

# ‘Round-the-clock need for triple-duty space’

The pandemic is fuelling demand among condo residents for dedicated work space

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It was three years ago that the City of Toronto set out to study the ways condo owners “hack” their units to make living in tight quarters work for families.



The idea behind the project, called Growing Up, was to develop guidelines for integrating family-suitable design into new multi-unit residential projects. As the study rolled out, the city’s planning division visited families across the GTA for firsthand accounts of raising children in condo units ranging from 635 to 1,400 square feet. The work-from-home findings it unearthed now seem like ancient history.

Of the nine anonymous households it consulted, only two made mention of working from home, and only one had dedicated home office space. For the most part, dens were used not as offices but as bedrooms for children.

Fast forward to 2020 and dedicated home office space, or the flexibility to allow for it, is a priority. Not surprisingly, architects and developers are exploring ways to enhance or extend at-home office features.

“Households suddenly have this round-the-clock need for triple-duty space,” says Growing Up project manager Annely Zonena — for parents’ work, school work and child’s play, plus domestic uses — “and many condo dwellers must be scrambling to carve this out.”

Ben Kawarsky is. The married thirtysomething father of two young daughters owns a two-bedroom-plus-den unit in the seven-storey High Park Lofts building at Roncesvalles Avenue and Dundas Street West, and has been casting around for something with a third bedroom now that he’s working from home indefinitely. “I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place,” Kawarsky says. “Either we force our daughters to share a room and I take over the den as my office, or I continue working at the dining room table and struggle to get everything done.” No wonder house prices outpaced condo prices in the second quarter of 2020. According to the Royal LePage House Price Survey, the median cost of two-storey Canadian homes rose eight per cent year-over-year to \$ 794,392, while condo prices increased 5.3 per cent, to \$ 503,983. “As the reality of extended and potentially permanent work-from-home employment sunk in, people pondered both the location and size of their homes,” says Royal LePage president and CEO Phil Soper, adding that Canadians’ desire for extra home office space was part of the reason for the pricing trend. “Interest has been growing in having more private spaces so you don’t hear your spouse on their Zoom call, or your children while you’re on your own Zoom call.”

The demand for work-from-home space is perceived to be great enough that Camrost Felcorp has reconfigured and enlarged some of the 295 suites in its Upper East Village project under construction on Eglinton Avenue East near Laird Drive, scheduled for occupancy in mid-2021.

“Slipping in desk space, or repositioning a den so that it can be accessed from the main living area, are some of the things we’re looking at,” says Christopher Castellano, Camrost’s head of marketing and sales.

Still, there’s only so much you can do with limited square footage and a set number of rooms. In that sense, the findings of the Growing Up study were actually prescient in its recommendation that two-bedroom and three-bedroom units should comprise a minimum of 10 and 15 per cent of new condo developments.

“Had developers delivered those ratios prior to our recommendations, Toronto would have been in a better position to offer triple-duty space when it was needed during COVID-19,” Zonena says, adding that the city has seen a significant increase in the number of two and three-bedroom units planned for construction since the draft Growing Up guidelines were shared with developers in 2017.

Another of its recommendations — “promoting flexible building design for changing unit layouts over time” — is being taken up by condo architects such as Vaughn Miller. The associate with Toronto-based BNKC architecture + urban design says condo-dwellers are benefiting from the multi-functional spaces and furniture solutions that have recently become popular in newer builds. “It’s not really a viable option for most people to buy more space. So we’re seeing lots of second-bedroom offices with Murphy beds in them, sliding room dividers and more communal amenity space dedicated to working from home.”

More than one in four Canadian employees are freelancers, according to a 2018 study by BMO Wealth Management that described Canada's gig economy as growing at "a phenomenal rate."

The study also found that almost a quarter of all employees were already working virtually or remotely, with 85 per cent of the companies surveyed foreseeing a more "agile workforce" in the coming years. No wonder shared workspaces were becoming standard condo amenities across the GTA well before the pandemic.

The rush to add full-featured co-working facilities began in earnest in 2016, when Centre-court Developments launched Axis at 411 Church St. The second floor of the recently completed condo tower houses nearly 4,000 square feet of shared workspace amenities, including a boardroom, meeting rooms, private and two to three-person offices, a kitchen and equipment such as printers, scanners and video-conferencing units.

Plans for Daniels Corp.'s 33-storey Artworks Tower at Dundas and River streets include a roomy co-working space with an outdoor terrace. Then there's Graywood Development's Peter & Adelaide condo in the Entertainment District, which will add foosball and billiard tables to its 4,000-square-foot shared working environment.

But what of social distancing in spaces like these? Camrost's Castellano says it can be achieved by dividing open-concept office amenities into multiple spaces for groups or individuals to work two metres apart. Minto Communities, for its part, is already exploring the use of breakout rooms and pods in its shared coworking spaces.

Another COVID-fighting technique: using easy-to-disinfect quartz countertops and porcelain tiles, as Broccolini is doing in the coworking spaces of its River & Fifth and upcoming Left Bank projects.

"What buyers are saying, particularly those in small downtown units," according to RE/MAX Realtron general manager Cameron Forbes, "is that they are really missing the workplace experience and are looking to interact with other people in a safe way."