

## DEVELOPMENT

# Going to battle against conventional taste

Jim Neilas had to scrap his grand experiment with artful condominiums in Little Italy, but he's not through tilting at windmills



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Of the several condominium schemes I wrote up last year, none was more exciting than N-Blox.

This striking six-storey building was designed for a site in Toronto's Little Italy by Roland Rom Colthoff and Richard Witt, then with Quadrangle Architects. (They've since gone out on their own.) It had a handsome façade: a dramatically asymmetrical composition that expressed the interlocking and overhanging units within. But the best things about it were the units themselves: house-sized apartments, with prices to match (\$700,000 to \$1.5-million), pitched to deep-dyed downtowners.

Hearing nothing more about N-Blox after I did the column about it, I began to wonder what happened to the project. So, last week, I dropped by the downtown office of its developer, Jim Neilas, 37, to find out. The story he told me says a lot - alas! - about the readiness of Toronto condo buyers to embrace advanced architecture and family-sized apartments.

"We cancelled N-Blox almost immediately after the launch," Mr. Neilas said. "What we found out was that people will pay a slight premium for architecture, but they won't pay a hefty premium. They certainly won't pay 50 per cent above what a cookie-cutter condo would go for."

The site slated for N-Blox is now to be occupied by a building with smaller units called Cube.

"We tried to keep the look, feel and spirit of N-Blox, but in terms of its guts, Cube is pretty conventional. And sales have gone incredibly well. It sold out in two hours."

But does the failure of N-Blox suggest there's no future for new family-sized suites in this town?

"They're going to keep going. People are looking at apartments as a preference, as opposed to being Plan B - 'I can't afford a home, so I'll take an apartment.' I don't think we're there any more. I think we'll see more and more large apartments being sold."

It would be premature to call Mr. Neilas a visionary: He's still relatively new to the real estate game, having forsaken a career as a lawyer. But he is definitely thinking beyond the ordinary, and bucking the conventional wisdom of his industry.



Jim Neilas at the Cube sales room. 'People are looking at apartments as a preference, as opposed to being Plan B.' ASHLEY HUTCHESON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



A rendering of the original design for the N-Blox condos by Roland Rom Colthoff and Richard Witt, then of Quadrangle Architects.

DESIGNSTOR

Take, for example, the common view that nobody who can afford to do otherwise would want to live over a store on a busy street.

In a new project now under way in Little Italy, Mr. Neilas plans to prove the skeptics wrong.

"On College Street, you have typical three-storey, mixed-use properties, one after the other. My idea is to take one of them, put \$2.5-million into it, gut it, put a different skin on it, add another floor on top. And there you have it: this beautiful steel and glass building with a 4,000- to 5,000-square-foot house above the store, with a pool and sheer luxury. Where else could you get 5,000 [residential] square feet? Forest Hill and Rosedale. But that's about \$7-million, not \$2.5-million. It's for a buyer who wants the area, who wants to see a lively street and make a statement about where he lives. I think we're there."

At the same time that he is trying to overcome market resistance to his new, architecturally challenging products, Mr. Neilas has been meeting opposition from another source: city planners and community groups now working to keep Queen Street the funky, low-

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Developer Jim Neilas

rise avenue it's long been.

"They have this obsession with height. I wanted to put up six or seven storeys in Leslieville, on Queen Street East - some stunning architecture, really cool stuff. But when I tried to move on it, [the planners] would only allow five storeys. If I'd said I was going to do a five-storey strip joint, they would have said: 'Okay! So long as it's five storeys!' How is that good planning?"

As Mr. Neilas sees it, popular antagonism to higher density

downtown is bound to backfire.

"Queen Street has become a museum. They say Queen is special! It may be where the Drake Hotel is [on Queen Street West], but over here in Leslieville, it's a rat-hole. We've got ugly, terrible mechanics' shops. Preserving everything does nothing for anyone."

His ire extends to the people who are attempting to keep high-rise development out of the Annex and other downtown neighbourhoods.

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"Someone should bring a class-action lawsuit against the groups that are fighting density and height, on the grounds of environmental damage. Thousands of acres [in suburbia] are being swallowed up and made into ugly homes. The damage we're causing by going out instead of up!"

As he forges into these and other battles, Mr. Neilas seems ready for the fight up ahead. "I'm young," he told me, "and I've got the stomach for it."