

THE ARCHITOURIST

Hamilton, show us how it's done

A local architect has turned a rusting row of abandoned industrial buildings into a lesson in adaptive reuse



'Cool Urban Towns' at Nos. 7, 9 and 11 Brock St. in Hamilton.

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Architect Bill Curran has thrown down the gauntlet in his native Hamilton ... hard.

"It's pretty extreme, architecturally, for the neighbourhood," he says of the trio of adaptively reused, freehold townhouses he's just finished in the North End. "And I hope it's like a splash of cold water in the face of some people, aesthetically, because in Toronto this would be relatively anonymous or innocuous, but here, there's nothing like it."

Really? But Hamilton has so many small, semi-abandoned industrial buildings just

aching to be converted. And so many creative types have traded in the expensive T-Dot for the budget-friendly Hammer, it's been jokingly called "Toronto's Brooklyn" for at least a decade; you'd think ingenious infill would be all over that city's notorious one-way streets.

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"They're not happening here, we're not getting the cool stuff," he counters, grimly. "There's a lot of really poor, crappy stuff.

"I can show you a half a dozen around here that are just heartbreaking, missed opportunities."

Consider Mr. Curran's architectural gauntlet an opportunity snatched and then massaged into a powerful message. Dubbed simply "Cool Urban Towns" at Nos. 7, 9 and 11 Brock St. – a stone's throw from the waterfront and the HMCS Haida – the handsome project was an unheated, red-brick storage building containing skids of drinking glasses, tents and folding tables when Mr. Curran picked it up for \$320,000 in 2014.



The original building, top, and the 'Mr. White' townhouse after the renovations.

TOP: BILL CURRAN; BOTTOM: INDUSTRIOUS PHOTOGRAPHY

The "total dog" of a building had begun life in 1910 as Jobborn Manufacturing Co., a

little machine shop that made tools, weigh-scales and assorted bits and bobs (some for the Ford Motor Co.) but, by the 1930s, had branched into warehousing booze bound for the United States during Prohibition. To wit, there remain two safes and a "barrel ramp" in No. 11, the largest of the townhomes at 1825 square feet. By the 1960s, the little building was bristling with more than a hundred phone lines and a phalanx of doggedly determined salesman in its new role as a boiler room.



The building held a machine shop in 1910.

