

THE GLOBE AND MAIL REAL ESTATE

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Over a broader swatch of inner Hogtown than it officially occupies, the University of Toronto sets the architectural tone: dignified and serious in style, mid-rise in height, red brick and grey stone in material palette. Try to put up a really tall glass condominium tower anywhere along the fringe of the St. George campus, and you invite the wrath of just about everybody, from local citizens and the university itself right down to city hall.

Spirited defence of the university's built legacy is a good thing. Keeping the margins of the campus forever free from high-density development, on the other hand, is probably as undesirable as it is impossible. The U of T campus abuts some of the most valuable residential and commercial real estate in Canada. Instead of trying to prohibit development along this margin, we should be thinking about how best the architectural transition between our improbably rural university and the big city all around it can be managed for the benefit of all.

For a suggestive example of the kind of sensible passage I have in mind, take the proposed redevelopment of 77 Charles St. West at St. Thomas Street. It's an interesting location, by the way: Little Charles Street, between Queens Park and Bay Street, lies along the northern frontier of the university, the edge where the discreet, ivy-covered masonry meets the gleam of the decidedly middle-brow (or worse) architecture and high-end shopping and living along Bloor Street West.

Given the transitional condition of Charles Street, the work designed to go into this sensitive spot — by Yann Weymouth, vice-president of the international architectural firm HOK — is suitably mixed. Mr. Weymouth's 16-storey structure is actually two separate buildings, the taller atop the shorter, each with its own entrance and distinct purpose.

Below is the three-storey home of Kintore College, a dormitory and educational centre for about 20 university women that is loosely affiliated with Opus Dei, the international Roman Catholic renewal movement. The atmosphere of the college is to be studious and pious; mass will be celebrated each day, and instruction in Catholic faith and practice will be offered to the university community.

To link this building to the architectural traditions of the university, Mr. Weymouth has chosen elements from the tool-kit of collegiate style: cladding of brick and limestone, windows and doors framed in oak, the overall profile of a modest box. The mid-sized residence, with the pedestrian scale of its façade and details, will probably not seem out of place in the streetscape of Charles West, which also hosts Victoria University's splendid neo-Gothic Burwash Hall, graceful Isabel Bader Theatre, and Hariri Pontarini's handsome Mackenzie Institute.

While the Kintore College structure is reminiscent of university edifices, the 13-storey building on top is an evocation of bright lights and luxurious style. The curtain wall of the condominium plinth is an airy composition of large, lightly tinted green glass panes, accented by green Canadian granite spandrels. The apartments behind this glistening surface are large: 1,100 square feet to 4,500 square feet, with a penthouse of 6,000 square feet. The prices being charged by Aspen Ridge Homes, the developer of the project, are also large, though they are not especially surprising in this stylish location: \$780,000 for the smallest unit, up to \$5.9-million for 4,500 square feet. (So far, the penthouse has not been given a price tag.) There will be four levels of residents' parking below grade.

The two parts of this project have been blended by drawing the glass curtain wall of the condominium tower over the college residence, down to the ground. The model of the project, which was unveiled last week at a HOK reception, suggests that the melding of two programs and two styles will be smoother than I might have expected from renderings. The connection between the two geometries of the tower's structure — right angles and rectangular forms toward Bloor Street, curves around back, toward the university precinct — seems to work, as well. The layout of the suites, especially the large ones along the façade looking out to the south and west, is ample and comfortable.

The architecture of 77 Charles could surely be far more vivacious, more daring than it is. The profile is somewhat stumpy, as though the building had been whittled down from a considerably greater height. Be that as it may, the tower will likely be a formal success in its urban context, where scales and textures change, as do building uses. It makes a certain sense to have a hybrid in this spot: a tall building that's not really tall, and a luxury condo stack married — this must be a Toronto first — to an outpost of avant-garde Catholicism.