

Condo Living

P SECTION > TORONTO STAR < SATURDAY, JUNE 14, 2003 ★ thestar.com



DAVID COOPER PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

Developer Bob Mitchell goes over floorplans with Star food editor Jennifer Bain, while her daughter Lucy, 6, explores the upper-level area that will soon become her bedroom.

Recipe for a new home

Food editor worked with developer to design her condo

Suite in The Glebe church conversion 'deal of a lifetime'

JENNIFER BAIN
TORONTO STAR

What do you get when you combine a visionary developer who only converts obsolete Toronto buildings, an unused portion of a spectacular Riverdale church, and a single mom who happens to be the food editor of this newspaper?

You get unit 304 in The Glebe — and you get it with indestructible granite countertops.

Let's start by stressing this isn't your typical condo story.

It doesn't involve parading through fancy showrooms, selecting a pre-determined layout, sitting mute while it's built, and raging when the move-in date is 18 months later than first promised.

But it is the story of what happens when you make a leap of faith and buy into a creative process.

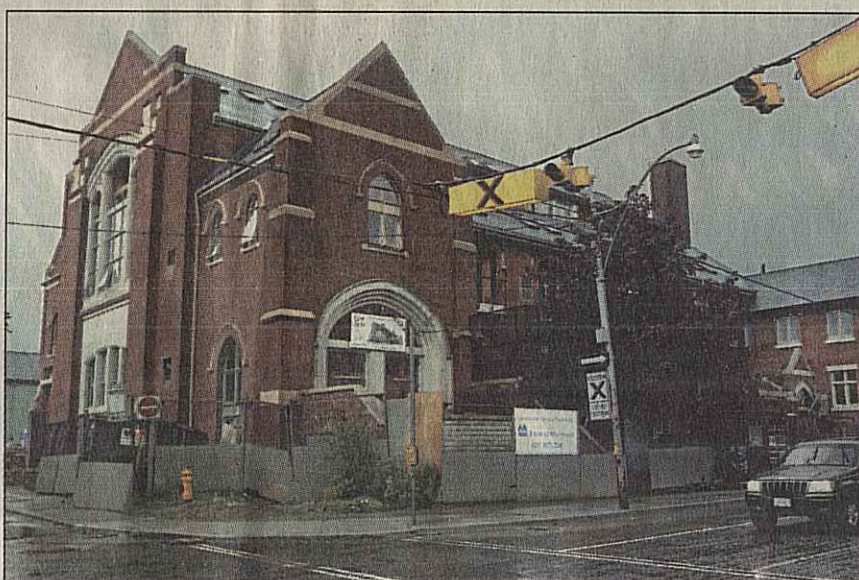
Flash back to the late 1990s. I'm freelancing dozens of condo stories to this paper and interview Bob Mitchell of Mitchell & Associates for a piece on loft-style condos. Six months later, I



Jennifer Bain's daughter, Lucy, shows off her mom's choice of granite countertops for her new Riverdale condo, one of 32 units in a former church that's being converted into suites, right.

profile him for a larger story. I'm renting, but daydreaming about a landlord-free life. Condos aren't my thing, but as a self-employed single mom, a house is beyond my reach.

I ask Mitchell to alert me if he creates anything in my price range. Considering I can't fathom paying more than \$150,000 for a home, and his multi-level places usually start at \$250,000, it's an idle request. But since his spaces sell (and resell) almost exclusively by word-of-mouth, it's worth a shot.



Mitchell's call comes less than six months later. He's converting part of Riverdale Presbyterian Church into 32 units, spread over three floors with ceiling heights of up to 17 feet. Most of the spots in The Glebe — at 662 Pape Ave., one block south of the Danforth — are \$250,000 to \$360,000, but five are pre-selling for under \$200,000.

