

THE ARCHITOURIST

Critical care for the site of a former hospital in Peterborough, Ont.



DAVE LEBLANC >

PETERBOROUGH, ONT.

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 3 HOURS AGO



The former St. Joseph's Hospital building site, in Peterborough, Ont.

DAVE LEBLANC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

It's an odd bedroom for sure. With a bathroom on one end and a jog with stairs to the main living area on the other, standing in this long, ultra-skinny space, one feels as if one is floating away from the rest of the complex. Plus, to be less esoteric, where will the bed go? No matter, the views to be enjoyed by the new tenants (professional bowlers, maybe?), are quite spectacular.

"It's a real problematic space," developer Amit Sofer says. "You're in the bridge, but the option was to demolish this, which would've cost more, and lose the space. The thing is, every unit in all of our buildings is different, so that's what gives the architects all kinds of problems – and free reign to create."



From left to right, developer Amit Sofer, TVM Group regional manager Tammy Deneault and BNKC's Jonathan King.

DAVE LEBLANC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Perhaps that's why the St. Joseph's Hospital campus in Peterborough, Ont.'s East City neighbourhood changed hands three times after being offered for sale in the mid-2000s before Mr. Sofer's TVM Group purchased it in late 2009. Ask any structural engineer, developer, or architect, and you'll get the collective Greek Chorus: Purpose-built, utilitarian buildings, such as churches or grain silos, do not convert easily to other uses, especially warm-and-cozy residential.

So, this hodge-podge of buildings, bridges, tunnels and additions to buildings – which range in age from 1922 to the 1970s – could've been an architectural dog's breakfast in the wrong hands. Instead, Jonathan King of BNKC Architects (Phases 4 and 5), and Paul Shields (Phases 1 to 3) have created an inviting, thriving complex of 21st-century rental apartments. And Mr. Sofer and Mr. King are now offering an ownership opportunity vis-à-vis the soon-to-rise, nine-storey tower, East City Condos, at the northeast corner of the site.



St. Joseph's Hospital - 1950 Wing

The 1950 Wing at the former St. Joseph's Hospital building site, in Peterborough, Ont.

SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH

To wit, a walkabout of two of the buildings – one complete and the other ready in December – rewards the eye with features that are easy to spot, such higher-than-average ceilings, deep windowsills, LED pot lights and luxury bathrooms and kitchens. Look a little closer, however, and the keen aficionado can identify the various challenges that have been overcome: flooring changes that have been smoothed; odd room sizes that have been massaged into domesticity, and too-wide hallways (so that two gurneys could pass in either direction) that now allow for multiple bicycle storage inside the unit, and, outside, undulating walls that add visual interest.

Where possible, vintage items, such as terrazzo stairways and the oldest operating elevator in the city of Peterborough, have been retained.



Renderings of the new 21st-century rental apartments coming up in place of the former hospital building.

TVM/BNKC

A walk through the basement of the under-construction building, where original plaster walls, door openings and scarred quarry tile floors are on offer, and one gets the sense of just how much work has been done elsewhere, and why other developers shied away. “Down here we had to remove a lot of structural walls, so we had to install a lot of structural beams. It was fairly complex down here,” Mr. Sofer says.

“The City really wanted the properties to be brought back to life rather than demolished,” he says, “so they came up with a suite of community incentive programs – waiver of development charges and things like that – that in the absence of I don’t think we would’ve been able to make these projects work.”

“I think what’s also made this possible is that Amit is prepared to get his hands dirty,” Mr. King says, “and has gotten his hands dirty in making sure that every single brick that could be retained is retained. ... He has a vested interest in maintaining the fabric of this community.”



Renderings of apartment features such as LED pot lights and luxury bathrooms and kitchens.

TVM/BNKC

Mr. Sofer also has an interest in helping the less fortunate and those with mobility challenges. Even before he and his team got to work on the two-hectare hospital property, his company was transforming surplus schools and vacant commercial buildings into homes for the Canadian Mental Health Association and victims of domestic violence. When it came time for Phase One at St. Joe’s, the 1947 Nurse’s Residence, the building was transformed into 30 fully-accessible suites (wide corridors, roll-under sinks, roll-in showers, etc.) and the ground floor was leased to Community Care Peterborough, which runs the local Meals on Wheels among other services.

Other uses would’ve brought in more money, so why do it? “Writing a cheque has been the easy way out of our social obligations, and we never really felt good about the efficiency with which that money was dispensed,” Mr. Sofer explains. “We service both ends of the marketplace, and it gives us our balance.”



TVM/BNKC

When Phase 4 is completed, Mr. Sofer will have created 159 accessible and luxury rentals to a city that had precious few. Phase 5, the condo, will add 93 ownership units to the mix, plus a coffee shop on the ground floor. Eventually, the site's old power plant will be transformed into something special. And, most importantly, what was once a proud health care community will have become a proud community of individuals, many with personal ties to the buildings they inhabit.

"We've had lots of connection with the original Sisters of St. Joseph. ... They still come in and they walk through to see what our finished product looks like," Mr. Sofer says. "And everyone who works for us was born in one of these buildings, pretty much, [or] were there when they broke their leg, [or] their uncle passed away in that room.

"So we are proud to preserve it."