

DEAR GARDEN

Mark Cullen reflects on the joys of a summer afternoon, H4

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2012: YEAR IN REVIEW

Condo market came back down to earth in 2012

RYAN STARR
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

For Brian Brown, 2012 started off with a smashing success.

The vice-president of Lifetime Developments presided over the launch of INDX, a 54-storey tower on Tempérance St. that became the top-selling condo project in the first quarter of 2012, with an eye-popping 642 units sold.

The impressive performance of INDX

— which Lifetime is developing in partnership with CentreCourt Developments — had a lot to do with it being a unique offering for that neighbourhood. “It filled a void,” Brown says. “It’s the only pure residential building in an area of all office towers. So it really catered to the people who worked in the Financial District.”

Lifetime went on to sell out INDX — around 1,000 units — by the end of the year.

All in all a pretty good year for the Toronto builder, considering the difficulties the local development industry faced as the condo market came back down to earth.

2012 continued on H9

THE FUTURE VIEW

Toronto city councillors offer their visions for the Toronto of tomorrow

RYAN STARR
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

As 2012 drew to a close, the Building Industry and Land Development Association invited four Toronto councillors — Adam Vaughan, Peter Milczyn, Ana Bailao and Kristyn Wong-Tam — to share ideas on city building and their vision for the “Toronto of tomorrow.”

For his part, Vaughan’s opening remark to BILD’s “Talking City Building in Toronto” forum made it fairly clear what he has in mind.

“Someone said when I accepted this

invitation that it would be a great place to start a campaign fundraising project,” said Vaughan (who’s rumoured to be mulling a mayoral bid), prompting laughter, applause and even a bit of table banging from the development-industry audience. “So if you’ll just leave your business cards at the door . . .”

Hint successfully dropped, he turned his focus to the topic of the morning.

Toronto is “grappling with the challenge of building a great city, which is much more than just a transactional process of adding bricks and mortar to the sidewalk,” said Vaughan, whose Trinity Spadina-Ward 20 is condo development central these days.

FUTURE continued on H9



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TRASH TALK

Maureen Reilly was environmental champ

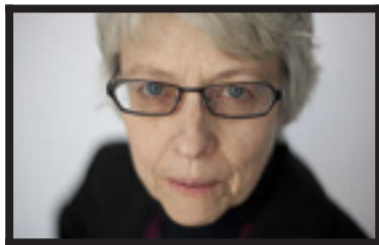
We are in a new year, and, alas, we have lost an environmental champion.

Maureen Reilly, the subject of several Trash Talk columns, died suddenly on Dec. 11 at the age of 58.

She was a warrior. Her enemy was sewage and industrial sludges spread on agricultural land. Her goals expanded over time to encompass proper sewage and water treatment, and the safe handling of effluent and residues with a view to protecting agricultural lands, water resources, food supplies and human health.

She had passion, persistence and intelligence. She was resourceful and articulate. She stood up to politicians, policymakers, bureaucrats and moneyed interests.

"Her legacy can be found everywhere on the Internet," says envi-



ELLEN MOORHOUSE

ronmental lawyer David McRobert, who met Maureen early on in her sludge battles. "She used the deep knowledge she gained about law and policy to produce regular newsletters, blogs, and articles. She appeared in films and videos. She passionately advocated for law and policy changes. She assisted other people all over the world."

Maureen always gave — of her time, knowledge and emotional

support to those whose lives were turned upside down by sludge.

In the mid 1990s, Maureen was looking to escape Toronto, where she worked on poverty and women's issues. She had an old farmhouse in the country near Cannington, northeast of Toronto, where she planned to enjoy rural Ontario, plant a herb garden, look after her cats, make jam and run a little B&B.

Alas, fate had other plans.

One day, as she sat braiding garlic on the steps of her house, an environment ministry official came up the driveway to tell her that 5,000 tonnes of industrial paper mill sludge would be spread on the marginal pasture land surrounding her house.

She was incredulous and worried. The soil was thin and contam-



Maureen Reilly died suddenly on Dec. 11 at the age of 58.

ination of her well a likelihood. She fought back, despite intimidation. She succeeded in keeping sludge off her little corner of Ontario.

Other parts of this province and continent have not been so lucky. She became an expert on sludge and the go-to person for people affected by the application of these so-called biosolids to land around their homes.

"I wonder how many thousands of people have benefited from Maureen's tireless work to assist rural and urban communities, who felt they had no voice or power," says Nancy Holt of North Carolina. A friend of 10 years and fellow warrior, she describes Maureen as her "walking encyclopedia."