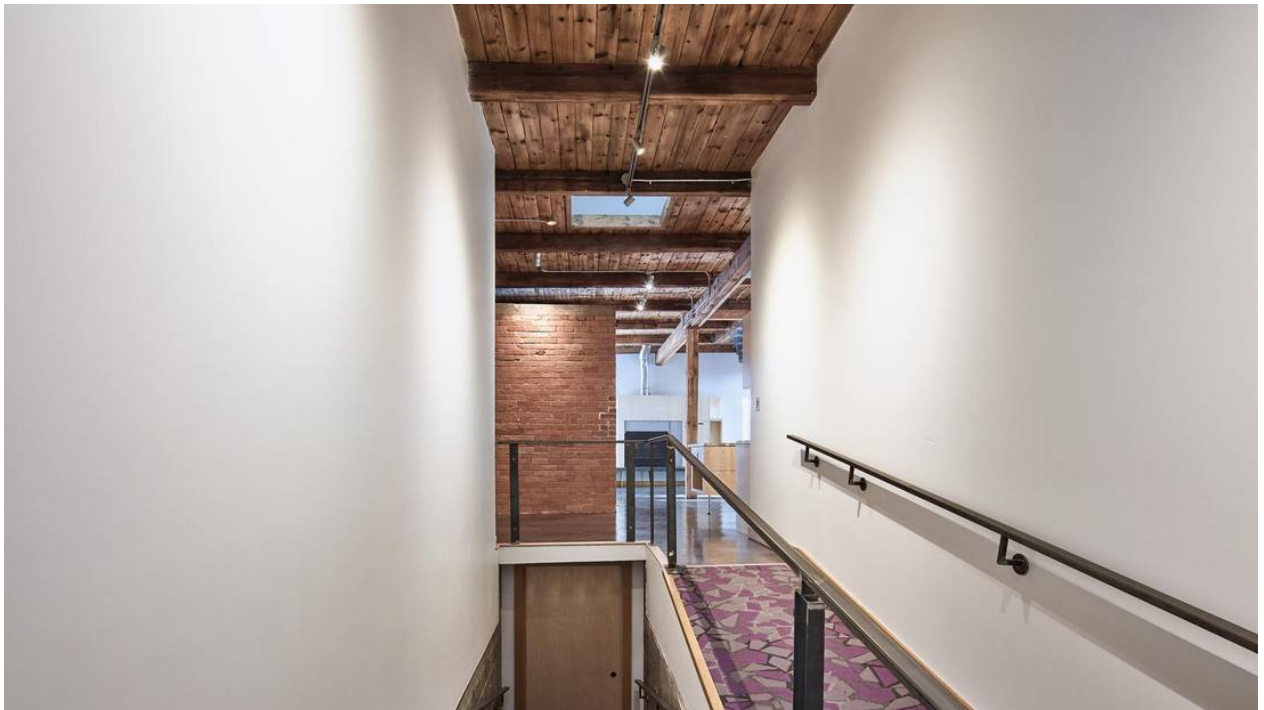
BILL CURRAN

And speaking of dogs, the building's notorious past, combined with its hardscrabble charm, flipped a switch inside the affable fiftysomething architect's head: "When I was looking for a narrative or some inspiration to tell me what to do with the building ... I was walking around thinking 'This feels like the building from the movie Reservoir Dogs' – it's got that run-down brick and timber warehouse-y feel, and it's got different levels and stuff."

So, meet "Mr. Orange," "Mr. Pink," and "Mr. White." Fans of the Quentin Tarantino movie will remember mob boss Joe Cabot doling out colourful monikers to the ragtag group of thieves – to which Mr. Pink, played by Steve Buscemi, protests and suggests Mr. Purple for himself – so Mr. Curran, a fan himself, used these to inform his design decisions for each unit.

In each of the three, "periscopes" allow natural light to rain down onto French limestone or oak floors; essentially roof pop-ups, these work better than skylights – and there are plenty of those also – in that they trap sunlight in a box (thereby becoming light fixtures) and also act as heat chimneys to eject stale summer air. Each high-ceilinged unit also features some very sturdy, very thick Douglas fir to hold things up: "Nobody builds a crappy little building out of Douglas fir," Mr. Curran says with a laugh. "Our engineer sent a chunk of the wood away just to be sure."

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A barrel ramp in 'Mr. White' leads to a finished basement.

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Two of the units feature street-facing windows with a gaggle of glass block, a material Mr. Curran has been fascinated with since childhood. "My doctor's office had it, and I used to sit on the back of the bench and I would stare – it was on a main street – and cars would go by and you'd see 12 Chevys, then 20 green Pontiacs in multi-images." All units also feature full, custom kitchens tricked out with high-end appliances and, in the living rooms, big bold fireplaces with either concrete hearths or, in Mr. White, folded metal that speak Steeltown's language.





The kitchens in 'Mr. Pink,' 'top,' and 'Mr. Orange.'

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Since Mr. White is played by the very robust Harvey Keitel, Mr. White, the-unit at No. 11, sports a big sturdy staircase that reveals a small writer's loft or yoga studio and a roof deck. And it, like the others, has colour-appropriate finishes such as white ash cabinets, Sydney marble countertops and a kitchen faucet hose sheathed in white. Mr. Curran admits that his fastidious nature meant getting that hose, plus the pink and orange hoses for the two other units, cost him more than a thousand dollars.

And about that attention to detail: It's evident in the artist-designed light fixtures, Philippe Starck toilets, doorknobs by architect George Ranalli and stripped and striped front doors by Hamilton metal artist David Hind. That's because, while the project went through Mr. Curran's office, Their + Curran Architects, it's really a personal, passion project.



'Mr. White' features a raw metal staircase leading up to a writer's loft.

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"[Architects] have no retirement fund," he says simply. "My pension plan is this

"It's my baby."

Perhaps that's why he's mulling over yet another gauntlet: "I've been thinking about putting something in the documents that they can't change anything without my permission for 25 years or however long I'm going to be around," he finishes with a laugh.

Mr. Orange is listed at \$699,777; the middle unit, Mr. Pink, at \$699,000; and Mr. White at \$999,111. For more information, visit tcarch.ca/7911brockstreet.php
