

Factory tailor-made for condos

Tip Top building gets a six-storey, steel addition

Heritage property features art deco design details

W.D. LIGHTHALL
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The former Tip Top Tailors textile factory, often praised as one of the city's better examples of art deco architecture, is missing its crown of neon signs.

The temporary removal of the three rooftop "Tip Top Tailors" signs is part of the work by Context Development Inc. to convert this historic building, located on Lake Shore Blvd. W. near Bathurst St., into a 250-unit condominium called Tip Top Lofts.

The once-prominent signs had to be removed because the project includes construction of a six-storey addition on top of the original five-storey building.

Construction began in November and is expected to finish during summer 2005.

About 80 per cent of units in the new 11-storey building have sold.

The conversion is a complex project, posing several challenges, says David Hart, Context's project manager.

"We have three separate forms of construction on this project," Hart says.

"There's the conversion of the existing building. There is the addition of the six new floors of structural steel. Then, we have the new underground parking structure, which is a challenge to build because of the high water table this close to the lake."

Hart makes it clear the Tip Top Tailors building is well worth the effort.

It was completed in 1931, at the height of the art deco design era, for Tip Top Tailors Ltd., a menswear company founded in the



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Alex Speigel, director of development for Context Development Inc., stands outside the former Tip Top Tailors factory, which is currently being converted into residential lofts. "What I found fascinating is through the process of adding new elements to the building, the historical architecture has been enhanced," Speigel says.

early 1900s by Polish immigrant David Dunkelmann.

(The company was later part of retail-clothing conglomerate Dylex Ltd., which is now out of business.)

Built as a combined garment factory, warehouse and head office, the U-shaped structure has 13-foot ceilings and expansive

rows of windows on all sides. These high, long rows of windows were built to allow lots of natural light into the production areas of the building.

Another noteworthy structural feature is the round concrete interior columns, which flare into a mushroom shape where they join the ceiling.

"Just the physical dimensions of the building are screaming for it to be converted into residential lofts. It's perfect," Hart says. "And the conversion is a good way to preserve part of Toronto's heritage."

Designated as a heritage property by the city in 1973, the building's exterior has an ele-

gant look of cool sophistication, complete with the symmetrical features and geometric shapes that are the hallmarks of art deco architecture.

Strong vertical lines on the facade contrast with the building's horizontal feel; the stylish front entrance is two storeys high and exterior terra cotta

panels have detailed figurative and decoration work.

As part of the conversion, the lobby will be restored to its original state and the building's exterior decoration will be refurbished, says Alex Speigel, Context's director of development.

➤ Continued on next page



Sign letters are being refurbished

➤ Continued from previous page

"What I found fascinating is through the process of adding new elements to the building, the historical architecture has been enhanced," Speigel says.

Steel was chosen as the structural system for the six-storey addition because it's lighter than concrete. Hart says if they had used concrete for the new section, it would have limited the addition to four storeys.

However, using structural steel also has its drawbacks. "It's expensive, Hart says, "and because structural steel is not normally used in residential construction, our designers have to develop solutions that are not common to our industry."

Then there are the challenges stemming from the building's location on the Lake Ontario shoreline.

When Toronto was founded, the shoreline was at Front St., well north of where it is today.

Most of what is now known as the city's central waterfront area is actually landfill. As a result, the area has a high water table — complicating the proposed construction of a three-level, 180-space underground parking garage between the Tip Top building and Lake Shore Blvd.

Before excavation for the garage can start, an underground retaining wall, known as a caisson wall, is being built to keep the water out. Steel sleeves are drilled into the ground down to the bedrock and then filled with concrete. Before the concrete hardens, the steel sleeves are pulled out.

"Once that's complete, we then have to remove the water trapped inside the soil located within the caisson wall," Hart says.

"That allows us to get in there and excavate by conventional means. The reason we have to build the wall and remove the water is because the water table here is so high the soil has the con-



Large windows flood a model suite with natural light at Tip Top Lofts. Similar to the existing building, the addition will feature lots of glass. "The new section has all the spacious feel and expansive light of the existing building," says Craig Taylor, director of marketing for Context.

sistency of quicksand." Something that didn't need upgrading is the original wooden piles supporting the building. Though driven into the bedrock about 75 years ago, Hart says they remain in perfect shape.

"Since they've been installed, they've been immersed in water. Cold water preserves wood because the wood is not exposed to the air. They are in perfect condition," he says.

Craig Taylor, director of marketing for Context, says one of the challenges was to design the new addition so it blends well with the existing building.

He says the new section of the project, designed by Peter Clewes of Architects Alliance, has the same sense of clean, simple refinement as the old. At the same time, it has a modern appearance that differentiates it slightly from the original structure.

Similar to the existing building, the new portion features lots of glass.

"It allows the historic elements of the original building to shine," says Taylor of the overall design. "And the new section has all the spacious feel and expansive light of the existing building."

Units in Tip Top Lofts start at about \$190,000 and rise to more than \$1 million for the

largest, two-storey penthouses. There are more than 50 floor plans in the 250-unit building.

"Because we have the luxury of so many different floor plans, there is a good selection of suites still available," Taylor says.

They range from one-bedroom units at about 600 square feet, to two-bedroom-plus-den units of more than 2,000 square feet.

Ceiling heights of 13 feet are standard on floors one to five. In the new section of the building (floors six to 11), many units are two-storey mezzanine lofts, some of which have open spaces with ceilings as high as 18 feet.

With the wide-open floor spaces, Taylor says Context is able to offer a large degree of customization, though it's not possible to move concrete columns.

As for the neon signs, the best-preserved letters from each of the three will be restored and combined to make one sign.

When construction is finished, the refurbished "Tip Top Tailors" sign will go back on the roof, its traditional place on Toronto's waterfront.

"But our architect has a bit of a sense of humour, so it's going to be slightly angled," Hart says.



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

A glowing model of the Tip Top Lofts conversion shows the planned six-storey addition and an abundance of windows.