

# REAL ESTATE

ONTARIO EDITION ■ FRIDAY, JUNE 25, 2021 ■ GLOBEANDMAIL.COM



## MUCH MORE THAN IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

A fenced-in dust bowl of an empty lot is transformed into sorely needed but thoughtfully designed public housing ■ H4

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This three-storey building at 230 Talbot St. in St. Thomas, Ont., which is about two hours southwest of Toronto, was designed by Hamilton-based Thier + Curran Architects. On the second and third floors it has 28 affordable housing units for seniors. TOM ARBAN



Hamilton-based Thier + Curran Architects designed this three-storey brick building at 230 Talbot St. in St. Thomas, Ont. TOM ARBAN

# How to transform an empty lot into thoughtfully designed public housing

Firm tasked with designing three-storey brick building to host Ontario city's social services department, 28 affordable housing units

DAVE LeBLANC ARCHITOURIST



ST. THOMAS, ONT.

“Well, I have a few little problems here,” the woman says a millisecond after learning the man in front of her designed the building she moved into 15 months ago. After a group chuckle, Bill Curran of Hamilton’s Thier + Curran Architects puts on his game face. The rest straighten up and wear expressions of concern.

“I don’t know why you would make a cupboard that opens like this,” she says, demonstrating, “and then you bang your head; that door, I think, is backwards ... and why would you put the light switch out here instead of in the bathroom?”

“That’s great feedback, I appreciate it, we’re always trying to make things better,” Mr. Curran says enthusiastically. He then outlines budgetary issues the multiunit building faced as well as some of the finer points of the Ontario Building Code.

“But I don’t have any major complaints,” she finishes, proudly showing our little tour group the washer-dryer combo in the closet and the big window in her living room.

The city of St. Thomas, Ont., about two hours southwest of Toronto as the crow flies, has plenty of other reasons to be proud. Where a fenced-in parking lot once stood at the edge of downtown, there is now a long, handsome, three-storey brick building housing the city’s social services department on the ground floor and 28 affordable housing units for seniors on floors two and three.

“This was literally a dust bowl down here, it was a mess,” city manager Wendell Graves says simply.

“So this is the first step in redeveloping this area,” Mr. Curran says.

“You want to have a nice gateway building, and affordable housing isn’t typically what you think of ... so there was an interest in making it look like more than it might be.”

By articulating the façade with



The affordable housing units in the building were given a clean, hotel-like look. INDUSTRIOUS PHOTOGRAPHY

“This was literally a dust bowl down here, it was a mess.”

WENDELL GRAVES ST. THOMAS CITY MANAGER

alternating red and buff brick – there is a great deal of yellow brick in St. Thomas – tracing some elements in wood, peppering the composition with jaunty geometric windows and adding a steel “cornice” and canopy, the rhythm of the 19th streetscape has been preserved also. By adding office workers, who’ll animate the sidewalk out front by day, and residents, who’ll keep their eyes (and feet) on the street in the evenings, an underutilized part of the city now sings.

And the city built 230 Talbot St. for a song. A large portion of St. Thomas-Elgin’s publicly owned community housing stock, Mr. Graves says, is made up of “dated ... little brick bungalows.” These postwar-era, single-family homes need constant attention, from simple yard work to larger concerns such as plumbing and roof shingles. Since no one would ever build affordable housing in that form today, the city began a liquidation program.

“So for every home we sell, we build two units, so that financed this building ... without impact on the taxpayer,” Mr. Graves explains.

But, despite the tight budget, there are elements to this building that go well beyond utilitarian. Even as a visitor approaches the entrance to the municipal of-

ices, there is the pleasure of viewing a large reproduction of St. Thomas-born artist Clark McDougall’s *Ann’s Snack Bar* from 1964. Inside the large lobby, one is calmed by a water feature and impressed by a community room that can be sectioned off for evening use (the community room also has access to a “pocket garden” outside, Mr. Curran points out). The social services offices are cheered by ample natural light, bold purple and orange walls, rich wooden doors and yellow-and-grey carpet tile. City staff enjoy a private patio for lunch breaks.

While small, the residential lobby feels condo-like, with lovely ceramic tile adorning the walls, and the wide hallways to the units give a clean, hotel-like impression. “It’s a modest building but that’s not a bad thing,” Mr. Curran says. “Affordable housing will never be showy, luxury condos, but that’s okay, it’s just a different role.”

It helps, too, that St. Thomas has spent a great deal of money on streetscape improvements. New sidewalks and pavers are populated with planter-boxes that feature sections of railway track, and benches that sport steel wheels from old train cars. And why not? St. Thomas, “The Railway City,” was once home to

eight different railways, with more than 100 trains passing through each day, and, right smack in the middle of the city was the Canada Southern Station, the largest of 31 stations built in the 1870s by the Canada Southern Railway Co.

While the railways are long gone, much of the impressive architecture from those boom years remains. But, like most places that have seen large industry leave – another blow was the closure of the massive Ford plant in 2011 – there are streetscape gaps to be filled and vacancies to be tenanted. With an affordable-housing waiting list of 800 in St. Thomas-Elgin, Mr. Graves is also overseeing the conversion of the former Transit Hub building into 16 “micro apartments” (300 sq. ft.) for people transitioning from street life.

“It’s top of the list for our council to engage in this stuff and get it done,” Mr. Graves says.

“There are a lot of revolutionary ideas here,” Mr. Curran says. “We don’t think that these smart ideas are happening because of our sense that the only good things happening in affordable housing are in Toronto.”

“If St. Thomas can make a building like this work – self-funded – why aren’t more municipalities making it a priority?”