



Globe Real Estate

AMENITIES THAT WORK



Toronto’s high-rise landscape is littered with gimmicky and neglected public spaces that residents don’t use and often resent. Some owners are speaking up PAGE 4

Jasmine Artis-Longhurst stands in one of her building’s libraries, built after consultations with residents.
CHRISTOPHER KATSAROV FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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DEVELOPMENT

Does condo gimmickry work?

New buildings often come with interesting amenities, but they may be more marketing ploy than useful feature

JOHN LORINC

When home buyers visit the sales centre for a three-phase Vaughan, Ont. condo project known as Cosmo III, they'll encounter the usual buffet of shared facilities – pool, exercise room, party spaces, patios and so on – as well as one particular proposed feature that seems a bit, well, out of this world.

Marco Filice, senior vice-president with Liberty Development, says the firm spent a year figuring out how to design an observatory and fit it out with a serious telescope. The firm's also talking to local astronomers about creating programming for the star-gazers who will live in the 36-storey, 400 unit building. Response, Mr. Filice claims, has been enthusiastic. "I am so astonished by the number of people who say, 'I've never seen anyone put a telescope on the top of a building.'"

So, will the Cosmos observatory become a well-used amenity, or is it merely a marketing ploy, meant to differentiate Liberty's project from similar ones nearby?

While Mr. Filice insists the observatory will foster a sense of community among astronomy-minded residents, it's difficult to imagine that the 36th-storey space, five or ten years hence, will come close to fulfilling its destiny.

Indeed, the city's high-rise landscape has plenty of towers fitted out with neglected or gimmicky amenities that residents no longer use but nonetheless actively resent because of their impact on maintenance fees.

"A lot of these spaces are heavily underused and unnecessary," says Igor Dragovic, a 29-year-old civil servant who has lived in three condos over the past decade. He has watched features such as squash courts and hot tubs in his current building languish. In another condo, the board moved to remove an unwanted but pricey hot tub by filling it in to create a low-maintenance Japanese garden.

Even developers acknowledge the problem. "Residents don't actually use those spaces," observes Shamez Virani, president of CentreCourt Developments.

It's not true in every complex. A former resident of The Summit, at King and Bathurst, described her building's "well-used" amenities as "one-stop shopping."

Robyn Hughes, who lives in an older midtown building with fewer than 70 units, cites a basement workshop with a large industrial fan, workbenches and tool storage space. "It works in a small building where people are respectful of the space and don't clutter it up," says Ms. Hughes, who uses the workshop to fix her bicycle.

The question for developers and buyers, however, is how or even whether to preprogram the



Jasmine Artis-Longhurst, a social-services manager who lives at Heintzman Place, says her condo board asked residents what shared amenities they wanted in their building. That survey resulted in useful spaces, such as the children's play space seen here Tuesday. CHRISTOPHER KATSAROV FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL



The Cosmos III condo project in Vaughan, Ont., will have an astronomy observatory for residents. LIBERTY DEVELOPMENT

shared spaces that such projects are required to have. Mr. Dragovic wonders why more builders don't follow the approach he's heard about from friends

who live in condos in some European cities. There, developers build "bare bones" apartment complexes, with lower fees. "Everyone seems to get along fine."

Jasmine Artis-Longhurst, a

social-services manager, describes another approach used by the Junction condo she and her husband acquired in 2011. One of the first owners and a director of the condo corporation, Ms. Artis-Longhurst says the developers of the 643-unit Heintzman Place – a joint venture by Deltera and Options for Homes – hadn't programmed the shared space before the occupants moved in.

"I wanted a building that had some amenities but not the huge swimming pool and sauna and all those things that drive up maintenance fees."

Early on, the board distributed surveys soliciting input from residents about what sorts of shared spaces they thought they'd need and use.

When the survey came back, the residents asked for a children's play space, two libraries, a dog-washing room and a space for yoga, as well as more typical features such as a patio. "We asked the people in the building how they wanted to use the spaces," says Ms. Artis-Longhurst. "I know that's very rare."

Most developers still prefer to market buildings using specific amenities as a come-on and don't worry about whether they'll end up being used.

Mr. Virani, who is building a 572-unit tower at Church and Carlton, opted for another solution to this dilemma. Instead of trying to provide something for everyone, his firm has doubled-

down on two demographically friendly ideas: a 7,000-square-foot fitness room several times larger than the typically small and spare condo gym, as well as a 4,000 square-foot shared communal workspace, not unlike venues such as We Work, Quantum Coffee or just about any Starbucks in the city. (He's also promising access to a pair of shared Teslas.)

Those choices, he says, are linked directly to the way the building is being marketed: to health conscious young professionals used to open concept offices and flex hours. For a focus group, Mr. Virani looked no further than his own office. "We really looked at ourselves and said, what would we want in our building?"

What's less clear is whether these features will change the habits of buyers who already belong to a gym or have their own established work routines.

For those who are skeptical about a developer's ability to anticipate the tastes of future owners, Ms. Artis-Longhurst points to another benefit of leaving those choices up to buyers. After five years, 85 per cent of the Heintzman's residents are owners, and market values have risen over 25 per cent. "It's a community," she says. "In other condos, [residents] don't even know their neighbours."

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The eighth addition to a waterfront community by Mattamy Homes and Biddington Homes will provide a vast collection of suites to satisfy different demographics, but a unifying feature will be components to showcase the lake and city skyline.

The entire 53-storey tower, called Vita on the Lake, will essentially be wrapped in glass, so windows and balconies will span the perimeters of its one- to two-bedroom-plus-den suites. "We certainly made sure we had a good selection of designs, so we've got something for



Vita on the Lake will be a 53-storey tower essentially wrapped in glass, and occupy a piece of the city's dwindling available waterfront property.

everyone," vice-president of high-rise sales and marketing Linda Robinson says. "We've got wraparound balconies and every suite has a balcony, which makes sense when you're selling on the lake and you want to have those beautiful views."

The 489-unit high-rise – the first of two on site – will be located on the west end of Annie Craig Drive, which bisects the master-planned community between Lake Shore Boulevard and Marine Parade Drive in Mimico.

"There's not a lot left on the waterfront, so if people want to live in a new condominium on the waterfront, then this is their opportunity," Ms. Robinson states.

"So there is some sense of urgency being created here."

The competition of sister towers has spurred a revitalization around the development, which abuts Humber Bay Park and Martin Goodman Trail.

"We've got transportation and local restaurants just minutes down the street, so it has a more neighbourhood feel as opposed to back in the beginning when there wasn't anything," Ms. Robinson notes. "Now, there's also green spaces and parks that have been created as part of the master-planned community."

Radiating further outward are schools, hospital, supermarkets and shops, including many on the Queensway.

"You can just hop on the QEW and the Gardiner Expressway is right there, so it's very easy to access," Ms. Robinson adds.

Graziani + Corazza Architects Inc. – the same firm behind previous phases – will design the contemporary façade of this high-rise and U31 will fashion the two-storey lobby, fitness and social facilities, as well as indoor and outdoor lounges.

"The building is very clean and sleek looking, so it stands out from the busyness and craziness of other buildings, so we've gone for simplicity on this one," Mr. Robinson states.

"We have a beautiful fifth floor, outdoor salt-water pool, which is pretty huge, a full-sized gym, party room and a Muskoka room, where you can shoot a game of pool or sit and relax."

Individual units will exhibit natural materials, such as wood and marble, as well as six appliances and a locker. High-lights in select plans will include wine fridges, walk-in closets and laundry rooms, plus parking.

Move-in dates will begin in 2021.

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