

Many Toronto condos were never designed to be homes. The condo crash may be changing that

With investors missing, some developers are shifting to bigger units with more bedrooms and better soundproofing.

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Renderings of a planned condo at 1 Marlborough Ave. in Toronto by Devron Developments and Dorsay Development Corp.

Supplied by 1 Marlborough



By [May Warren](#) Housing Reporter

During the Toronto condo boom, for all the aspirational renderings and fancy showrooms, there was one thing that was rarely, if ever, discussed, recalls builder Pouyan Safapour, president of Devron Developments.

The elevators.

“If it takes you 10 minutes to get in and 10 minutes to get back out, it doesn’t matter if everything else in that building is amazing,” said Safapour in an interview. “You’re likely impacted with your decision of renting or buying there.”

In recent years, “end users” — industry jargon for people who want to live in their condos — were often an afterthought as developers marketed many tiny units in tall glass towers to investors. But now investors are nowhere to be found.

The real estate downturn has left builders across the region converting projects to rental or cancelling them all together as a glut of supply pre-sold during the pandemic peak floods the market.

Amid this turmoil, some builders are pivoting towards bigger suites, consolidating smaller units, and paying attention to details like elevators, and sound proofing. The goal is to attract a new group: owners who are looking for homes. It's a potential silver lining to the condo crash, but there are still questions about how affordable they will be and if they make sense for families.



The entrance of 1 Marlborough Avenue, a new condo project marketed at people, not investors, is seen on Tuesday, April 14.

Sophie Bouquillon/Toronto Star

Safapour, whose family business started out making custom homes before getting into condos, said they've long been designing with livability in mind. But they're further leaning into this concept with a new project by Devron Developments and Dorsay Development Corp. near Rosedale and Summerhill called the 1 Marlborough, launching pre-sales in the fall.

At 13 storeys and just 58 residences, the developers are marketing the condos as homes, instead of units. Almost all of them will be two to three bedrooms, with a couple with four bedrooms. They range from 1,800 to over 8,000 square feet, offering high-end finishes, and details lacking in many condos like sound insulation and leak detection.

The project will also preserve and restore the existing facade, a heritage building that was the site of a Pierce-Arrow car showroom, as well as a CBC studio. As for the elevators? There will be four, with most suites having direct access, according to Safapour.

"For us, it's really meeting the moment and the evolution of the condominium market," said Ian MacLeod, senior vice-president of residential at Dorsay Development.



Renderings of the exterior of the planned condo at 1 Marlborough Ave. near Summerhill and Rosedale.

Supplied by 1 Marlborough

Matti Siemiatycki, director of the Infrastructure Institute and professor of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto, said the move toward bigger units that are easier to live in is “very positive.”

But it’s still quite expensive to build, “and we’re building at a cost that regular families are struggling to afford,” he said. “There’s still a huge need for affordable housing and quality housing.”

Safapour said they don’t have pricing yet on Marlborough, but recognize this kind of building will not be “attainable” for everyone.

Their target buyers are empty nesters, who are over 50, have financial security, and know where they’ll be in a few years.

That’s one of the challenges with the way the Toronto condo market has been set up, he said. Typically buyers agree to purchase units before they are built, and then close and get a mortgage when buildings are completed four or five years down the road.

Developers usually need to pre-sell around 70 per cent of units to move forward. But it’s very hard to find, for example, first-time buyers who can commit to this. The model, which is unique to Canada and a few other places around the world, attracts investors and speculation, Safapour said.

Now that the market is facing its steepest correction since the 1990s, Safapour sees it as a pivotal moment to rethink what's being built.

The fact the term “end user” existed was kind of a red flag, he said. “Imagine going into a shoe store and saying, ‘I’m looking for an end user shoe, an end user car. Not an investment car.’”



Pouyan Safapour, president of Devron Developments, left, and Ian MacLeod, vice-president of Dorsay Development Corp., stand outside 1 Marlborough Avenue. Safapour says there can be savings in building larger units, in that they require, for example, fewer kitchens and washrooms.

Sophie Bouquillon/Toronto Star

Some other developers are also recognizing the importance of “livable” condos.

[Developer Gupta Group](#) recently tweaked plans for the Yonge City Square project, consolidating many bachelor and one-bedroom units, reducing the total unit count from 704 to 500.

Steve Gupta, founder and chairman of Gupta Group, said they have also added some amenities to increase the appeal for “people who are going to live there, call it home.” [The website](#) mentions an outdoor pool as well as golf simulators (the site is also next door to a large golf course).

Gupta told the Star there’s “no investor market,” blaming the federal ban on foreign buyers.

Michael Waters, CEO of Minto Group, said they are looking to rentals as a path forward for the near future. But he sees a shift at play for the future of the market.

The new units coming on the market now were sold four or more years ago “in a very different market situation, with a very different immigration policy, very different population growth profile,” he said.

“It’s going to take us a couple years at least to absorb that excess supply, and then what emerges after that in the condo market, will be very different than what we saw before,” he said.

He predicts more developers will move to a “less investor-oriented product” — more end users, smaller buildings, bigger suites — but he said it remains to be seen whether the market will support bigger units, which historically have been more expensive. The reason why so many small units were built in the first place was because people bought them.

“At the end of the day, what we’re trying to do is meet the market need,” Waters said.

Safapour, for one, believes there is a business case to be made for larger, higher quality condos because they require, for example, fewer kitchens, fewer washrooms, and less plumbing, leading to some savings.

But, as more developers pivot to more livable units, U of T’s Siemiatycki wonders what happens if and when the market starts to turn around again.

“Is this just a small moment, or is this a fundamental change?”



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