

National Post

A modernist Charles Street condo is king

Give it a royal welcome; the design is clever

Kelvin Browne, National Post Published: Saturday, December 12, 2009

Let's compare and contrast condos at the intersection of St. Thomas and Charles streets. On one corner, the defending champion, in pale limestone, is Robert Stern's ode to 1930s skyscrapers, a 21st-century "pre-war" apartment aspirant. On the other, a sleek 16-storey modernist tower, 77 Charles Street West. Having gone to architecture school in the 1970s, I admit to a bias. The Bauhaus was unassailable, and professors inculcated students with the view that anything retro was a demonstration of a lack of imagination and/or a profound disconnection with your own time. You know who I feel compelled to put my bet on in this fight.

Seventy-seven Charles Street is not just another stylish, expensive condominium, though it has 50 suites ranging from 1,320 square feet ft. to a penthouse of 6,000 sq. ft., and prices from \$1.2-million to \$9- million (77charles.com). For starters, it's not just a condo. At the glassy tower's base is a stone-clad structure that will house Kintore College and Cultural Centre. This is a four-storey, 20-bed private residence for women attending university that will include, among other features, a chapel and an auditorium to accommodate public seminars. The college is affiliated with Opus Dei. The condo is completely distinct from Kintore College, having a separate entrance and elevators. Seventy-seven Charles Street West is designed by architect Yann Weymouth, of Hellmuth, Obata + Kassabaum (known as HOK). HOK is one of the world's largest firms with more than 2,000 professionals in 23 offices worldwide. HOK is behind an astounding range of projects -- all modernist -- and was committed to sustainability before it was trendy.

Mr. Weymouth is one of those architects whose careers make teenagers think it must be cool to be a designer. He did a degree at Harvard, then architecture at M.I.T. and then worked for the firms that won the most interesting jobs. After a few years of running his own business, he was off to Paris as chief design architect for I.M. Pei's Grand Louvre project, which created that glass pyramid in the Louvre's courtyard.

"It starts with the site," Mr. Weymouth says of his approach to 77 Charles. "The location is between the towers of mid-town Toronto and the low-rise of the University of Toronto. We

wanted it to fit the streetscape of the University on the ground level and, of course, take advantage of the unimpeded views that the campus ensures the building will have of Toronto's downtown." His building is a classic one, an ephemeral glass tower on a stone podium. "It's a wonderful combination: Kintore College fits with the other traditional university buildings on the street and the tower appears, in contrast, to be transparent and light."

Energy-efficiency was also a concern. Apartments have 10-to 11-foot ceilings (12 feet in the penthouse). Now I can justify my ceiling-height fixation not as a need for grandeur, but because I care about energy conservation. "The higher ceilings allow [winter] sunlight to penetrate the entire suite, and this can have a significant impact on heating," Mr. Weymouth says. By arranging the windows with balconies above as he has, you can also keep the summer sun out and reduce cooling requirements.

The tower is modulated with an interesting curve that allows suites to have city views that they might not otherwise be able to enjoy. Like I.M. Pei's work, the result is quiet and elegant. If you live there, you'll have a more spectacular view than you'd get from the traditional square windows of the retro building on the other corner. The higher ceilings on every floor, however, are the knock-out punch.

The building's only weakness might prove to be owners unschooled in the modernist style. Back to the design gym for them if they try to recreate their traditional home and decorate with heavy curtains and massive furniture that needs to be shoved up against walls. To all you owners at 77 Charles (and modernist condos in general), edit your stuff before you arrive and try to get in the refined spirit of such a swell apartment.