

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

New Digs

Designed for urban buyers

Eight mews-style houses, each up to 14 feet wide, are planned for Toronto's Little Italy neighbourhood

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From Friday's Globe and Mail Last updated on Thursday, Jul. 09, 2009 05:21PM EDT

Just a short walk from Kensington Market, on the edge of Toronto's Little Italy, construction is about to begin on a new row of eight dwellings in the style of traditional mews houses.

The townhouses are not the first to carry the imprint of interior design firm Cecconi Simone Inc.

But they do mark the first time Elaine Cecconi and Anna Simone have taken a stake as developers as well as designers. The two have teamed with Brad Netkin of Netkin Architect to form Blurredge Group with an aim of bringing contemporary infill houses to Toronto's urban pockets.

The three principals each have an equity stake and the backing of a silent investor in the project known as Lippincott Living.

Cecconi Simone has been creating interiors for more than 20 years. Since the mid-1990s, the firm has established a busy practice in designing loft conversions and condominiums. They've created model suites in countries as far away as Dubai.

Two years ago the Blurredge Group found the land at 56 Lippincott St. Plans were already in place for a row of eight townhouses but the partners quickly dismissed any idea of using that design.

"That would have been a disservice to the community," says Ms. Cecconi.

Mr. Netkin came up with a design that fits precisely into the site. The houses are no more than 14 feet wide. They take advantage of the sunny aspect to the south and occlude a three-storey apartment building to the north. A common walkway runs along the mews gardens.

"Row housing is really the urban fabric of Toronto," says Mr. Netkin.

The overall design is sensitive to the environment and the elements are cutting-edge, the designers say.

The mews give privacy to each terrace and also to the surrounding neighbours. A green wall runs along the length.

"It's a more sensitive way to integrate into the neighbourhood," says Ms. Cecconi.

The project is aimed at buyers who are very urban. They are uncommonly attuned to fashion, design and architecture.

"They're super-sensitive to it – they're very well read and well travelled," says Ms. Simone.

One might wonder why such stylish people would buy a house that comes with a layout, finishes and range of colour palettes selected by the designers. If they choose, home buyers can even purchase furniture and decor items chosen for the units, right down to the cutlery on the (optional) custom-stained dining table.

The team says creative types can still express their individuality through their furnishings.

“You personalize it with your own sensibility,” says Ms. Simone.

Ms. Cecconi adds that people are often so focused on career, family and other passions that they want the ease of moving into a well designed environment without having to think about it.

“They just want to bring a toothbrush and their clothes,” she says.

The pair have found through their years of experience working with the buyers of condos and lofts that even the fashion-oriented want guidance.

“Sometimes they're so busy that they just want to simplify their lives,” says Ms. Simone.

Mr. Netkin says the design, construction and ventilation of the houses will make building and energy consumption more efficient.

Solar shading devices take advantage of the southern exposure to keep heat in the building in the colder months. Precision panels are made in a plant, then erected on site. That modular way of building reduces waste and cuts down the construction time.

“Once the foundations are in, the building frame will be up within two weeks,” says Mr. Netkin.

The model, which has been built inside a showroom on the ground floor of the Cecconi Simone headquarters on Dundas Street West, allows prospective buyers to walk through a unit almost as they will be built.

Buyers typically have trouble looking at plans and imagining a finished house, say the designers.

“They haven't developed that vocabulary because architecture and design is a vocabulary in itself,” says Ms. Cecconi.

For example, it's hard for buyers to look at plans and perceive how the narrow houses on Lippincott will still feel generous in size because of the 10-foot high ceilings on the main floor. In the third-floor master bedroom, the roof cranks up so that the ceiling is 10 feet high at the window end.

“Heights become really important when spaces are smaller,” says Ms. Simone.

Construction is getting under way this summer with a move-in date slated for next spring.

Real-estate agent Paul Johnston of Right at Home Realty is representing the Blurredge Group on the sales side.

Meanwhile, the developers continue to search for new properties. They say the economic recession has not slowed their plans. They think there is a strong demand for modern, infill houses that suit the individual character of neighbourhoods such as Little Italy, Little India and Little Portugal.

“There's a critical shortage of new housing in downtown Toronto,” says Mr. Netkin. “We're not here to do mass building. We're here to create a niche.”

