out in less than six months.

What makes Core promising, Mr. Virani believes, is that this time out they had their target demo at their fingertips. This buyer, they reasoned, was a professional in his or her twenties or thirties, like those who bought at INDX, but more casual, hipper, and with an appreciation for design. "As soon as we started brainstorming, we began to realize the target market was ourselves — many of the team members from the various firms we were working with were exactly the kind of people who would live here." The result was a condo that's plainly designed to a price — the majority of units are modest-sized one-bedrooms or one-bedroom-plus-dens, with a smattering of smallish two-bedrooms designed for roommates, and many of them are under \$300K — but offers amenities and an edgy, youthful design that's custom-tailored for a young, highly social crowd.

Page + Steele IBI Group's design for the exterior used the imagined tastes of its future residents as a jumping-off point. With its cheeky contrast trim (the east side features similar banding elements as the west, but in white) and sculpted touches north and south, Core's facade has a distinct personality that's not only unusual for this part of Toronto, but unusual for condos in its class generally. What's more, it manages to do this without insulting the heritage buildings with which it shares the block — including a pair of century townhouses that sit practically at its feet. "We are definitely interested in the city's heritage and cherishing the past," says Mr. Virani. "But we saw that the way to treat the heritage properties was not to just copy them, but to juxtapose our design with them ... to highlight through contrast." In fact, the heritage buildings are framed through the glass walls of the lobby, and their facades will be restored to give them pride of place as part of Core's ground-floor view.

Cecconi Simone's design for the suites and interior public spaces also has a highly specific sense of the young professionals who will live in the building. Principal Elaine Cecconi explains that it's not about age as much as attitude. "It's more 'psychographic,'" she says. "Location for this buyer is most important, first of all. They want to make use of all that downtown offers — not necessarily Bay Street, but Massey Hall, the Eaton Centre, Bloor/Yonge, Chinatown. There's a lot to do around there. But more importantly, it's a casual environment, as opposed to being highly programmed. It's more fluid, more engaging in a personal way."

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The building's public spaces and amenities are designed to take the kinds of venues that are popular when this demographic goes out — Starbucks, the local pub, singles joints — and puts them at home. One whole floor is devoted to an open-concept, living-room style playground that features Wi-Fi and laptop plug-ins, a high-end coffee bar complete with a fancy coffee machine for residents' use, a TV lounge with stadium-style seating, a board game area and seating pods of various sizes designed to bring residents together to meet each other, entertain friends or just come out of their rooms and be near people. "The rise of social media — which in a way is really anti-social media! — means people don't really talk to each other any more," Ms. Cecconi says. "I think we're seeing the pendulum swinging back these days. You're seeing a rise in the popularity of coffeehouses, places you can go to play board games, and so on. People are seeking engagement now."



The kitchens are all the same throughout the building.

The suites themselves are compact (390 sq. ft. to 775 sq. ft.), but efficiently arranged. Ms. Cecconi says that for units this size, “The challenge is to make them usable and livable, and to maximize every inch of space — not just the linear space but vertical space as well, with good storage. You think about how the resident is going to move through the space, from the entry to the living room to the bedroom.”

The kitchens are well appointed, with sleek features such as stainless steel appliances and composite stone countertops. By making all the kitchens in the building identical regardless of suite size, she says, they were able to take advantage of economies of scale to deliver as much design for the buck as possible. Designed in straight-line form, they feature black banding under the countertop, open shelving with a choice of neutral or colourful interiors, and built-in appliances, keeping the design simple but stylish.

“We’re always very conscious of the exterior when we design [interiors]; we feel it’s one statement that should be consistent,” Ms. Cecconi says. “And what’s happening with this building is very interesting, very dramatic. The way they’ve sculpted the exterior is quite striking. As soon as I saw it, I wanted to be a part of it.”

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