Ah, the agony of choice. I'm not concerned about nabbing the best price per square foot — I need a liveable home. There are four ground-floor spots for

\$150,000 to \$170,000, and they're each a spacious 906 to 1,047 square feet. But they don't come with underground parking, and their tiny walk-out spaces (big enough for a barbecue and a chair) are on the edge of a Green P parking lot.

Can I swing option number five — a slip of a space (784 square feet over a main and mezzanine level) that's a whopping \$199,900? It anchors the northwest corner of the top floor, has parking and a 150-square-foot deck with a view of the CN Tower. But it

seems barely big enough for me and my then three-year-old daughter, Lucy — until I measure our current apartment and realize it's 750 square feet.

Isn't there a real estate rule about picking the smallest place in a good neighbourhood, rather than the biggest place in a bad neighbourhood? I opt for a third-floor future with six neighbours who've got huge \$290,000 to \$360,000 units. I'll also be down the hall from Mitchell's mother, who'll be in a similar, small southwest corner unit.

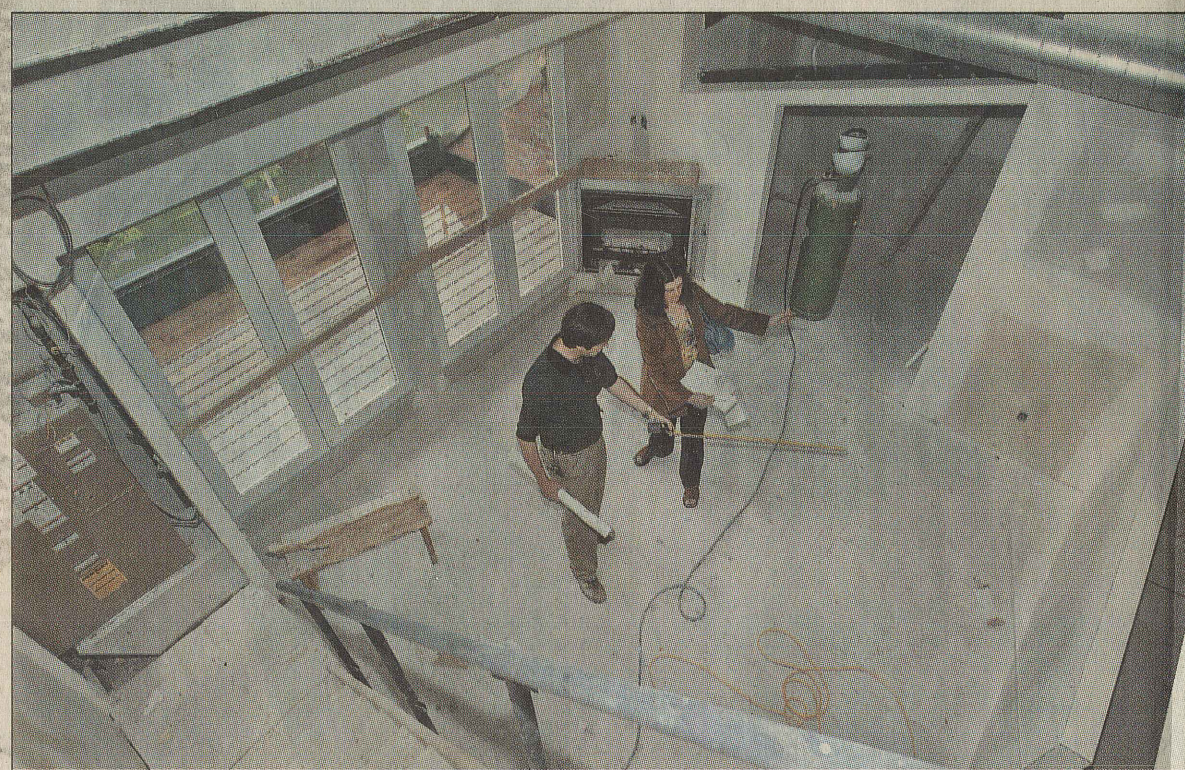
There's no moral struggle with The Glebe since we're not displacing artists or tenants. The church, designed by architect J. Wilson Gray and built in 1912, expanded in 1920 with its congregation. But when the numbers shrunk, the church began renting out the addition to film and television shoots (among them, apparently, *La Femme Nikita* and *The Nutty Professor*).

