A new living room (and bar) in the new Mirvish Village

Book Bar's energy makes you feel like you are coming home

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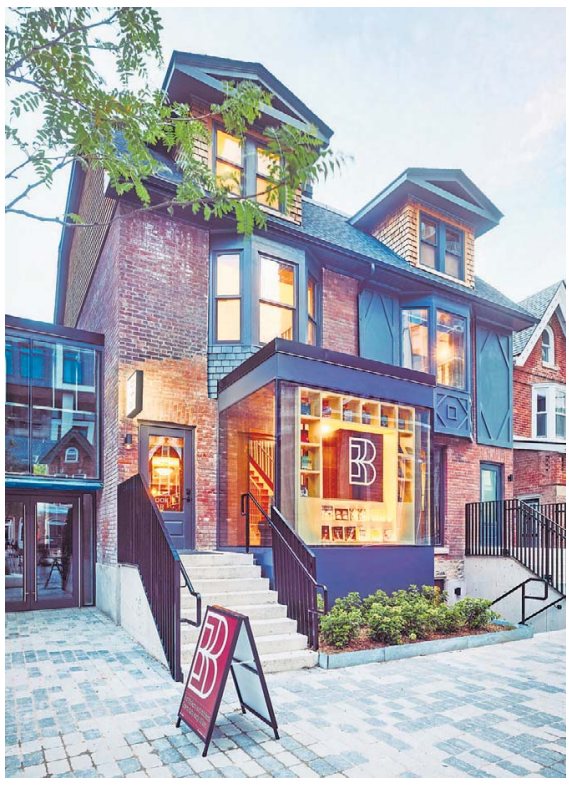
Book Bar in Toronto's Mirvish Village occupies two of the Victorian houses of the former Artist's Colony that were saved from redevelopment. Matthew Davis of DesignAgency was hired to design Book Bar as a place that's purposeful and intentional. PHOTOS BY MAYA VISNYEI



Despite the few drops of rain, curious Torontonians were exploring the new Mirvish Village.

And it is new. Right now, metal barricades block off some properties, orange traffic cones prevent tripping on uneven pavement, and Tom Freeman, co-owner of Book Bar, points to Pizzeria Badiali as the only other comrade-in-arms to get its doors open this year in what was, once, the kitschiest corner of Toronto. It's good to finally see life return, I say to Mr. Freeman. I've been watching the site since "Honest Ed" Mirvish's big, garish building came down in 2017 and 2018.

"Are you one of the owners?" says Laura Nashman, flutist, as she approaches Mr. Freeman. "Sorry to disturb," she continues. "I just wanted to say that this is the most positive experience, a place I want to be, my emotional architecture is ringing with happiness. How did you get this done so beautifully where everything is right? You feel welcome, the place is trendy but not too much."

And while Mirvish's sprawling, anything-but-trendy, carnivallike atmosphere is only a memory at Markham and Bloor streets, a circus of problems and lawsuits meant numerous delays in allowing happiness and beauty back onto the 1.8-hectare site. "We landed on Mirvish [Village] probably two-and-a-half years ago," says Mr. Freeman, "and we waited probably a year-and-a-half until we actually got possession."

"The silver lining is, what [the delay] did do is it gave us a longer runway to be open with as much as we could with systems and processes," says Mr. Freeman's business partner, Robin Storfer. "We had employee handbooks that got written, we had structures that got written, we had values that got done."

Today, with Peterson Group as sole developer for Mirvish Village, the ship seems to have been righted. Honest Ed's Park by PFS Studio (with Henriquez Partners Architects) officially opened with a ribbon-cutting on July 17, coming soon notices for retail businesses are proudly pasted in windows, and folks are finally moving into the 890 rental apartment units.

And that energy can be felt when one opens the doors to Book Bar for the first time: it's like coming home. The business occupies two of the Victorian houses of the former Artist's Colony – one of them home of David Mirvish Art Gallery – that were saved and restored as part of the development.

"The idea of being able to come to a place where you can settle in, enjoy a good book, enjoy a great glass of whatever your choice is, is a really special thing," says Mr. Freeman, who has worked in the contract furnishings business for much of his life. Interestingly, it was through FH Hospitality Group, where Mr. Freeman is partner, that he met Matthew Davis of DesignAgency, who was charged with bringing Book Bar to life.

