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With a staircase
worthy of
Frank & Ava.
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Canderel's Riz Dhanji, top, beside Aura; resident Derrick Lai at Yonge and Gerrard.

Stuart Hamilton has spent most of his adult life nestled comfortably at the intersection of College and Yonge streets in downtown Toronto and is continually impressed with how the neighbourhood has transformed.

"When I moved in we had a completely straightforward view of the hospitals [along University Avenue]," recalls Mr. Hamilton, who lives with his sister. "Now you can barely see them because all of these big high-rises have gone up."

Mr. Hamilton moved to Toronto from Regina in 1948 and first meandered the district while working as an usher at the Eaton Auditorium atop College Park. When a sixth-floor unit became available in the adjoining apartment building, the young man moved in, piano in tow. He spent the next 23 years working out of a studio in the building's recreation room and carved out an impressive career as a pianist, vocal coach and host of CBC Radio's *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*.

As he recalls, the College Park area was a good place to live back in the day because, as he puts it, there wasn't much action "and they were anxious to get anybody, even me with a piano and singers." But time changes everything, and he couldn't be happier.

"It's now quite an experience to live here," says the 84-year-old, who still teaches masterclasses at University of Toronto's opera school. "When I first moved in, the building had ceased being Eaton's and it wasn't very busy. There were some shops but few patronized them. Now you can't move!"

He's not kidding. The neighbourhood surrounding College Park has come into its own since the glory days of the Eaton Auditorium. It began reinventing itself after the famed Eaton's College Street store closed its doors in the 1970s and shoppers ventured south to the Eaton Centre. By the 1980s, the new College Park had offices, boutiques, a 10-storey rental apartment building, the courthouse and a subway concourse — with the original Art Deco architecture remaining intact. By the early 2000s, another redesign wooed such big-name stores as Winners and Metro. In 2003, the famous music hall got a facelift and became The Carlu, a swanky event venue. Sobeys arrived in 2011, and the following year Loblaws grocery store opened to great fanfare in the nearby Maple Leaf Gardens building.

Today, with Canderel's 78-storey Aura condominium — Canada's tallest — newly topped off and 600 units occupied, the

area teems with students, young professionals and spunky seniors like Mr. Hamilton seeking something special. Even pop star Madonna dropped by, leading a highly publicized workout class at Aura's Hard Candy Fitness (Aura residents get free membership). At 42,000 sq. ft., it's the high-end gym's first North American location and says a lot for the 'hood's new-found cachet.

According to developer Riz Dhanji, vice-president of sales and marketing, Canderel first took notice of the area in 2001 when it acquired College Park's parking lot and started planning a two-tower, 1,100-unit project at Bay and Gerrard streets. As he recalls, the area needed some help.

"It was very derelict," he says. "There wasn't much activity. It was a little bit rundown. Yonge Street wasn't moving much. We wanted to create something great. [Property management firm] GWL Realty Advisors wanted to create exposure to its College Park retail and bring some big businesses and residential in there."

Before long, it became what Mr. Dhanji calls "a mini underground city" connecting Canderel's Residences of College Park to College Park itself and the officer tower at 777 Bay St. When word got out that Canderel has purchased another parking lot at Yonge and Gerrard and was intending to build Canada's tallest residential tower, investors scrambled and 700 of the 985 units sold within a month. Canderel also added 180,000 sq. ft. of retail, including Marshall's and Bed Bath & Beyond as well as a trendy wine bar and restaurants.

Today, many Aura dwellers are well-paid professionals working at MaRS Discovery District, the downtown hospitals and in the financial district. There's also a growing number of students and empty nesters drawn to the area for its upbeat vibe.

Derrick Lai is one of them. The architect grew up in Markham but yearned to live downtown once he finished university. He tried out Yonge and Eglinton, Fort York and Liberty Village before realizing he wanted to be in the heart of the action — and to never have to ride a packed subway again. He figured that Aura would be a good investment property given its proximity to the Eaton Centre, the subway, the hospitals and campus life. The singleton is now happily ensconced in a 27th-floor, 700-sq.-ft. one-bedroom-plus-den ("On a clear day I can see all the way to Mississauga," he declares) and has no plans to move.

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overnight success

With its then-dingy
ambience, the College
Park area went ignored
for many years. Though
it's taken a decade, it
seems that suddenly
there are compelling
reasons to revisit it

By Suzanne Wintrob

“ We wanted to create something great.... College Park has now become a destination to live in. With all the hospitals and universities, people want to live close by. It’s a walking neighbourhood.
— *Riz Dhanji*, vice-president, Canderel

COMING FULL CIRCLE

The once-popular College Park block saw some rough times, but is re-emerging

COLLEGE

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“When I lived in CityPlace [near Fort York] I felt like I lived on an island,” says Mr. Lai, 31. “... Here there are more things to do, more people, more energy. It’s more lively.”

Naturally, the rejuvenation has been good for business. According to

Mark Garner, executive director and chief staff officer of the Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area, the “high street retail on Yonge” is evolving considerably given Aura’s presence and the announcement that Saks Fifth Avenue and Nordstrom will soon set up shop in the Eaton Centre. Even the Delta Chelsea — Canada’s largest hotel, with 1,590 guest rooms — rebranded as

the Eaton Chelsea Toronto last summer and is undergoing a major renovation to keep pace with the area’s revitalization.

“It ripples across the entire bucket,” says Mr. Garner. “... Over time, as these brands change and the different demographic is in the area, you’ll start seeing the high street change. It’s only a matter of time. We at the BIA will be very focused on finding brands that are needed in the area and we’ll start working with the other building owners and developers in the area to help that evolution of brand and that experience on Yonge Street.”

Canderel’s next venture is a 66-storey tower called YC Condos, set to soar one block north at Yonge and Grenville streets and draw hundreds of additional faces to the ‘hood. The luxury building boasts five floors of penthouses with suites starting at more than \$1-million, as well as 17,400 sq. ft. of amenity

space including a \$5-million infinity pool on the 66th floor that’s one of the highest in the western hemisphere.

The developer has also pledged \$3-million under the City of Toronto’s Section 37 for the redevelopment of a three-acre park within the College Park boundaries of College, Gerrard, Bay and Yonge. Scheduled for completion in Fall 2015, the aptly named College Park will once again have benches, a boardwalk, an event pavilion, a skating rink, a water feature and some much-needed greenery.

“[College Park] has now become a destination to live in,” Mr. Dhanji says. “We’re getting some amazing rental values and retail values that are incredibly high. With all the hospitals and universities, people want to live close by. It’s a walking neighbourhood. Canderel is proud that we’ve built up this neighbourhood from nothing to what it is today.”

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YC Condos will have 66 storeys.