



» HOMES & CONDOS

A makeover for the Royal Connaught Hotel

Hamilton icon to become condos as 'tired' downtown prepares for rejuvenation

CAROLA VYHNAK
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Pierre Trudeau dined, danced and slept with her. So did Tom Jones, Bill Cosby and Louis Armstrong. And Liberace? Well, let's just say he graded her with his usual grandiosity.

But it's not just the rich and famous who were enchanted by Hamilton's glamorous old gal. Regular folks have fond memories too, from countless weddings, proms and Sunday dinners spent in her company.

Now the city's abuzz as the Royal Connaught Hotel opens again after a 10-year slumber. But when the famed building reawakens June 7 — two days after her 98th birthday — it will be as a condo development and future home to eager buyers.

The much-anticipated weekend sales launch of the Residences of Royal Connaught is expected to draw lineups of admirers waiting to witness the rebirth of the 13-storey, Edwardian-style building.

It's a makeover befitting a monarch, from the art deco lobby's original limestone floor glammed up with black granite inserts to the LED crystal chandeliers glittering from the 23-foot ceiling.

But the dazzle is about more than the Royal Connaught's renaissance. It's also a sign that Hamilton is ready to shine, according to Hamilton's manager of urban renewal, Glen Norton.

The revival of a historic building spanning an entire block in the heart of downtown is a symbol of the area's revitalization, he says, noting its impact will be both emotional and economic.

"Hamilton has been overlooked and I'm not sure why. But this is confirmation that we have turned that corner. Hamilton's moment as a destination city has arrived."

The project's timing is perfect as plans to remake adjacent Gore Park pick up steam, he adds. The "tired" four-block oasis in the commercial district is slated for a number of improvements, including new park



Rudi Spallacci, left, and Ted Valeri in the historic hotel's mezzanine overlooking the restored lobby.



The Royal Connaught's lobby, with the chandeliers that once graced the hotel's Crystal Ballroom.



With 10-foot ceilings and hardwood, the condo suites will blend classic and contemporary features.

space, pedestrian walkways and a patio-lined boulevard.

Project partners Rudi Spallacci and Ted Valeri say their research shows Hamilton is "ripe for a condo development."

"The community was pushing us forward, saying 'Yes, please — do something. We need this,'" says the president of Spallacci Group.

"So we're bringing the grand old

lady back."

The 122 luxury condos, ranging in size from 555 to 1,084 square feet and starting in the mid-\$200,000s, make up the first phase of the project, with occupancy expected in the spring of 2016. Construction of three adjoining residential towers will bring the total number of units to 700.

Restoring and updating the hotel's three-storey grand lobby with its or-

nate mouldings, glass staircase and plaster columns proved to be a "very expensive and tedious task," requiring the skills of experienced artisans, says Valeri, president of Valery Homes. But worth it, adds Spallacci, imagining the impact on residents.

"You arrive home and look up and see the architectural features and go, 'Whoa, this is where I live.' Then you enter the lobby and it's just as breathtaking," Spallacci adds.

In a nod to the hotel's legacy, the lobby and mezzanine are designed to become a social hub for residents, with a sleek coffee bar, baby grand piano, lounge areas and media bar with hookups for electronics. A seven-storey podium connecting the new towers will feature a fitness centre, party room and rooftop terrace. Ground-level shops will be added along the block near the reconstructed Gore Park.

Built by businessman Harry Frost, of Frost fencing fame, the Royal Connaught opened in 1916, playing host to a who's who of the political, sports and entertainment worlds — even gangster Al Capone.

Flamboyant pianist Liberace, who travelled with a purple cape-clad posse, "was one of the nicest guests we've ever had!" Judy Papalia, a front desk worker in the 1970s, recalls on Facebook.

On another occasion, movie star Ginger Rogers requested an employee's company while she drank tea and read the paper in her suite.

And Hamiltonian Grace Cowling comments that her late father, George Ireland, took great pride in announcing he was "having dinner at the 'otel.'"

