

A long-reviled place gets a trendy new face

Extreme makeover to transform city's premier mental health centre and Queen West

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Print Edition 03/10/06 Page A10

For most of 156 years it has been mocked and reviled as the place where they keep the crazy people.

Now, in a bold attempt to banish that stigma, Toronto's premier hospital for the treatment of mental illness and addiction plans to transform itself into the next hot Queen West neighbourhood.

Construction begins Thursday on a \$382-million plan to chop up the sprawling seven-hectare property lining the south side of Queen Street West and home to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, into eight new city blocks.

They're building a village; one that planners say will erase physical barriers separating patients from society, and the stigma afflicting mental illness and addiction, too. They predict its success will be twofold: better health care for patients and a revitalized community for everyone.

Print Edition - Section Front

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But the ghosts of the Provincial Lunatic Asylum, as the institution was called when it opened in 1850, may be difficult to evict. Some local business owners, frustrated with the unique clientele of their biggest neighbour, say it will be tough to attract investors.

John Williams, a general contractor who has worked in the area for years, put it like this: "If you say, 'Queen and Ossington,' the automatic thought is, 'Oh, by the nuthouse.' It doesn't matter where you are in Toronto, everybody knows it."

The CAMH facility, a looming concrete structure surrounded by lush green grass, picnic benches and old deciduous trees, has more than 600 beds for in-patients, employs close to 300 physicians and is overseen jointly by the Health Ministry, which provides most of its budget, and the Attorney-General's Office.

The new design, the result of years of community consultation and research on other community-based mental health facilities in Europe, was inspired by urban thinker Jane Jacobs, who argued that "eyes on the street" create safe, functional neighbourhoods.

In the plan, Fennings Street, Brookfield Street, Ossington Avenue and Givins Street, which all now stop at Queen Street, will extend south through the hospital property. A brand new street will bisect the property, running east to west. Adelaide Street will also be lengthened westward.

About half of the new buildings in the new grid will be CAMH-related, including apartments for in-patients and hospital facilities. The rest will look like any other neighbourhood, and include retail stores, coffee shops and homes.

"This is about fitting into Queen Street West, with a hub here," said Dr. Paul Garfinkel during a recent tour of the facility. "This is where we integrate our functions, but in smallish, plain buildings. But they'll be functional. They'll be helping people recover."

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Dr. Garfinkel winds through narrow hallways and cramped rooms where in-patients sleep on plastic mattresses. He pauses inside a brightly lit room that is about twice the size of the others and furnished with a homey desk and lamp and a single bed with a red duvet. On Thursday, construction begins on three buildings that will each contain 24 similar rooms: phase one of the neighbourhood plan.

"I have to say, we're really proud of this," the bespectacled psychiatrist said with a smile.

Each of the project's other four phases must be approved individually by the province, which will cover about two-thirds of the cost. If they're all approved, the entire project should be complete by 2020.

While it is expected that the apartments will be done in about a year, it will take about four years to complete the first non-CAMH-related buildings. Planners are mulling over the types of businesses they want to attract. (A liquor store would be a bad idea, Dr. Garfinkel said.)

Most shop owners along the north side of Queen Street West, across from the CAMH site, say they welcome the plan. They hope it will breathe life into the street, which is lined with art galleries, cafés and independent boutiques. But in sharp contrast to portions of Queen West to the east and west of it, there are also several boarded up windows, vacant stores and For Sale signs.

Some predict the new retail space will be tough to fill.

Joe Domingues owns a two-storey corner building at Queen and Brookfield Streets, which was recently renovated and reopened last month as Wicked, a swingers club. The building has been home to drinking establishments for decades.

He estimates that 60 to 70 per cent of potential renters turn away when they realize a mental institution sits across the street.

"[The patients] walk back and forth in front, sometimes they scream," he says. "If the hospital was not there, it would be much, much better for the street."

Gallery owner Bernie MacNab, 47, scoured Toronto before settling on a second-floor gallery space near the corner of Queen and Ossington. He's happy with his choice, but since Solé Gallery opened a month ago, his daily routine includes shooing away CAMH patients dozing on his stoop. "They just move along quietly, but it's a little bit of a problem," he said.

Jay Comentan, who serves lattes and muffins at Barako Coffee, said his patrons are periodically disturbed by scenes on the street, or people wandering in, asking for change. But for the most part, it's business as usual, he said. "If you treat them nice, they'll treat you nice. It's like any neighbourhood; sometimes you have to be careful," he said.

Frank Lewinberg, a registered professional planner and architect whose company, Urban Strategies Inc., was master planner on the CAMH project, is confident those worries will be trumped by the lucrative allure of Queen Street West.

"There's no question they will come, because they want to be on Queen Street," he said, pointing out the recent residential buildings popping up in the area.

"Just think about it. On the corner of Shaw and Queen is the Candy Factory. On the south side of Adelaide are a whole lot of townhouses. None of them are having any problem selling their units. Who cares what side of Shaw you're on?"