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South Unionville Square could be a model for future suburbs

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Project recreates the same ambience, atmosphere, ownership model and lifestyle that Chinese newcomers to Canada thrived on for centuries in cities such as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing.

I do not usually write about individual projects. This week I am making an exception.

The reason is simple; this one is an example of where cities should be going.

During the past two weeks I have looked at the direction urban centres - the GTA especially - must head to ensure livability and a certain quality of life for their residents. They have to go up instead of out; they have to mix residential, retail and office in neighbourhoods; they have to get away from the need for gas-driven vehicles to handle daily errands, and they have to substitute public spaces for private yards.

The project I want to take a look at here is called South Unionville Square. It is in Markham on the east side of Kennedy Road between highways 7 and 407 and it incorporates almost all of the features listed above, as well as a couple of others worthy of a round of applause.

First, the entire project - shopping mall, offices and residential tower - is geared toward the GTA's Chinese community; second, every square inch - save for the supermarket that anchors the mall - is condominium space.

Merchants get to own their stores - some as small as 10 feet by 10 feet - residents get to own their own suites, and the dentists, accountants, hairdressers and small-business people who take over the commercial space get to own their own premises.

In essence, South Unionville Square recreates the ambience, atmosphere, ownership model and lifestyle that Chinese newcomers to Canada thrived on for centuries in cities such as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing.

A few facts about the project:

Mady Development Corp. is taking a 7.5-acre site and building a 300,000-square-foot, two-level shopping mall with 300 stores and 80,000 square feet of office space, and an adjoining 11-storey residential tower with 200 suites.

The mall will be anchored by a T&T supermarket, the Chinese food-store chain recently acquired by Loblaws. There will also be parking for 1,500 cars at grade and in an underground garage that connects all the structures.

To provide vital public space for relaxing, entertaining and recreation, there will be a 20,000-square-foot rooftop terrace accessible from the fourth floor of the residential tower.

"What we had going for us from the start was a Chinese partner," says Charles Mady, president of the Mady Group. The partner, however, prefers not to be identified.

"He showed us things and gave us insights we just would never have had otherwise," Mr. Mady says. "He helped us arrange a feng shui expert to make sure everything was properly sited and aligned. He explained small things like making sure we had gas ranges and high-speed vents in the residential units.

"Our buyers will want to cook with woks, and gas is necessary to get the right heat from the ranges and the ventilation is essential to get rid of the steam that rises from the woks."

The project has proved a commercial as well as critical success. The retail stores went on sale first and are 85 per cent sold. The office space is half gone and the residential suites are about 70 per cent sold.

Esther Yeung, a financial adviser with a nearby bank, bought a one-bedroom suite shortly after they went on sale late this summer. Her 600-square-foot one-bedroom unit has a balcony, a parking spot and a storage locker and she paid less than \$200,000, she says.

Granted, the 30-year-old already owns a home with her husband David Hui in Markham. But Ms. Yeung's mom and dad are nearing retirement age and are thinking of coming to live in Canada. South Unionville Square will meet their needs to a T, she says.

"It will be as close as they can get to the way they live at home," she says. "In their apartment building in Hong Kong there is a grocery store on the ground floor, so mom just takes the elevator down every day to shop.

"At South Unionville Square she can buy fresh food every day and that is important to the Chinese."

If mom and dad delay their retirement beyond the move-in date two years down the road, Ms. Yeung says she sees no difficulty in renting the suite. Rents will easily cover mortgage and maintenance costs, she figures.

"There is really nothing else like it," she says. "Unless you have come to Canada as an immigrant, it is hard to understand how wonderful it is to find a place to live where you are surrounded by the culture and way of life you grew up with."

And if the daily pleasures of living in a recreated Chinese neighbourhood are not enough to meet your needs, there is the public transit stop right next to the residential tower and Highways 7 and 407 minutes away by car.

"Frankly, if I could find a site and a similar community need, I would do it again in a shot," Mr. Mady says.

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