Maureen became the administrator of a web-based information

service, Sludge Watch, culling the media for articles and scientific reports on sewage, water treatment, corporate practices, pollution and health issues. She added introductory comments to place each missive in context, often drawing on her long memory of events and issues.

Her last email on Dec. 10 contained reports on an enzyme produced by bacteria that disables antibiotics and was behind superbug outbreaks at two Toronto-area hospitals. "Why risk spreading this contagion by spreading sewage sludge?" she asked.

The outpouring of sadness for her loss and expressions of gratitude for all she did were palpable in Sludge Watch postings.

Chris Dancey had this to say: "I was in awe of Maureen's longevity as a sludge activist. She told me one day that most environmentalists don't even last two years before they burn out. I don't believe anyone else could have done the job Maureen did for victims of sludge and for Sludge Watch."

Maureen, who had finally exhausted her financial and emotional resources, sustained her crusade for 16 years.

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"We are grappling with the challenge of building a great city, which is much more than . . . adding bricks and mortar."

ADAM VAUGHAN



"We have taken a wrong turn toward prosperity if we create a city too expensive to live in."

ANA BILAO



"We need to, in the planning department, create a culture of collaboration as opposed to a culture of regulation."

JENNIFER KEESMAAT



"We want to encourage people to move through the city in a way that's going to be meaningful."

KRISTYN WONG-TAM



KEITH BEATY PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

"We've had no shortage of (transportation) plans, but nothing really that speaks to a cohesive vision for the entirety of the city."

PETER MILCZYN

'It's about having a plan for the future'

FUTURE from H1

"It's about having a plan for the future and about achieving that plan."

Part of that plan must address the need for affordable housing to accommodate a diverse population, he said, particularly the key workers who keep the city running. "In London, they have strategic worker housing . . . they have programs that put nurses next to hospitals, hotel workers next to hotels, firefighters next to fire stations."

"And as a result, they sustained the economic diversity of the downtown core and have reduced the pressure on senior levels of government to heavily invest in transit to move people to work. We need to talk about that in this city and we need to do it very quickly."

The development industry can play a key role in helping to generate wealth for all, Vaughan noted, by providing spaces for small businesses and non-profit commercial operations at the base of condos.

AFFORDABILITY ISSUES

Bailao, chair of the city's Affordable Housing Committee, stressed

the need to address issues related to "rising income disparity and transit pressures."

"I have serious concerns that a growing number of Torontonians feel forced to travel long distances between where they work and where they can live affordably," she said. "Rent costs are also taking larger portions of wages, with more and more residents paying over 40 per cent of their income in rent."

"We have taken a wrong turn toward prosperity if we create a city too expensive to live in."

Engaging the development industry for solutions is essential, she noted, citing her inclusion of BILD along with other private sector partners in an affordable housing roundtable. The group released a report last year that includes 12 recommendations for how to build 7,000 affordable housing units over the next three years.

IMPROVED PUBLIC REALM

The city has to do a better job of managing its public realm, Wong-Tam told the audience, by creating friendlier streetscapes and providing neighbourhood amenities that foster interaction.

"We want to encourage people to move through the city in a way that's going to be meaningful, that's going to give them a wealth of experience that will allow them to linger, stay and chat," she said.

Noting that 119 different properties are currently under development in the downtown core, Wong-Tam took aim at construction sites that create impediments to the public realm.

She showed a photo of one such property, with poor lighting, chain-link fencing and concrete barriers jutting out into the sidewalk. "Try walking through (that)," she said. "Now try walking pushing a stroller, or as an elderly person carrying groceries, or under windy conditions, rain, darkness and snow."

Some are doing better, she noted, pointing to the use of an urban umbrella — a more attractive and pedestrian-friendly sidewalk shed — at Great Gulf Homes' One Bloor project and at the site of the new Ryerson University student learning centre at Yonge and Gould Sts.

'TORTUOUS' TRANSPORTATION

No city building discussion would be complete without mention of

transportation planning, a matter Milczyn noted has been the source of "tortuous debates at council this past term."

"We've had no shortage of plans," said Milczyn, the TTC's vice chairman, "but nothing really that speaks to a cohesive vision for the entirety of the city, something that's actually based upon consulting the public, consulting property owners, figuring out what's needed, where it needs to go and in what order."

"We need to think outside the box a little bit and not be afraid of bringing in perspectives that might challenge the status quo from within, not just from without," he added.

Of course, new initiatives from city hall often encounter pushback from those who "don't necessarily grasp right away what we want to achieve," Milczyn said, appearing to refer to his audience. Green roofs, for example, weren't exactly embraced by the building community when they were introduced. "But (they speak) to the kind of city we want to build," he said.

