

Building a fine `foil' on Bloor

MuseumHouse will be a modern, 19-storey structure with glass railing balconies and custom stainless steel planters

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RICK EGLINTON PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

Architect Sol Wassermuhl, left, and real estate investor and financier Sheldon Esbin with the model of MuseumHouse. Both men and their wives will be taking up residence in the building.

Real estate investor and financier Sheldon Esbin, and his wife Carol are the perfect customers for Toronto's growing number of upscale condominium projects.

They're ready to unload the "pile of bricks" in Forest Hill Village where they've lived for 35 years. And they're already converts to an apartment lifestyle.

"Twelve years ago, we were fortunate enough to be able to take an apartment in the Renaissance Plaza for a year while we put our house under renovation. We just had the time of our lives," says Esbin, who was recently preparing to head off to Florida with his wife.

During the Plaza interlude, they had no worries about where to park the car when they planned an outing; they just walked out the door, he says. They also discovered at least 10 kinds of dumplings within a mile's radius of the Bloor and Avenue Rd. intersection.

But the Esbins won't be buying a condo from anybody else.

They're building their own: MuseumHouse at 206 Bloor St. W.

"I'd been trying to buy that property for 10 years," says Esbin, who owns the medical building next door at 208 Bloor. "When it came up (in 2005), I had the inside track and got it."

His next step: call his friend Sol Wassermuhl, who just happens to head Page + Steele Architects. "I told him, 'It's a tight site, but we want to put a building on it and move in there,'" Esbin recounts. "I always knew it had great views, especially looking south, which will probably never change."

The Esbins will be occupying the 16th floor of the 19-storey 24-unit building. They'll have a 4,300-square-foot suite – 2,000 to live in and 2,300 for the shoes and bags, he jokes – with private elevator access and generous balconies.

(Wassermuhl and his wife are planning to take the 17th floor, Esbin confides.)

Like many in the high-end market, Esbin likes a more traditional architectural style. He's a big fan of American architect Robert A.M. Stern's design at One St. Thomas St., a bit east and south of Bloor. It has all the elements of a classic New York City highrise apartment dating from the 1920s or '30s. (The project had too many units for Esbin's taste, and he was concerned about increased traffic in the area.).

MuseumHouse will, of course, be intimate. But Esbin has ended up with a decidedly modern structure, defined by a limestone base, and glass and metal above. Balconies with glass railings topped with custom stainless steel planters create strong horizontal lines. Prices start at around \$800 a square foot, and the lowest-priced unit, at 1,942 square feet starts at \$1.55 million.

"I think it's going to be a very functional building. It's pretty, but I did not set out to design a modern building," says Esbin, who is an avid collector of art, sculpture and books and ephemera related to Toronto's history.

But while the Esbins will compromise on the exterior, their suite will have a distinctly traditional flavour.

"We intend to have a lot of sconces and woodwork, and things that are not all that contemporary. We don't plan to get rid of all our furniture, our beloved pieces that we've picked up over the years."

Mind you, they have been acquiring some art deco furniture as a compromise between modern and traditional styles.

For Wassermuhl, however, there was no choice but to go modern with this building: The context dictates it.

To take advantage of the views, both to the south and north, the units need big expanses of glass, and that immediately suggests a more modern style.

The presence, across the street of some of the city's finest historical buildings – the museum, with its jutting new David Libeskind crystal, the elaborately Victorian Royal Conservatory of Music, as well as Queen's Park to the south – would make any attempt at a traditional look futile, says Wassermuhl.

"You can't compete with these heritage buildings. So clearly, the way to go is to be a foil to these historical buildings in a simple, elegant modern statement."

That's not to say Wassermuhl could not have gone the traditional route. His firm has such high-profile upscale developments as the Chedington, at Bayview and Lawrence Aves., One Post Rd. and the Windsor Arms on its project roster. All of these condominiums exhibit an ornamented style designed to appeal to luxury seekers and not necessarily the city's architect critics.

