

Julian Jacobs says Toronto should move beyond its architectural stereotypes

Advancing the culture, one building at a time

The Perfect House

JOHN BENTLEY
MAYS



The condominium tower at 123 Eglinton Ave. East in midtown Toronto has a three-storey base that could use a good sandblasting, to get rid of the fussy, shaggy stonework.

The flimsy porch is a notably dull introduction to the million-dollar suites within. But the up-sweep of the tower is good, and the sharply tailored line where the top hits the sky is better than good. In other words, 123 Eglinton East is what we usually get these days from Toronto's providers of up-market condos: sturdy architecture with a nice touch or two (if we're lucky), but with little zip and with too many daubs and swags of heavy, traditional-type styling.

Award-winning Toronto architect Julian Jacobs, who designed this building and likes it better than I do, told me that several factors guided his decisions to do things the way he did. One was something every would-be designer of beautiful high buildings must face.

"The issue is that tall buildings

have to stack," Mr. Jacobs said. "You can't change the forms too much. Philosophically, you cannot put a lot of meaning into tall buildings. I want a building to be as rich as a novel and poetry, but everything [in a high-rise project] has to be solid. The structures have to line up. It's a great restraint on architectural design."

The more pressing issue, or set of issues, comes with working for Toronto's high-end developers and investors, who do not appear to have much feeling for fine architecture, in a Canadian market that happens to like daubs and swags. "Designing a high-rise building, you don't have a single client; you are going to the market for the maximum number of people," Mr. Jacobs said.

"What attracts people in 2004 is traditional architecture with rich, traditional materials like masonry, with pierced windows rather than sheets of glass. It's an interesting socioeconomic and cultural phenomenon that in North America, most people are conservative when it comes to architecture, much less sensitive to buildings, churches, museums than people elsewhere."

The architect believes the fault lies with the Disney dream factory and other fantasies mass produced for consumption by children. When people grow up and make enough money to build a home,



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"they think of a stereotype, like processed food — castles, cha-teaux. Ninety-five per cent think of a centre hall, and brick and stone. I think this is very unfortunate, because we live in a culture of infinite possibilities."

Though the 20th century expired a few years ago, Toronto's usual taste in new residential architecture is still stuck in the 19th — or,

rather, in a pseudo-historical pastiche that never existed anywhere outside story books. But the big job in Toronto, this architect believes, is not merely catching up to the last century's clean, glass curtain walls. (Mr. Jacobs thinks we are doing fairly well on that front.) It's inventing and refining a homemade vocabulary that talks clearly about what it means to live here, now.

"It's taken a hundred years for the curtain wall to be acceptable in a high-rise building. We should have an architecture of our time; we should be making architecture at the leading edge of culture. Whether Canadians want to be or not, we will be pulled into the next millennium."

If the Modernists famously preached the gospel of form fol-



TARAS KOVALIV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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lows function, "now form can follow geography, dreams, aspirations, contexts, the limitations and possibilities offered by technology. We have to get past the limitations of Modernism, and on to pluralism.

"We are living in an incredibly complex world, rich with culture and human configurations. Toronto should be creating the best architecture in the world, because we have 150 cultures working and living here in harmony."

The authentic architecture of such a society would follow no stylistic dogma. "We have to find an architecture that speaks to site, climate, program. It should be extremely pluralistic, spiritually rich, strong with relation to the earth and sidewalk, cohesive.

"You can do things that are exquisite in an urban setting. This is something we must never forget. We don't have to make radical inventions, but we are advancing culture.

"The job of the architect is spiritual. How can we elevate man? How can we accomplish transcendence with materials?"

So what about the high-rise at 123 Eglinton East? "It's less art, more commercial," Mr. Jacobs replied with a smile. "Some developers don't want advanced architecture. I am not always advancing culture. Some time you want to make a living."

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