Reminiscences of the much-loved

icon, which struggled financially before closing in 2004, inspired interior designer Lisa Boyer.

"It has so much history and means so much to so many people," says Boyer, who got her first look at the vacant building by flashlight.

"Just stepping inside, even with everything covered in dirt and layers of paint, you could see it was still such a beautiful space," she says. "But it needed a lot of love."

The new look, created by her company LB Design, is evocative of an era that oozed opulence and prestige. Playing up the original art deco style, Boyer chose high-contrast colours of dark ebony and cream punctuated by hits of chrome and brass, and dramatic lighting.

A gallery wall of photos showcases the hotel's history and the people who stayed, played and worked there.

The model suite, with its quartz, marble and lacquered finishes, is the picture of "contemporary elegance," Boyer says. Boasting 10-foot ceilings and antique hardwood, the light-filled luxury suites will blend classic and contemporary features to appeal to both young professionals and empty nesters, she adds.

The building was retrofitted and updated for the 21st century with LED lighting, energy-efficient plumbing and heating systems and the latest technology and materials — as much as possible within the limitations of a restoration, say the developers.

Both Valeri and Spallacci were born and raised in Hamilton; their family businesses together have more than a century of homebuilding experience. They're excited about the Royal Connaught's impact on the city's worn and aging centre.

"This project will be a catalyst to revitalize the downtown core," says Valeri.

The celebrated address is within easy reach of a thriving arts scene, and diverse dining, shopping and entertainment experiences. Condo residents will also be close to the existing GO station and a second one due for completion next year.

Hamilton-Burlington boasts the country's highest appreciation of residential real estate, with resale house values rising 7.5 per cent last year, according to a REMAX report.

Speaking, perhaps, for the lady herself, urban renewal manager Glen Norton notes: "We're feeling pretty good about ourselves right now."



> THE RESIDENCES OF ROYAL CONNAUGHT

Location: 112 King St. E., Hamilton
Developer: Valery Homes and Spallacci Group
Architect: KNY Architects
Suites: 122 units, from 555 sq. ft. to 1,084 sq. ft., in first phase 13-storey building. Prices start at mid-\$200,000s
Contact: 905-645-0450, info@royalconnaught.com
Sales launch: Sat., June 7, 1-4 p.m.; Sun., June 8, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Why wait?

Have the **Toronto Star** delivered to your door.
Call 416 367-4500 today

Outside the Greater Toronto Area, refer to your local phone book for the Toronto Star Zone Office nearest you.



BILD BUILDING A GREATER GTA Building Industry and Land Development Association **BILD New Home Profile**

REFINED SINGLE LEVEL CONDOMINIUM LIVING IN OAKVILLE'S GLEN ABBEY.
Sales Centre Located at:
2300 Upper Middle Rd., W. Oakville
www.thebalmoralcondo.com
905.827.6441

SUITE 215: BIRKSHIRE H - 1168 SQ.FT. OF LUXURY LIVING

- 9' and 10' Ceilings
- Granite Counter Tops
- Hardwood Flooring
- Stainless Steel Appliances

FOR A LIMITED TIME RECEIVE \$10,000 IN BONUS UPGRADES
*Visit Sales Centre for details.

PICKERING

BUILDER'S MORTGAGE AVAILABLE

BROCK ROAD, NORTH OF HWY. 401

**FREEHOLD TOWNS
SEMI-DETACHED DESIGNS
DETACHED DESIGNS**

**-Superior Quality and Upgraded Features
-Conservation and walk-out lots available**

NO BANK APPROVAL NECESSARY

905-428-3434

SALES CENTRE HOURS:
MON. - THURS.: 1PM - 8PM
SAT. & SUN.: 11AM - 6PM
FRI.: CLOSED

Lebovic BUILDING QUALITY HOMES FOR 58 YEARS
lebovichomes.com

BILD MEMBER