Nor do they conform to Wassermuhl's personal taste.

"As an architect, my preference has always been modern. When I built for myself and designed for myself, it's always been modern, but Toronto has definitely been a traditional market at the high end," he says. "It's very difficult to dictate a direction in terms of the fashion of building, if there's such a strong impetus from the client. From their viewpoint, they're building a \$50-million project, and it's their money at risk."

That being said, Wassermuhl believes the high-end market is becoming more receptive to a simpler, more contemporary look.

What highlights the trend for him is the fact that the Ritz Carlton Hotel will be settling into contemporary-style quarters in Toronto. (The project is designed by New York-based Kohn Pederson Fox Associates Architects and Planners with interior layouts by Page + Steele.)

"We were addressed by senior executives from the hotel chain, and they were clearly happy to move to a more modern approach, and they indicated that this reflected the change in lifestyle and the change in their guests," says Wassermuhl.

David Powell and Fenwick Bonnell, of the interior design firm Powell & Bonnell who are selecting finishes and designing common areas for MuseumHouse, have seen this shift to a more contemporary taste.

"How many times in the last year, we've been hired by clients who want to get rid of all the details, have more of a transitional look," says Powell. "If there is a trend, it's that – almost a turning back on the traditional."

"It's a purist expression of quality, instead of putting a lot of detailing on it to make it look expensive," adds Bonnell.

Their designs for the project's sales office at 160 Cumberland St. in the Renaissance Court reflect these sensibilities. The vignettes incorporate limestone, marble, glass and stainless steel, as well as the contemporary kitchen cabinetry from Snaidero with a strong horizontal line of the upper cabinets. The bathroom features a soaker tub backed by curved translucent glass behind which is a shower.

The sales office serves as a backdrop for art: a Rodin bronze of a woman, which Esbin had in his office, will be moved to the MuseumHouse lobby; prints line the walls, including the powder room; and a reproduction from China of a Tamara de Lempicka deco-style painting backs a desk area. ("It went up when I was out of town," says a somewhat disappointed Esbin, whose favourite sculpture is a Rodin bronze head of the author Balzac. "I wish it were real.")

Esbin says he chose Powell & Bonnell because "they don't impose on you their standard kind of template that they've been successful with. They listen to you and they're flexible. They helped guide us to some great kitchens, and there's a lot of flexibility to the interior finishes."

The floor plans for the MuseumHouse suites, which range from 1,950 square feet to an ultra-luxurious two-storey 5,600-square-foot penthouse, to be priced around \$10 million, offer familiar configurations for buyers like the Esbins, who are used to spacious foyers and living rooms, separate dining rooms, large kitchens and family rooms, dens and butler's pantries.

Modern on the outside, with an option for the more traditional on the inside – that's what real estate broker Pat Baker is seeing in some high-end condo projects.

But a luxury building's location, she says, is more of a determinant for its exterior architecture rather than a trend one way or another to traditional or modern.

"If they're looking in Forest Hill, they're looking for something that fits into the Forest Hill architecture," says Baker, who has sold dozens of new condo projects in recent years, including the Ritz and One Post Rd.

All of these wealthy buyers, however, are looking for certain amenities.

"You have to have some really great exercise stuff, whatever it is, and great rooms to do it," says Baker. "Even if you say, well, everybody belongs to a club, but lots of people think how great it would be not to have to go to the club and just go down the stairs."

An impressive lobby is another requirement. "It doesn't have to be huge, but it has to be really exquisitely done," says Baker.

Esbin's MuseumHouse, with estimated maintenance fees of 93 cents per square foot, will have both concierge and valet parking, and the requisite amenities such as guest suites and exercise facilities.

He has added some other practical touches: the cool room for deliveries of groceries and flowers; and an emergency generator system that will power the whole building through brownouts and blackouts.

MuseumHouse website: <http://www.museumhouseonbloor.com>. 416-920-3222.