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Sales Centre as Prophecy

How Cecconi Simone create a cohesive vision of condominium amenity spaces from presentation centres to finished product.

By David Lasker



— In 2008, I snagged a memorable quote from James Ritchie, senior VP of sales and marketing at Tridel while interviewing him for a story on condo developers. He bristled when I asked how many units were in their latest tower. “How would you like to live in a unit?” he retorted emphatically. “You wouldn’t. You live in a home!”

At the time, his comment struck me as a glib, kneejerk remark. But I soon realized that it was profound, with lucrative implications for designers working in the condo space, because a unit is generic; a home has an individual identity. On a mega-scale, the developer bestows an identity on a condominium tower through the architecture, and on a more intimate and human scale, through the interior design.

In this realm, Toronto-based interior design firm Cecconi Simone (CS) reigns supreme with few, if any, as prolific. A recent tour of several condos boasting public spaces and amenity areas by CS put me in mind of Sir Christopher Wren, the British architect who rebuilt 52 churches, including St. Paul’s Cathedral, in the City of London after the Great Fire of 1666. CS, however, has been even more productive. “We are one of the few firms, if not the only firm, to have completed about 100 condo projects in the GTA alone,” says partner and co-founder Anna Simone.

Our outing dashed my long-held assumption that the condo presentation centre is eye candy to seduce prospective buyers, truth-in-advertising be damned. CS centres, at least, faithfully represent what the finished building will look like. If “brand” can be defined as “a promise of performance,” CS presentation centres certainly perform.

One of the most daring presentation centres was CS’s Five Condos Sales Centre, a winner in the *Canadian Interiors* 2011 Best of Canada Awards. One judge commented, “It’s the only condo sales centre I’ve

seen that’s rough and gritty.” The condo was proposed for 5 St. Joseph Street, which for decades defined the western edge of Toronto’s Gay Village. As I wrote in that year’s Awards issue, “The premises saw incarnations as a popular bar, strip club, disco and gym. The sales centre creates a vocabulary that the target market can connect and relate to. Cecconi Simone enhanced the raw state of the post-and-beam warehouse-style base building by not only ignoring imperfections but augmenting them.”

What fun as a sales centre, I thought to myself at the time, but there’s no way the finished product will fulfill the sales centre’s promise; it’s just too over the top. That Cecconi Simone, what a tease! I was wrong. Not only does the as-built condo incorporate the sales centre’s visual vocabulary, it elaborates on it. For example in the pool-table room, the rack for the pool cues is suspended on hangers that recall, to bon vivants of a certain age, the meat hooks from which carcasses dangled outside the Mine Shaft (1976-85), that famously raunchy gay bar and sex club in lower Manhattan’s Meatpacking District where patrons had to run a gauntlet of butchered steers to reach the entrance.

Besides expressing the sales centre’s visual theme, Five condo epitomizes CS’s work in other ways. First, wherever you turn your head, every element in the vista greeting your eyes rigorously reinforces the condo’s brand; nothing is generic and much, therefore, is custom-designed and made. Second (a corollary of the first), there’s no such thing as a pre-packaged, cookie-cutter CS “look” because each project differs from others in the firm’s oeuvre.

For instance, the antipode to Five’s brooding darkness is the white-washed Edition Richmond presentation centre, another Best of Canada winner. As I wrote in the 2013 Awards issue, its “white

Photography by Shia Gill



previous spread The design focus for MOD Developments' 55 Charles Street condominiums (a.k.a 55C) is a minimal palette of natural materials such as walnut. Why walnut? "It's not a dark wood; it's not a light wood and it's not a redwood. It's got that beautiful balance of brown. It's earthy. There's an understated elegance about it. It has a strength that we wanted to bring to the sales centre," says Simone. above Highlights of the design for Menkes Developments' Harbour Plaza Residences include tufted walls built from mineral composite panels and plastered joints that match the room's tufted furniture, and eight-foot tall tree-shaped light features made of fibreglass trunks and branches with translucent fabric canopy shades. opposite At Five, newly added timber interior columns, polished concrete floors and sliding industrial barn doors (embellished with rivets) were charred or otherwise aged to attain a heavily textured patina. Walls were wrapped in custom wallpaper with blurred depictions of old surfaces covered in graffiti and torn posters.



floors, walls, doors, ceilings and recycled found objects lend an ethereal, metaphysical quality."

Our itinerary included the 55C sales centre for a condo tower to rise at 55 Charles St. East. Here the palette of rich woods and dusty golds, the diminutive Japanese garden with small sculptural rocks reposing on a bed of raked white pebbles, and the profusion of walnut screens generate a feeling of Zen-like serenity. "The garden's composition and how one manoeuvres around it creates a sense of space, balance and harmony," says Simone.

The centre provides answers to buyers' frequently asked questions: "My space is small. I may have 600 square feet or less, so when I want to entertain a large group of people, is there space that I can break out into? Will there be a place where I can relax and be amongst my neighbours? Is there an area where I could lounge and relax by a pool?"

Once upon a time, sales centres were places for information gathering. They were chock-a-block with floor plans and sample boards of floor and wall coverings and fabric swatches. They didn't, says Simone, "try to give the prospective purchaser an indication of what their future holds and how amenity areas might appear." Developer clients didn't need CS's help devising sample boards. CS was there to take a contrary approach. "We've done thousands of sales centres in the 37 years that we've been in business. It was no longer just about gaining information on the project. Our mandate was to convey a feeling of mood and a sense of quality to the prospective purchaser. We developed an environment that gave the prospective purchaser a snapshot of what their future might entail at an emotional level."

With CS, condo amenity spaces have undergone a similar evolution. Originally, these were an afterthought. "We have some surplus space, let's put them in the basement," she said of the typical developer mindset. "Nobody would ever go to a party room there. There was no

sense of light, no sense of anything. Now, many amenity spaces are architectural statements. These are some of the best spaces in the city. Unfortunately, only residents get to enjoy them."

Indeed, nary a five-star hotel, private club or plutocrat's residence boasts amenities as opulent as those at One Bloor Condominium, the 75-storey tower on the southeast corner of Yonge and Bloor designed by Hariri Pontarini Architects for developer Great Gulf Homes. CS created 27,000 square feet of resort-inspired amenities on the sixth and seventh floors, including four separate plunge pools for each sex: Roman bath-inspired frigidarium, tepidarium and caldarium (cold, tepid and hot) and a Jacuzzi-like pool with multiple jets. Then there's the lap pool that extends, in warm weather, to the outdoor terrace with 19,000 square feet of outdoor amenity space, including a tall garden folly/sun shelter designed by Janet Rosenberg & Studio. Impressive as these stats are, what inspires oohs and ahs is how the interior design cleverly yet subtly riffs on the façade's swooping organic elements. In the ground-floor elevator corridor, for instance, the angled walls' forced perspective adds a frisson of what's-going-on-here excitement.

The scale of the room looks bigger than it is thanks to the wall covering of layered organic forms, a skein of Swiss cheese-like holes, custom-made by Eventscape, that relate to the rounded sculpted balcony profiles ascending the building's façade and Ron Arad's monumental pair of twisting, twirling 88-foot-tall stainless-steel tube sculptures facing the sidewalk.

Eventscape also takes a star turn at the amenity floor of Harbour Place Residences at 80-100 Harbour St., where abstracted eight-foot tall Corian "trees" reposing under witty giant lampshades add a touch of nature to the indoor area. Elsewhere, biscuit-tufted white walls resembling a huge upholstered couch back are made of mineral composite panels. These material choices ensure durability, meaning lucky residents will enjoy these enviable amenity spaces for years to come. ■