

ELDER LIVING

Retired, but hooked on the big city

Seniors are rejecting the traditional rural retreat and opting instead for the charms of urban living

BY KATHERINE LAIDLAW

A spacious, richly furnished one-bedroom, two-bathroom suite with a large living room, kitchen area and sizable windows overlooking Avenue Road in the heart of trendy Yorkville.

It may sound like the ritzy digs of a young urban professional working his/her way up the corporate ladder. In fact, the home belongs to Stella and Louis Ziff, two seniors who moved to the big city from a small town.

The Ziffs, and many others like them, represent a new trend: aging baby-boomers and retirees who are well off and who reject the "lazy acres" stereotype and opt for luxury housing close to the entertainment opportunities and professional services of a city. In response, developers are building high-end projects specifically for that demographic — to sell or rent — in urban settings.

Last October, Ms. Ziff, who was 89 at the time, knew she needed knee surgery. She and her husband were long-time residents of Fort Erie, near Niagara Falls. Although they were both active in the small community, they had no family members left in town and were looking to gain access to the health care they needed and lead what they considered a simpler lifestyle. So they picked up and relocated to downtown Toronto, moving into Hazelton Place, a residence geared to retirees at 111 Avenue Rd.

"It's a simpler life [in the city]," Ms. Ziff says. "For health reasons, age reasons and family reasons, I thought it was time to consider the move."

She stresses the convenience of living in the heart of Toronto. "We were in a very rural area along the parkway. You couldn't run out and pick up a quart of milk. [Now] we're just up the street from the Royal Ontario Museum, and Queen's Park is just down the street. It's there if you want to take advantage of it."

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Stella Ziff, 90

Retirement rental suites usually don't come cheap. Those in Hazelton Place cost between \$2,900 and \$6,000 monthly, for instance. But there is a demand, and developers are building condominium and rental buildings in urban areas that cater to seniors like the Ziffs, who want a more active lifestyle and a wider range of health services.

These developers have discarded the antiquated idea of seniors growing older in front of their televisions, says Neil Prashad, president of Origin Retirement Communities Inc.

"I think what we're looking at now is retirees who want to do everything from art therapy to music to socialize," Mr. Prashad says. "What we're saying is that the days of retirement living being centred around bingo at 2 — those days are gone."

John Andrews, an assistant professor at Queen's University's school of urban and regional planning, says some seniors are moving into the city because they're looking for a more culturally vibrant lifestyle.

"My gut feeling is there is a disproportionate number of seniors, more than any other demographic, who are relocating from rural areas to more urban areas," he says.

"Things like art galleries and museums and restaurants, not to mention shopping — they may find those aren't available in rural areas. It's the proximity to those kinds of things that they now have time to do and are able to do."

Prof. Andrews says easy access is a given. "You want to be in an area that's higher density, where things are [within] walking distance."

He cites a couple of reasons why these types of residences have high price tags: On the one hand, it would be hard for a developer to make money

from luxury properties without charging above-average rent or higher prices.

"[And] of course, there are many seniors who are fairly affluent — much more than before."

Exercise and food are the two most sought-after amenities in the rapidly growing industry of resort-style living for seniors, according to Mr. Prashad. Today's seniors are active, social and interested in staying that way.

These aren't just any condos: They're luxury buildings that offer seniors a comfortable living space, a built-in community atmosphere and any other imaginable amenity that might make retired life more convenient.

Tapestry at Village Gate West Concert Properties Ltd. is one such development. Set to open early this year, the 11-story building is located at 5133 Dundas St. West, in the high-end Islington neighbourhood. It will contain 168 studio, junior one-bedroom, one-bedroom and two-bedroom suites that run from \$2,980 to \$6,500 a month.

Cathy Wallbank, the project's general manager, is quick to point out that that represents much more than monthly rent. Tapestry is offering what she calls "a total lifestyle," including weekly housekeeping services, transportation, laundry, fitness classes, a swimming pool, a creative arts centre and even a golf simulator and spa.

Kerry Wilson, Concert's development manager, says the site in Toronto's west end seemed like the obvious choice. It's an affluent area with a tight-knit community feel.

But Mr. Wilson has his eye on the future, as well. "This is the leading edge of the baby-boomers, [who have] higher standards. They've been accustomed to more of a catered lifestyle," he says.

Jim Ritchie, senior vice-president of sales and marketing for Tridel, said "empty-nesters" have made up about 25 per cent of his company's total condominium sales since 2000. People over the age of 60 make up 10 per cent.

Although Tridel offers retirement rental suites for older seniors, the company's luxury condominium units are targeted at the younger senior demographic, Mr. Ritchie explains. The Huntington, one of Tridel's newest developments going up at 1900 Bayview Ave. in the well-established Lawrence Park area, is a case in point. The \$210-million project is aimed at aging Lawrence Park residents who want to stay in the neighbourhood and live comfortably.

"[Buyers] come out of very large homes in the neighbourhood," he says. "[The units] start at \$1-million and go to \$6-million."

The building will include many of the amenities other Tridel developments have, including a pool, a whirlpool, an elaborate party room and exercise facilities.

"If they have more disposable income and more time on their hands, downtown Toronto is the place to be," he says of the targeted buyer.

Tapestry and the Huntington are just two examples of "resort-style" projects and luxury condo buildings that are springing up all over the city. Chartwell's Village Park project is being built at 282 St. Clair Ave. West and Claridge's Amica at Bayview condominiums are nearing completion at Bayview and Sheppard avenues.

And as suburban areas become more urban and rural areas become part of the suburban sprawl, developers outside the city are also capitalizing on this market shift.

Mr. Prashad is currently developing Origin Evergreen, a retirement community in Mississauga with both rental and condo suites.

He says 60 to 70 per cent of his company's marketing for the project is targeted at the adult children of his potential residents because often times they're the ones looking out for mom and dad.

"Even though seniors themselves may not be all on the Web, we know that baby-boom daughters ... and sons are all over the net. You have to be very Web-savvy."

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Right, Tapestry at Village Gate West, under construction. Above, Hazelton Place in busy Yorkville. DARC Y MCGOVERN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



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