

An old story for a new audience

R. York Wilson's mural from when this condo and retail building was Imperial Oil's headquarters highlights Mad Men-esque lobby



DAVE LEBLANC
THE ARCHTOURIST
daveleblanc@globeandmail.com

Just as it wasn't hard to find her husband's work around the city, it wasn't hard to find internationally acclaimed painter/muralist R. York Wilson's widow, Lela M. Wilson, back in 2003. I simply flipped to the correct page in the phone book. However, Ms. Wilson, then 92 years old, thought I was trying to sell her a Globe and Mail subscription, so she tried, politely, to end the conversation; luckily, I managed to convince her of my interest in her husband, who had passed away 19 years before, and the home they had built together on the northern edge of Wychwood Park in 1955.

About a week later, I found myself sitting comfortably in her cozy living room – decorated with objects from all over the world owing to their nomadic lives – as she mixed a tray of gin and tonics and prepared a cheese plate in her tiny kitchen. In the seven years that followed before her death in 2010, I would visit the Wilson house often, and my appreciation for the paintings of Ronald York Wilson would grow and grow.

That's why I think she'd love that one of her husband's best works, *The Story of Oil*, is now enjoyed by thousands of people every day – many picking up a bottle of gin at the LCBO or some cheese at Longo's – at 111 St. Clair Ave. W., the former Imperial Oil headquarters, now a Camrost-Felcorp condominium called Imperial Plaza.

The diptych, which took three years to plan and execute, begins with a brooding depiction of the geological processes that led to the formation of oil and ends with man's manipulation of the atom to create everything from skyscrapers to the Avro Arrow. While it was once reserved for oil bigwigs and thoroughly vetted visitors, Mr. Wilson's masterwork now turns the humdrum act of shopping into the highbrow appreciation of Canadian art. And architecture, too, as the two 32-foot-long by 21-foot-high panels remain in their Mathers and Haldenby-designed environs: a deluxe, 1957 *Mad Men*-esque lobby crammed with original finishes, including creamy, veined marble, gold mosaic tile and finned, stainless-steel light shades.

"They did a great job with the leasehold improvements to respect the finishes," Camrost-Felcorp president and chief executive David Feldman says



during a recent walk-through. "This part of St. Clair was a dead zone; even the community, they've come back and said 'Wow' ... we could've done just a residential lobby here and kept it just for the residents, but we felt that would be a mistake."

And if any mistakes have been done here at all, they've escaped my eyes. Although there are hidden fire doors and other 21st-century safety and security upgrades, the lobby space can still be "read" in much the same way as in the 1950s and '60s. Standing just inside the main (and original) doors, a visitor can look to the three enormous, now-working clocks – one set into gold tile over the elevator corridor, the other two on the

east and west walls – because the retail display units have been kept low and unobtrusive.

The ceiling overhead, Mr. Feldman says, "looks the same, but it's all been upgraded." The chunky Canada Mail door, too, sits beside the elevators as it always has, except it's never been shinier, and building way-finding is achieved with simple, sans serif, period-appropriate lettering done in stainless steel. And while a little wavy from almost 60 years of foot traffic, the alternating pink and cream marble floor is far superior than the thin ceramic tiles found underfoot at most condominium projects.

And, most importantly, Mr. Wilson's mural has been left to breathe rather than being im-

Of the many mid-century modern features Camrost-Felcorp has kept for Imperial Plaza, formerly the Imperial Oil headquarters, is R. York Wilson's mural *The Story of Oil*. The diptych's depiction includes humanity's manipulation of the atom to create everything from skyscrapers to the Avro Arrow, seen above the heads of architect Rod Rowbotham and Camrost-Felcorp president and CEO David Feldman. PHOTOS BY DAVE LEBLANC FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

soned behind glass: Only a waist-high stainless-steel railing keeps shoppers from brushing against it. And unlike the 100-foot long mural at the Sony Centre, *The Seven Lively Arts* – which sits rather high in that lobby – art lovers can get within inches of *The Story of Oil*.

"Even that railing, it was a couple of weeks just designing it," says chief architect Rod Rowbotham of onespace unlimited.

He's proud of larger aspects of the project as well. To keep St. Clair free of added congestion, a below-grade, hotel-style, four-lane pickup and drop-off area has been created at the rear of the building. "What we wanted to do at this space was to make it really celebratory and very upscale," he

explains. "It's going to have a really nice ceiling in it with glowing beams ... and some artwork across there, on that wall, to serve as a focal-point."

"It's designed to be the street," Mr. Rowbotham finishes. "This is our own private street."