Then Mitchell came along and promised to retrofit the 1920 addition into homes, while the church lives on in its original 1912 space.

So on March 1, 2000, with the help of my parents, I slapped down a \$5,000 deposit, but not before weeping at the enormity of this commitment. I didn't want to leave my Harbord St. and Ossington Ave. 'hood, but west-end condos didn't appeal. Besides, the move would put Lucy in the district for top-notch Frankland Community School and, eventually, Riverdale Collegiate.

> Please see **Recipe, P14**

Me and My Condo



DAVID COOPER PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR
The living room features a gas fireplace, a low wall separating it from the kitchen and doors leading to a 150-square-foot deck with a view of the CN Tower. The small area at the back could become a study or guest room.

Furnishing condo allows a fresh start

► **Recipe** From P1

The deal was sealed after the mandatory 10-day cooling-off period. A condo lawyer helped with the fine print, ensuring I got a plywood locker with my parking spot and a \$1,000 cap on "hidden" costs.

The Glebe documents list a March 31, 2002 move-in date, but by that date, all that's happened is I've paid another \$15,000 to complete the deposit.

This is where the leap of faith comes in. Friends and family urge me to be skeptical, get second opinions, get more details on soundproof-

ing, agonize over the details.

But most of my condo documents go unread. I know we can have pets (who wants to live in a place that shuns animals?), that conversions aren't covered by the Ontario New Home Warranty Program, and that our monthly condo fees will be about \$150 since we have minimal common space and no pool, fitness centre or concierge to care for.

I've chosen to trust Mitchell. He created Toronto's first legal residential loft/condo conversion — 10 units in an obsolete felt factory at 41 Shanly St. in Dovercourt Village — in 1982. He has since converted buildings on Sumach St., Markham St., Hepbourne St., Poplar Plains Rd., Claremont St., Richmond St. W. and Logan Ave.

With a bachelor's degree in applied science and engineering, and a masters of science in urban and regional planning, Mitchell & Associates (a company of one) handles design, marketing, sales and construction of all his conversions — subcontracting out to structural engineers and architects only what he can't personally do, but retaining the final say on everything.

But what's really impressive is that while interviewing Mitchell in 1999 in Future Bakery on Queen St. W.,

hometown) from Hong Kong in 1997.

The plan is to start fresh in The Glebe. We'll take our toys, television and CDs — and give away everything else. We'll buy *real* beds instead of futons. We'll get a *real* kitchen table instead of a drafting table concealed by a piece of fabric. We'll chuck our mismatched dishes and allow nothing ugly into our midst.

I force myself to visit EQ3, Oni One and Caban to ogle sleek but pricey stuff.

I sneak into IKEA (the shame), learn I need to "think cubic" to live well in close quarters — and discover a killer couch. Actually the three-piece "Drömminge seating unit" is more like a lounge than a conventional sofa. Let the design-savvy neighbours scoff — this is a couch to build a new life around.

Suddenly, it's 2003 and reality strikes. Mitchell schedules a Jan. 17 meeting to discuss layout. "Welcome home," he enthuses in unit 304, stepping around piles of boards, boxes of nails and a space heater.

The walls, mezzanine floor and stairs are roughed in, but you can see into the neighbouring units. There are deliberately exposed steel beams and three skylights.

The building gods have smiled upon this small space. What was supposed to be just 784 square feet has spilled over into

"lost space" above an emergency stairwell separating the condo and church. There's a small extra room on the main floor and a larger one upstairs.

