

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

RiverCity II, exterior view.

Urban Capital Property Group

River City's second act changes tack - and tone

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Toronto— Globe and Mail Update

Published Friday, Nov. 25, 2011 9:52AM EST

Last updated Friday, Nov. 25, 2011 9:55AM EST

Urbane and thoughtful, the 950-unit River City condominium complex is one of the most imaginative multi-family residential schemes to go public in Toronto during the past two years. It's a lively procession of buildings, courtyards and parks that changes colour and form as it stretches south from King Street East along the west bank of the Don River.

River City is the handiwork of the celebrated Montreal firm of Saucier + Perrotte Architects, who did the design (in collaboration with Toronto-based ZAS Architects) for Toronto's Urban Capital Property Group. Launched on the market early in 2010, the first phase consists of a dark-skinned, slope-sided 14-storey tower. Its irregular pentagonal shape (in plan) generates unusual floor plans.

In crafting the development's second stage – its 248 apartments and townhouses went on sale last weekend – the architects have abruptly shifted artistic gears. The earlier phase is black; the newer building is white. Instead of pushing skyward in a vertical gesture, as the adjacent tower tends to do, the three squarish, 12-storey volumes of the second phase line up into a horizontal block.

But the most striking difference between the two lies in the manner each faces the world. In the façades of the tower, every suite opens in the same direction, in the usual way of apartment high-rises. The block, in contrast, is a great stack of long boxes, each plainly representing a unit of housing, with some thrusting out of the central mass in one direction, some in another. The result is a vivid syncopation of the building's exterior, a sophisticated abstract dance of rectangular shapes above the surrounding neighbourhood of old factories and warehouses.

“We wanted to express the idea of light, reflection, living in the open landscape, without any skin covering it,” lead architect Gilles Saucier told me last week. “Each apartment is the expression of individuality. You can choose your view. Some apartments turn to the small river on the east, several turn south and north, others turn west. Each is a living element you pile up to create complexity.”

When the River City ensemble is fully built out, the white condo edifice will be in the middle of the ribbon of structures and open spaces running continuously (except for the formidable interruption of an elevated roadway) between King Street and the new Don River Park. It will be framed by the dark first-phase high-rise just to the north and by a tower some 20 storeys tall, probably also dark, that will rise south of the traffic ramps. If everything works out well, the project will be a valuable addition to Toronto's inventory of fine 21st-century residential architecture.

It didn't always look quite as promising as it does now.

To be sure, the involvement of Saucier + Perrotte in a large-scale Hogtown condominium design was something of a coup, since the office is very good at what it does. But the site they were asked to work with had a daunting problem: the presence of the massive elevated roadway that bisects the property and splits in half whatever the Montreal architects, or anyone else, might want to do there.

If I like River City, it's mostly because of the inventive architecture of the buildings and open places. But I also admire the fact that Saucier + Perrotte were able to come up with a coherent, poetic design, completely free of clichés and jerry-built solutions, for one of the harshest urban conditions that Toronto has to offer.

Still, the gap between the two ends of River City yawns wide. Short of tearing down the flyover, how could this interval be humanized, tamed?

One intriguing answer to this question came last year, when Waterfront Toronto, the public agency charged with developing the formerly industrial West Don Lands (of which River City is a part), unveiled a \$5.3-million plan for transforming the wasteland under the traffic decks into an interesting passageway and playground,

Fashioned by architect Greg Smallenberg, partner in the Vancouver firm of Phillips Farevaag Smallenberg, in association with Toronto's Planning Partnership, the 2.5-acre Underpass Park will be appropriately tough: The underbelly of a roadway is, after all, no place for prettiness. It will offer to the city an attractive new collection of recreational spaces, community gardens and even a public artwork, by Toronto artist and architect Paul Raff.

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