

5 new Toronto buildings worth a second look

BERT ARCHER | WEDNESDAY, JULY 25, 2012

<http://www.yongestreetmedia.ca/features/topbuildingsworthasecondlook07252012.aspx>

There are 189 towers, with uncounted other buildings, going up in the city right now. A lot of them are pretty nifty. But in putting together our list of buildings worth a second look, we can afford to be picky.

In choosing any top designs, we have the luxury of ruling out entire categories of design. Like point towers. Sometimes, municipal regulations affect design in lovely ways, like the step-back rules New York set out in the 1920s that resulted in deco charmers like the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and, closer to home, Buffalo City Hall. Designers in the '20s and '30s took the regulations and made good. Toronto architects have not really embraced the point tower, or at least, not lovingly. So our new forest of point towers, though shiny and in many ways impressive, lacks the design acuity that a city of Toronto's municipal and architectural maturity can afford to demand.

Since we also live in a city that was once home to Paul Oberman, a man who knew how to adaptively reuse buildings, we can also eliminate certain underdeveloped attempts to mollify local ratepayers by clumsily including heritage elements in new developments, like the James Cooper Mansion and the Massey Tower. And we can include positive criteria as well, choosing only to consider buildings that have made their neighbourhoods better, or have made important movement forward in the architect's chosen form.



HOUSE 1

Though towers are by far the most obvious sign of any 20th- or 21st-century architectural age, there's a two-storey building on Rhode Avenue that might top the lot for significance, and certainly beats the bunch for potential. Completed this spring, it's called House 1, and for those at the forefront of their field in larger buildings, it's nothing new. As the firm's name, Modernest, implies, 154 Rhodes is built according to what architect Kyra Clarkson (daughter of Adrienne and Stephen) refers to as "a strictly modernist aesthetic." You know, like Mies van der Rohe back in 1956. Except this is not an office building or a condo tower. It's a house.

Though the bankers and other backers, builders and buyers of big buildings are often accused of a retrogressive form of conservatism, it's we, the house-buying public, who haven't been able to get over the 19th century. If you look around the most desirable neighbourhoods in town (excluding Rosedale, Forest Hill and Lawrence Park, which are more desire for the incomes of those who live there than for the houses and neighbourhoods themselves), you find one style, something we could call Vicwardian for its hybrid of Victorian and Edwardian styles. The Annex, Cabbagetown, Leslieville, the Beach... the list goes on. But in none of these neighborhoods is there ever more than one or two "wacky" houses that are responding to anything that's happened architecturally (or technologically) in the last 100 years. I took a trip to Buffalo recently and visited the Darwin Martin House, which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright a century ago, and I was struck by how modern it looked, ahead of its time even now.

Wright was a genius, but even he should not still be ahead of his time. Clarkson, along with a few others, such as Andrew Reeves, is trying to fix that.

"The modern exterior presents a striking alternative to the current wave of neo-traditional builder's houses," Clarkson says, "and hints at a space that speaks to contemporary urban life and advanced building technology."

But the most potentially important thing about this house is that it does not look like the "wacky" house on its Leslieville street. As Clarkson describes it: "The rectangular volume of the house nestles between its neighbours, respecting its context by keeping to two stories and maintaining a relationship to the street that is consistent with the urban fabric." Which, translated from archi-speak, means that it looks like we want our houses to look, despite its different colour and shape. And the interiors are good enough to appeal to people who have tried to renovate their Vicwardians but have never managed to get it this right. It's called House 1; we have reason to hope it will be the first of many.

EVERGREEN BRICK WORKS

In most cities, it's rare for entire neighbourhoods to undergo radical and successful transformations, but in Toronto, we've seen four in the last decade, with Liberty Village, Summerhill, the Distillery District and now the Waterfront. But the most radically successful of all is the Brick Works. Though it officially opened in 2010, it's not considered a neighbourhood yet. But the plans have allowed for it to grow into one over the years if that's the way the city wants to go. For the moment, however, it remains the best all round remediation of a wayward space this city has ever tackled. All told, it now includes a new office building, a conference and meeting space, a farmer's market, a nursery for indigenous plants, a café, demonstration gardens, an exhibition space and room for education and children's activities.