"It embraces the idea of a home, and it's not a generic home," says Mr. Davis. "We're not trying to create a space specifically to attract everyone, but we do know if we design a space that's purposeful and intentional people will really enjoy it; there're enough spaces that are too washover and too vanilla."

No vanilla here. Only herringbone floors underfoot, backlit stained-glass windows, warm woods, comfy furniture, arched openings that recall Victorian doorways, rich and tactile ceramics, and … is that tapestry?

"It is a wallpaper," Mr. Davis says with a chuckle. "But I wanted to create something [that is] almost like you're walking into an oil painting … a subtle nod, a texture, a warmth, it's almost like being wrapped in a blanket."

And then there's that massive bar (an odd sight in a book store, but this isn't just a book store) and a smaller bar upstairs with a top of beautiful green marble (and a fireplace surround to match).

"And that's how we talked about it," says Ms. Storfer. "[The television show] *Cheers*, right, you come in and people know you and they know what you drink and they know what books you like, so they can suggest."

The size of the downstairs bar – which almost interrupts the corridor to the back room – is intentional, says Mr. Davis: "That hospitality element bifurcating the retail element was to really emphasize that fact that this is a hospitality space; you're welcome just to come and buy a book, but this is a space that is really about social interaction."

And to ensure patrons do get social, there's a 6 p.m. rule in place: all laptops get closed. "Video calls, we really pooh-pooh in here," Mr. Freeman says with a laugh.

Staff, including bartenders, are all booklovers, say Ms. Storfer and Mr. Freeman, so even a solo visit will turn into a social one. And, upstairs, there's the Green Room for events – there have already been singles nights and author talks – and another area where book clubs meet.

On a random Wednesday afternoon, Book Bar was packed; as Victor Hugo once said, it seems to be "an idea whose time has come." Why? Is Toronto that bookish? Are people looking for tactility in a digital world? Or do books represent something reassuring and friendly in an unsure and unfriendly world?

Probably all of those things, but there's an architectural reason as well. Just as a diner can punch above its 2000 square feet and create community with its open kitchen and cozy booths, so too can this new 'living room' in Mirvish Village.

A living room that also pours a nice glass of merlot.

Housing: Critic says federal government lacking any overarching policy framework

FROM H1

Other insiders note that while the new subsidized units are welcome and needed, they're still playing second fiddle to federal programs aimed at boosting private sector development, in this case market rentals. Private firms are developing eight sites, including the Kilmer Group and Tricon, Osmington Gerofsky and Dream Impact Trust. Osmington Gerofsky is co-owned by Osmington Inc., a private commercial real estate and investment company controlled by David Thomson. The Thomson family holding company, Woodbridge Co. Ltd., owns The Globe and Mail. Build Canada Homes CEO Ana Bailao, a former deputy mayor, previously ran Dream's affordable housing team.

"There's $1.8-billion [in federal funding] for the private sector and $310-million for the non-profit sector," says Andrea Adams, executive director of St. Clare's, a non-profit that runs nine buildings with 960 units, and has signed on to operate one of the projects in this latest announcement, People's Place, a co-op being developed by the Parkdale Land Trust. "That kind of tells a story right there."

She adds that the funding for non-profits tends to be razor thin, with nothing left over to reinvest in new projects. "The breakdown is $164,000 per unit for the non-profit sector and $500,000 per unit for the private sector. That also doesn't make sense."

University of Toronto housing scholar Carolyn Whitzman observes that this latest announcement, and previous deals unveiled by the Carney government, feel like expedient one-offs, and lack any kind of overarching policy framework, given that the $115-billion National Housing Strategy, the Trudeau government's marquis program, will expire in 2028.

"I think this is akin to that level of ambition, but it will be a test of endurance," says Mr. Saad. "We need 50 more of these announcements. Every indication is suggesting that we'll get there. But we as a country, you know, the affordable housing crisis is a nation building project, and I think the prime minister sees it that way. I think it fits into his nation-building frame.

Mr. Hambly, for his part, is hoping for something more definitive.

"A [new] national housing strategy in my opinion is needed. It provides some assurance of a framework which we in the non-profit housing world can [use to] guide our decision-making in the future."