"And just think about this," Milczyn added, "Santa's sleigh can now land on all these roofs downtown

and the reindeer can recharge."

CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

Toronto needs a model of city building that recognizes the shared interests of city planners and the development industry, the city's new chief planner says.

"We need to, in the planning department, create a culture of collaboration, as opposed to a culture of regulation," Jennifer Keesmaat said in her opening remarks.

One shared interest that planners and the building industry can collaborate on, she said, is creating a "spectacular" public realm. "It's almost cruel to add density in any urban environment without creating the corresponding public realm where people can thrive."

A properly functioning transportation system is another item on which city planners and builders can work together, she said. "We all know we have a shared interest in getting transportation planning right; we can't simply ignore movement and pretend it isn't a fundamental part of our quality of life."

"Who cares if we get everything else right but we can't move from place to place with ease?"

The condo market returned to 'normalcy' last year

2012 from H1

"The biggest challenges came as a result of changes to government policy, such as the federal government's decision to change the mortgage rules in July," notes Bryan Tuckey, president of the Building, Industry and Land Development Association (BILD). "We saw consumer confidence diminish in the months following that change."

And as it became clear that 2012 new-home sales weren't keeping pace with a record 2011 — 31,766 homes were sold as of Nov. 30, compared with 44,393 by the same time in 2011, according to RealNet Canada — the ensuing "sky is falling" media coverage only made things worse for developers.

Although 2012 condo sales looked weaker on a year-over-year basis — with 18,103 condos sold in the first 11 months of 2012, versus 27,659 in 2011 — RealNet says 2012 is actually on pace to be the fourth strongest year on record for condo sales.

"The market had been so powerful and so strong for so long that what we're experiencing right now isn't a slowdown," Brown says. "What we're seeing is a return to normalcy. And normalcy is a good thing. You couldn't sustain what we had."

Despite all the negative sentiment swirling around at the end of 2012, there was certainly no evidence of a condo market in crisis when Tridel launched Ten York, a 65-storey glass tower at York and Harbour Sts. The builder sold 532 of the project's available 600 units within the first two weeks, making it the most successful launch of the fall.

"There seems to be an affinity for tall buildings that are architecturally pleasing in triple A locations," says Jim Ritchie, Tridel's senior vice-president of sales and marketing. "I think we were able to demonstrate that regardless of market sentiment, if a product comes to the marketplace that people like, they make the buying decision."

Paul Golini echoes that sentiment.

Empire Communities' executive vice-president notes that purchasers were attracted to his company's latest project, Eau Du Soleil, largely because of its prime location on the Etobicoke waterfront.

By the end of 2012, Empire had sold more than 450 of the 750 available units at Eau Du Soleil. "It speaks to the fact that there are still buyers out there," he says.

Last year was the fourth strongest year on record for condo sales

"This year was an adjustment year compared to 2011," he says. "We've seen fewer launches and we've seen buyers take more time to make a decision. Success will not come in the short timeline, like the blow-them-out-the-door-type scenarios we've seen over the past few years."

Which isn't a bad thing, says Gary Switzer, saying that everybody in the industry should take a deep

breath. Plus, not having as many projects released last year over the previous years is a good thing, says the president of MOD Developments, whose Massey Tower at Yonge and Queen Sts. was another of 2012's best-selling condos.

MOD sold 486 of Massey's 698 units in the first quarter of the year, before new mortgage rules took effect and consumer confidence took a dive. "Our timing was good," Switzer says.

The most successful projects of 2012 weren't just downtown. Liberty Development's Centro Square — a two-tower, 800-unit condo project at Highway 7 and Weston Rd. in Vaughan — proved to be the 905's hottest launch of the year, with 70 per cent of the 300 units released selling within the first two weeks.

Liberty senior vice president Marco Filice notes that sales were driven by strong demand from local purchasers in search of alternatives to pricey single-family homes or townhouses. "There's a lack of high-

rise choices for them in the area," he says. "When you come in with a choice that didn't exist before, there'll be a lot more attention."

OUTLOOK 2013

If 2012 represented a return to more normal conditions in the Toronto condo market, what do the developers see in their crystal balls for 2013?

"I think we'll continue pretty much the way that we've been going," says Switzer. "The good projects in the good locations will continue to sell. But I think that certain areas of the city are saturated, which is why some projects have not been selling as well."

"Developers are going to start to look for opportunities in less obvious locations," adds Brown.

Golini predicts fewer projects will come to market in 2013, "which is representative of the industry self-regulating," he says. "And I see buyers still being cautious, but still buying because they need to live somewhere."