



Daniels partners with charity to create assisted-living apartment in Regent Park

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Over the past two years Daniels Corp. has been working on something special for one of its condominium towers in the third phase of Regent Park's redevelopment: a massive nine-bedroom apartment designed to meet the assisted-living needs of the charity L'Arche, which provides housing for people with intellectual disabilities.

According to Raphael Arens, executive director of L'Arche Toronto, condominiums can be an ideal location for the integration of vulnerable communities, but the key is getting in the door with a developer before a building's plans are already finished and ready for pre-sale.

"The challenge of developers is every level looks the same: we didn't want to have six apartments, we want one apartment with separate rooms for members as well those who support them and live with them," Mr. Arens said.

L'Arche, a network of communities for the intellectually disabled, was founded by the late philosopher and theologian Jean Vanier and now operates in 38 countries. Thirty of L'Arche's 154 communities are in Canada.

The L'Arche community of Greater Vancouver also has a building plan underway – an ambitious \$30-million facility in Burnaby, B.C., that would provide housing for people with and without disabilities.



In Toronto, L'Arche houses 21 members, who live full-time with several assistants, in four detached houses in residential neighbourhoods in east Toronto. With Daniels, L'Arche Toronto is hoping to find homes for five members and three live-in staff in the upcoming Artworks Tower at 130 River St..

It's not just a matter of buying several apartments and connecting them. The ability to carve out common spaces, to make the best use of the 3,500 square feet in the floorplan and to keep that financially viable is what requires pre-planning. "This can't be done midway through construction," said Jake Cohen, vice-president of project implementation at Daniels.

The project is a first for Daniels, and in a way it springs from Mr. Cohen's own work at making Daniels buildings more accessible.

Mr. Cohen started in a customer service role with Daniels and often fielded calls from new residents asking if there was anything that could be done to an apartment to make a little more manageable for residents with mobility issues.

"I spent three or four years collecting a lot of these phone calls and it struck me as this is a real issue – they are struggling to live in these places," Mr. Cohen said. "So, I created a checklist, and I thought, wouldn't it be easier to incorporate some of these features into our designs up front?"

Some of the issues are almost head-slappers: the company was designing balconies with a huge step to get out to them. Not only was that a tripping hazard but it made the balconies totally inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair. The answer was to design a lower threshold. Other things, such as a more accessible height for receptacles and switches, better clearance and turning areas in bathrooms, wider doorways and corridors, even door-openers in common areas went beyond industry standards.

Mr. Arens heard Mr. Cohen talk about some of Daniels' designs at a conference to connect developmental service providers with home-builders. "After the meeting, I just said to him: 'I need to talk to you about an idea.'" After that first meeting, Mr. Cohen and Daniels met with L'Arche again and again, spending months to flesh out the concept and refine the idea.

Hot real estate markets don't just create barriers for millennials looking to get on the property ladder; non-profits and other housing providers struggle to find affordable land or housing for their unique needs, too. A single-floor design has become an important goal for L'Arche, as some of its aging members are finding stairs in their existing houses a difficulty. Initially, L'Arche hoped to build a ranch bungalow, but land prices in Toronto are prohibitive, and that's when they started looking at multi-family residences.

As Mr. Cohen said, this will be a market-rate condo (which in downtown Toronto will mean close to \$1,000 a square foot), and L'Arche hopes to raise \$3.8-million to purchase and furnish the space. It's not cheap, but there are a lot of advantages too.

"The key for Raphael and Daniels was more integration and not segregation," Mr. Cohen said. "Those in the L'Arche unit will have access to all the building amenities – that was really a big sell for L'Arche."

In addition to the opportunity for more social interaction, the building comes pre-equipped with security and there's no need to worry about furnaces or any other mechanical issues a detached house comes with. Plus, Regent Park is an amenity-rich neighbourhood with strong local programming. "It's a very important piece to be part of that community," Mr. Arens said. "I think we have something to offer."

Condos are often a more affordable option for home buyers, and with a waiting list for assisted housing topping 14,000 people in Ontario – and more than 4,000 in Toronto – Mr. Arens thinks more organizations similar to his could make a similar move.

"It could be a blueprint," he says. "It's important to recognize you can build this not just for our sector."

Daniels, which has done projects with Habitat for Humanity, is also open to requests. "We're looking for other opportunities for affordable living partnerships," Mr. Cohen said.

"We want to build more, but we are a small organization," Mr. Arens said. "For me, it's important to break down that barrier. We need to start working with developers and architects. There are more people recognizing there's a market here."