

THE ARCHITOURIST

An old macaroni factory fills the commercial missing middle

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TORONTO

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 9 MINUTES AGO

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Former macaroni factory built in 1933 in Toronto's Junction neighbourhood at 2738 Dundas St. W.

MICHAEL VAN LEUR/MICHAEL VAN LEUR

Drive along Parkdale's King Street West from about Gwynne Avenue to Roncesvalles Avenue in Toronto and, using both hands, you'll run out of fingers if counting the three- and four-storey rental apartment buildings. And I don't mean the postwar buildings, but rather the more ornate examples built in the first decades of the 20th century that resemble New York brownstones. With the current housing crisis Toronto is facing, it is buildings such as these – the missing middle to use a popular term – that we must not only preserve but emulate when it comes to the construction of new housing in older parts of the city.

But housing the populace on Toronto's leafy and supremely walkable streets is only one half of the equation. There is another missing middle: small, flexible buildings that can house small businesses and startups. And, once again, part of the answer may come from the city's pre-existing stock of early-20th-century, small brick-and-beam warehouses – many of which are hiding in plain sight on those same high streets.

One, for instance, a stolid and solid, 2½-storey, red brick building at 2738 Dundas St. W. in the Junction neighbourhood, began life as a small factory/warehouse in 1933 and was purchased in 2021 by the owners of AKA New Media for their headquarters.

While a little tired and spotted with graffiti, it had a rich, even zesty history: designed by architect Benjamin Swartz (who also designed Kiever Shul at 25 Bellevue Ave., which opened six years earlier) for the Toronto Macaroni Company, it was the site of the first canning of (Mamma) Bravo spaghetti sauce. One of the company's owners, Domenico Viggiani, you see, took his wife's recipe (Rose Viggiani) and, likely, marketed one of the first canned Italian sauces in the city (they canned her meatballs too – but this is a story about architecture).

“We've protected it all through the construction,” says building co-owner Matthew Myers, pointing to a small piece of yellowed paper glued to one of the building's thick wooden posts on the main floor; under the heading “Lancia and Empire Brands” and “Invincible Quality Macaroni” are illustrations of the myriad types of noodle the company produced. The six-digit phone number, Junction 4247, dates it to before 1958. “We thought it was just magic.”

There's new magic here as well. “Aside from the HVAC system and insulating the walls [from the inside], and the windows and roof, there's this cross bracing,” says architect Maggie Bennedsen, an associate at Kohn Shnier Architects. Behind Ms. Bennedsen and Mr. Myers is a big steel W that locks into the existing 1933 frame. “The second that you touch a building like this and want to make a structural intervention in it, you must bring it up to modern seismic code.”



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The steel brace stands near the new washroom and kitchen core, which features gender-neutral bathrooms and barrier-free access. Ms. Bennedsen has placed the main stairs and the elevator in this area also. To access these, a new, wide main entrance was created on the Watkinson Avenue façade where a loading bay once existed – it's hard to miss with its wall of canary-yellow tile and painted-to-match, folded metal canopy – as the original entrance on Dundas Street was deemed too dark and narrow.

“We love that gesture,” says Mr. Myers. “We wanted the building to be what it was, but this ... really just [signalled] that something dramatic has changed, but it's not overstated.”

On the 3,200-square-foot lower level (which is so far untenanted), after a sooty, sunken boiler room was removed and the foundation was fortified to last another century, a beautiful brick wall was uncovered. Every third brick is stamped “Cooksville Patented 1926.” A quick search by this author turned up The Cooksville Brickyard: Cooksville’s Gold at heritagemississauga.com; the Ontario National Brick Company purchased a 200-acre farm at Dundas Street and Mavis Road in 1912 and released its first shipment by July, 1913. “At its height, the brickyard could produce 300,000 bricks every 10 hours,” writes Heritage Mississauga.

On the top floor of the Macaroni Factory – that’s the name Mr. Myers and co-owner Assadour Kirijian have given the building – one really gets a sense of how endlessly flexible these old brick-and-beam buildings can be, as AKA New Media has created numerous spaces and places to work independently, collaboratively, or formally and informally. There are even curtained “demo rooms” where staff members can demonstrate software over Zoom calls.

And, as a way of engaging with Dundas Street, Ms. Bennedsen has placed large, operable windows on both the east and west façades; so, when one tires of gazing at the rounded-top, century-old windows or terracotta medallions directly across the street (an impossibility for the true architecture buff), one can contemplate the park to the west or, to the east, the bend of Dundas as it links to Dupont Street.

“It’s fabulous, isn’t it?” asks Mr. Myers. It is, and it’s partly because it feels rather like one is standing on the bridge of a ship. And if that’s not a commanding enough asphalt-ocean view, a generous roof deck is available. However, says Mr. Myers, should a Montessori school rent here, the roof could be filled with tiny (and very loud) pirates.

And there’s the rub: after creating something this special, Mr. Myers is understandably picky about his future tenants. “We are affecting the neighbourhood. ... Nobody needs another cannabis shop [or] a currency exchange,” he says with a laugh. “We see so much happening with all of these condos going up that there must be somebody who feels like they want to do something interesting.”

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