Mitchell has long been reluctant to carve up the open-concept "master bedroom" for fear of reducing the resale value if a couple wants to move in. Now he doesn't have to. But still, Lucy and I demand the privacy of walls separating the main room from a smaller room and bathroom.

"I follow a combination of what the space wants to be and what the owner wants," allows Mitchell, who has soothed my parental worries by hiking the height of the mezzanine wall from 42 to 54 inches. He's a parent, but rarely builds for people with kids.

We've got two men and a retired couple as immediate neighbours. Lucy may just be the only kid in The Glebe, but there's talk of an 11-year-old boy somewhere in the building.

► Please see **Bain, P15**

What can go wrong when your developer's mom will be living in the building?

his dentist Kenneth Montague stopped by to chat. Montague lives in Mitchell's Richmond St. project and, it turns out, is an excellent dentist (just ask Lucy) who pipes HMV-sponsored CDs into his waiting room.

With friends like this to vouch for Mitchell, who needs background checks? Besides, what can go wrong when your developer's mom is going to be living in the building?

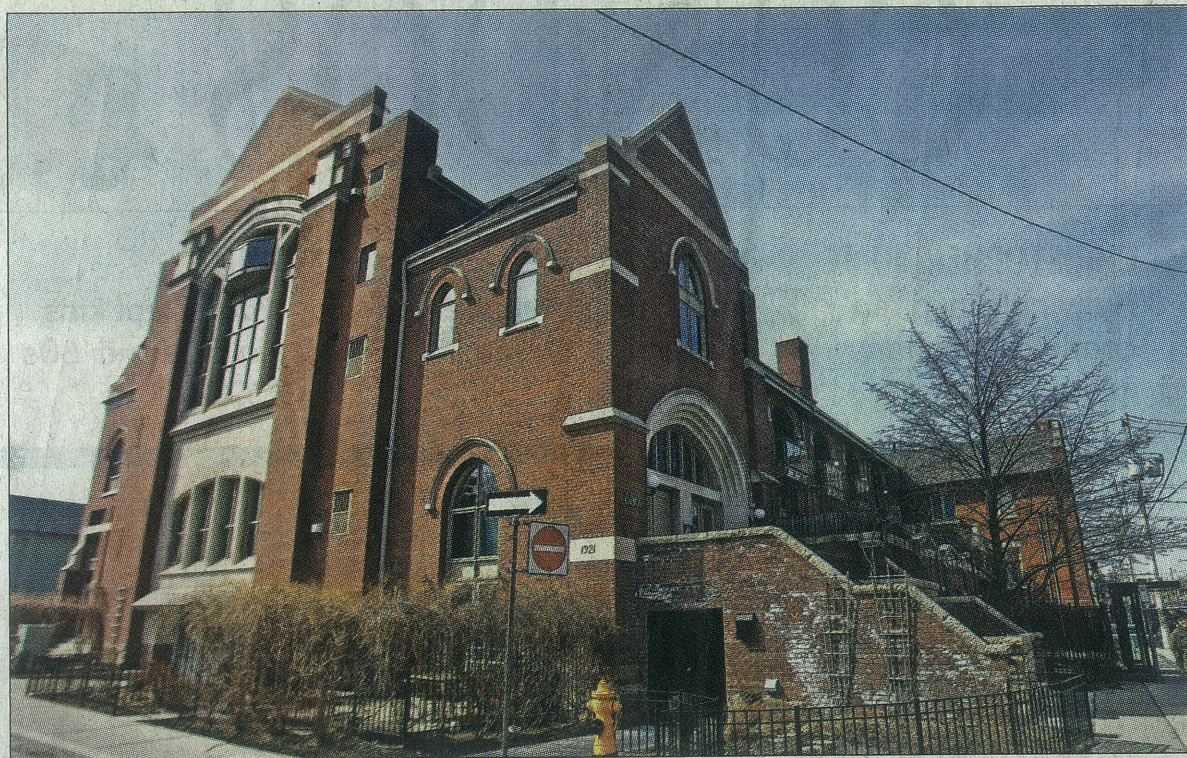
So 2000, 2001 and 2003 slip by. I put Lucy on the waiting list for Frankland day care and try to save money. I check in on Mitchell via his Web site, www.mitchell-lofts.com. My mom sends me clippings about getting a rebate for buying energy-efficient appliances and maximizing small spaces.