Led by **Du Toit Allsopp Hillier** with assists from Diamond Schmitt Architects, ERA and Claude Cormier, the 178,000 square feet of former industrial space on 40 acres of ravine land have been transformed into a model of development without erasure. The Brick Works is now a unique space that's evolved on a site of unique importance to the city's development, the very quarry and factory where the bricks that created Toronto's Vicwardian identity were mined and forged.

One could devote pages to the LEED-level sustainability, the sensitivity with which the site was treated, going as far as retaining the very graffiti on the walls of what was for years a secret teen hangout. But the secret and the essence of this remarkable projects lies in what its architects call their "light touch and loose fit" executed as a result of "the realization that current program suggestions would inevitably be subject to change over time, and that it was important to maintain the gritty character of much of the place, which was an essential part of its charm."

ONE PARK WEST

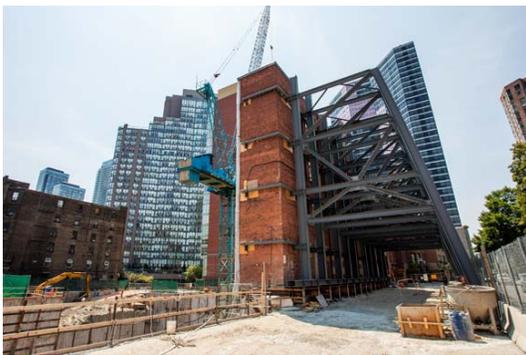
Another neighbourhood that's well into its second radical transmutation in half a century is Regent Park, and One Park West's articulated facade is one of the chief architectural signs that the neighbourhood is looking to be part of Toronto's future. Completed in 2011, it's one of the first of a new wave of design that's busting out of the clean-fronted planes of glass that have defined the evolution of our



skyline for the past decade. Core Architects have combined glass balconies with concrete frames in this 13-storey condo to create some of the first significant surface detail this city has seen on a major building in decades. The fact that it's in Regent Park, a neighbourhood that's stood for years as a symbol—architectural, cultural, political and anthropological—of the shortcomings of a previous era's ideas about ghettoizing low-income residents makes this market-value condo, the last of Regent Park's first phase of redevelopment, all the more significant.

MARKET STREET

The very name has been a disappointment for years. Running a block between Front and the Esplanade on the west side of St. Lawrence Market, Market Street has been a dead zone ever since the once popular Fish Market restaurant closed and was boarded up more than a decade ago. But then Paul Oberman got hold of it. He bought up lot after lot, from the north to the south end of the street, until he had assembled the whole block into a single property, and at the time of his death, in a plane crash in March 2011, he had begun to transform it into what he planned as a true market street, with flower shops, cafés, bars, restaurants and the longest uninterrupted strip of sidewalk patios in the city. It's all to be anchored by a 13,000-square-foot flagship LCBO, running from the current street level storefront on Front, all the way back to the second-storey overlooking the Esplanade. The LCBO portion of the development is now nearing completion, a shop Oberman foresaw as rivalling as his North Toronto station LCBO in Sumerhill, the space taking advantage of the old architectural detail, making it truly distinctive. "And way cool, if I do say so myself," as Oberman said in an interview with Yonge Street a few months before he died. With his company, Woodcliffe, under the direction of his widow, Eve Lewis, the project is expected to be completed this year according to Oberman's plans. There's even a petition to City Council to rename Market Street after Oberman.



FIVE ST. JOSEPH

No design list for the city of Toronto would be complete these days without one huge tower. I've picked one that deserves a second look, even though it's not built yet, for the sake of how it will transform its neighbourhood. Five St. Joseph is more than a tower: it's a rescue operation. An important corner of Yonge Street, just south of Bloor, is being transformed into what Gary Switzer of MOD Developments is hoping will be a new residential, commercial and street-cultural hub. In addition to a reclamation of St. Nicholas Street, which Switzer told Yonge Street in 2010 he was hoping to turn into a market street of his own, Five St Joseph will renew several moribund storefronts on Yonge, and add a 48-storey undulating tower behind a retained 1905 St. Joseph facade. It's facadism done right (the largest facade retention in Toronto's history, in fact,), adaptive reuse married to big-time development in a way that should make the city proud.

Bert Archer is Yonge Street's Development Editor.