Amenities spaces that Camrost-Felcorp has added to the building, such as the two party rooms, massive gym, indoor pool, theatres and sound studios, continue the luxury-materials palette. Furniture, such as the sculptural Harry Bertoia Diamond Chairs, Warren Platner wire tables and the spoke-and-hub Modo chandeliers by Roll & Hill, also underline the mid-century modern heritage of the building.

After unveiling a Heritage Toronto plaque in the lobby of Imperial Plaza in June, the project is now on the short list to receive a William Greer Architectural Conservation and Craftsmanship Award at Heritage Toronto's annual awards gala on Oct. 17. For more information on the awards ceremony, please visit: heritagetoronto.org/programs/heritage-toronto-awards

If your love of Toronto's modernist architecture has been piqued, Heritage Toronto's Gary Miedema, Blog TO's Chris Bateman and Your Humble Archtourist will be hosting an all-day bus tour, "Modern TO," on Saturday, Sept. 24. For information: heritagetoronto.org/event/bus-tour-modern-to

ON SITE) BY SYDNIA YU

BOXGROVE VILLAGE MARKHAM

Arista aims at flex space buyers

Markham project features designs with live/work potential

BUILDER/DEVELOPER

Arista Homes

SIZE

Live/work townhouses 2,150 to 4,000 square feet; traditional towns 1,665 to 2,340 square feet

PRICE

\$800,000s to more than \$1.3-million

SALES CENTRE

110 Copper Creek Dr., east of Ninth Line in Markham. Open Monday to Thursday from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m.; weekends from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

CONTACT

Phone 905-209-7667 or visit www.boxgrovovillage.com

At its new Boxgrove Village project in Markham, Arista Homes has devised some designs that aim to combine three properties in one.

The three-storey Briarwood design has a commercial space at ground level and a pair of two-bedroom suites above. Each of the units will have street-level entry and access to a rear double garage with two exterior spots.

"With affordability at times becoming an issue within the general GTA marketplace, this particular space ... would appeal to a family, for example, with a business in the area. It'll have a



Top, the three-storey Briarwood design at Boxgrove Village has a commercial space at ground level and a pair of two-bedroom suites above. The rest of the site will consist of 124 traditional brick townhouses, bottom, with front garages on 25-foot lots.

nice living space right above their workspace below and they'd have an opportunity to have additional family members stay in the second suite or they can rent it out and subsidize some of their monthly pay-

ments," says vice-president of sales and marketing Franco Crispino.

"It really offers a good opportunity or flexibility to different home buyers, from end users to investors."

Since the unveiling of 83 out of 195 townhouses, this 4,000-square-foot plan is among the most popular of the live/work collection making up a third of the master-planned site east of Ninth Line and south of Highway 407.

"We do have a new model that's going to be released ... that's a spin on that Briarwood model," Mr. Crispino adds. "So it's going to be even larger, just under 5,100 square feet ... but they'll all be three-bedroom [suites above]."

Other live/work plans within the project, called Boxgrove Village, will generally offer two- and three-storey layouts with double garages, commercial space with 11-foot ceilings and frontage onto Copper Creek Drive, and open entertaining and cooking quarters above with large balconies.

"The project is unique in that we have true live/work units," says Mr. Crispino, who notes the builder has constructed hundreds of homes in the area in the past decade. "And to have 71 in a community is unique."

The rest of the enclave will consist of 124 traditional brick townhouses with front garages on 25-foot lots.

"Increased intensification requirements and greenbelt legislation has seen land prices increase dramatically over the past several years, thus forcing homebuilders to opt to build on nar-

rower lots as a means of maintaining affordability," says Mr. Crispino, who notes 14-foot frontages as average nearby.

"In Boxgrove Village, we decided to provide homebuyers with what they really wanted – traditional two-storey townhomes on wider 25-foot lots with real backyards."

Inside, these three and four-bedroom designs will encompass 1,665 to 2,340 square feet. "The fact they are on two storeys seems to be key for our homeowners ... so they're not going up three storeys with lots of stairs," Mr. Crispino states.

Standard appointments will include nine-foot ceilings on the main and second floors, oak staircases and hardwood floors, as well as various Energy Star features.

Though occupancy won't begin until summer or fall 2017, the site is a short walk to two established shopping complexes and a short drive to Cedar Brae Golf Club, Rouge Park and Milne Dam Conservation Park.

"With the location the way it is – near the shopping plazas, the hospital to the north, established schools in the area, [Highway] 407 and Viva transportation – it's a great location," Mr. Crispino says. "So we're getting buyers from all across the GTA."

Special to The Globe and Mail