I fret about living among such design-conscious people. Like a true Sagittarian, I'm recklessly indifferent to personal space. I'm just as comfortable in a hotel room as I am in my apartment. All my furniture is hand-me-downs gathered since moving back to Toronto (my



Jennifer Bain checks out the skylight in her tiny bedroom, which measures 10 square feet and has a sloped roof.

CONDOS > WHAT'S ON > STREETSCAPES >



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

Built out of Riverdale Presbyterian Church, the Glebe Lofts on Pape Ave. near Danforth link past and present well.

A tale of two Danforths

Celebrated street loses its pedestrian-savvy identity east of Pape



CHRISTOPHER HUME

It is the best of Toronto; it is the worst of Toronto. Danforth Ave. is one of those streets that reminds us of how much the city has to offer. But it's also one of those streets that does enormous damage to the city. Starting at Broadview Ave., Danforth is a fully cosmopolitan artery, busy but still full of pedestrians and human-scale development. Indeed, most of the buildings that line Danforth are two and three

storeys tall. In fact, they could — maybe should — be taller. This, of course, is Greektown, a neighbourhood so successful in its own way that it verges on being touristic. But so far it hasn't crossed over that line; the locals are still there.

Then somewhere around Pape Ave., Danforth changes. By the time it hits Jones Ave., the change is complete. The vitality and urbanity disappear and instead we find a more desolate precinct more suited to the needs of cars than people. Interestingly, the number of traffic lanes goes from one in each direction west of Pape to two east of Pape.

Generally speaking, the quality of the architecture declines the farther east one travels. The buildings here are newer and as so often seems the case, considerably less interesting. So it's not surprising that the most interesting stretches of Danforth are the oldest. They date roughly from 1906 to 1920, a time when every bank announced its presence by building a beau-

arts landmark on the biggest corner available. A number are still standing, and remain as impressive as ever.

Until several decades ago, this was an area served by streetcars; now the subway, which has had remarkably little effect on things, has replaced them. East of Jones, Danforth still feels remote and unconnected, even though it's anything but. One might expect that at some point, the street would become an ideal candidate for intensification, not necessarily high-rise, but perhaps four to six storeys.

It's also worth pointing out that there's a celebrated IGA at Pape and Danforth. It's famous as the supermarket that has no parking lot, but which delivers. Though it's easy to forget, there was a time when stores delivered. That meant we didn't have to drive to shop; as obvious as this may seem, it's good to be reminded at a time when every merchant feels business can't succeed without parking for all. chume@thestar.ca

CONDO CRITIC

THE GLEBE LOFTS: Sitting a block south of Danforth on the west side of the street, this condo project at 660 Pape Ave. has been fitted into a handsome red-brick church.

The original, Riverdale Presbyterian Church, was opened 1912 and expanded nine years later.

The spirit feels very English; it is imposing without being magnificent.

There's something warm and homey about the building, which may be why it was a good candidate for a residential conversion.

The main feature of the three-part structure, the large-windowed church at the south end of the site, was clearly designed to dominate the neighbourhood.

Although a house of God, it was also tied to the city, joined seamlessly to the street and everything around it.

In this sense, it also manages to connect past and present, English countryside and east end Toronto. The north side of the building even still serves as a church.

In its own quiet way, it is a wonderful example of the power of architecture to serve temporal and spiritual needs without compromising either.

GRADE: A

WHAT DO YOU THINK? Email us at condocritic@thestar.ca