

Globe Real Estate

LUXURY HOMES

Developer Marc Hewitt is looking for a few well-heeled buyers who want a piece of architect Peter Clewes' vision for upscale living on some of Canada's most expensive lakeside real estate

Pioneers on Oakville's Gold Coast



BY CAROLYN IRELAND

When your aim is to sell luxury houses along a stretch of Lake Ontario known as the Gold Coast, it helps to know a few luminaries who can lend their shimmering presence to your garden party or black-tie evening.

Developer Marc Hewitt has been employing some unconventional marketing strategies in order to court the future residents of Edgemere Estate, where he plans to build a clus-

ter of new houses on the century-old site of a landmark mansion. For now, he is helping his friends and neighbours develop a vision.

"I think a number of our future buyers don't know they're buyers."

To stimulate those imaginations, Mr. Hewitt opened the gates of the estate to guests at a dinner party for Morgan Freeman and the Oakville-based film makers who collaborated with the actor on the documentary *Prom Night in Mississippi*. At a fund-raiser for

the Oakville Symphony, musicians serenaded the guests on the Edgemere grounds.

All the while, party goers had the chance to picture their lives as homeowners as they took in the views from the terrace overlooking the lake or strolled along the banks of Wedgewood Creek towards the Japanese tea house, which — along with other heritage buildings such as the carriage house and gate keeper's cottage — will be refurbished under Mr. Hewitt's plan.

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An artist's rendering of Edgemere, designed by architect Peter Clewes of architectsAlliance. This view from the lake shows the breakwater that will border the 12.5-acre parcel.

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Site plan offers outdoor space without the maintenance

Mr. Hewitt says marketing the new development is a challenge. It's hard for prospective buyers to look at plans on paper or a model in the sales centre and make the leap to 10 low-rise buildings, each with 3 units of two-and-a-half stories. The 30 condominium units will be set on 12.5 acres of grounds.

He can't point to any place in Canada and say "it's like that", Mr. Hewitt says, because the concept designed by architect Peter Clewes of architects Alliance is untested.

"That's the challenge of pioneering," Mr. Hewitt says.

One senses that to say he is looking forward to the start of construction next fall with alacrity would be an understatement.

The complexity has been building since Mr. Hewitt acquired the property in 2007 after it was listed for sale with an asking price of \$45-million. When Mr. Hewitt bought the estate, he held a 32,000-square-foot house built in 1994 by Peter Gilgan, the millionaire president of Mattamy Homes.

Mr. Hewitt hired architect's Alliance to refashion Mr. Gilgan's former palace - with 9 bedrooms, 17 bathrooms, spa and movie theatre - into condominium units. Mr. Clewes advice: Tear it down.

"He just about had a heart attack," says Mr. Clewes.

The architect came up with a plan that removes the Gilgan house but preserves the site's other heritage buildings and hundreds of trees, while giving the new residents units with private entrances.

"We invented a new housing type," Mr. Hewitt says. For example, each suite will have its own private elevator rising from the underground garage.

Buyers will have a choice of lakefront, garden or terrace levels.

He believes the plan goes much farther toward preserving the original site and the public's access to Lake Ontario than a sub-division of severed properties would have done. Canvassing of prospective



Elaborate renderings of the site and the interiors help potential buyers commit to the project. NICHE DEVELOPMENT LTD.

buyers showed that owners didn't want a yacht club and a common gym and similar amenities. They did want the seclusion and access to the outdoors that a house allows, without all of the maintenance. People in the garden units, for example, will have some land to play with.

"They can let their dog out. They can lie in the grass and they can garden. That's important to some people. They like to get out and get their hands dirty."

The lakefront level has the water and the terrace level has the views.

"The preferences are really personal," Mr. Hewitt says. "People are very attached to the location on the property. Some people want sun in the morning, some want sun in the evening."

Just as a plan was finalized and Mr. Hewitt was getting his colour back, the global recession hit. Buyers of luxury real estate, he says, vanished. "I

think people were afraid. People were terrified," he says. "I have yet to talk to a real estate person who predicted the severity of the downturn."

A few reservations also evaporated at Edgemere as clients chose to sacrifice their \$100,000 placeholders rather than move ahead amid the uncertainty. To keep the project alive, Mr. Hewitt advertised when others were quiet.

Even as that deep freeze thawed, buyers were reluctant to commit during the more than two-and-a-half years it took to receive regulatory approvals. After much debate, Mr. Hewitt negotiated an agreement with the City of Oakville that allows public access to the lake via a path that runs along the property's 1,000-foot shoreline.

In the midst of all that, the Ontario government announced a harmonized sales tax that places a higher levy on newly-built houses than resale homes.

"I've been swimming upstream for a long time."

This spring, with 6 units sold, he is feeling a lot more cheerful - even relieved.

He recently unveiled elaborate renderings because people are reluctant to commit to paying for an unconventional property that ranges between \$2.59-million and \$6.8-million in price. If people are going to move out of their Oakville mansions or forgo a downtown high-rise condo, they want to see what they're being offered instead.

But a lakefront property in the area typically costs about \$4-million, Mr. Hewitt points out, "and that's for a house you knock down."

With the Clewes design, the modernist architecture incorporates some Arts and Crafts elements which refer to the estate's original house, which was razed to make way for the Gilgan house.

Mr. Hewitt reduced the size of the smallest unit by 800

square feet to 10,000. That allowed him to lower the price and expand the target market beyond professional couples and empty-nesters to include people who are divorced, widowed or single by choice. He was also surprised to learn that the units appeal to parents who want to spend time hanging out with their kids instead of mowing the lawn or maintaining a house.

"We're seeing more families than I had anticipated."

Other buyers have decided to sell their cottages or pass them on to the kids. That allows the parents to live at Edgemere during the warmer months and spend their winters down south.

Mr. Hewitt will absorb the cost of the HST so that he doesn't have to raise prices.

The arrangements worked out with the various authorities will include conveying about one acre of land to the town. Mr. Hewitt will improve the fish habitat by building a

stone beach in front of the existing stone wall. Boaters won't be allowed to dock at Edgemere, but town residents will be able to jog or walk their dogs along the water.

Edgemere Estate, which sits about 12 feet above the water, will be fenced for security and privacy, says Mr. Hewitt. For many buyers, it will be a second home.

Next month, the charity season will resume with a Girls Night In at Edgemere for the Canadian Cancer Society. The Gilgan house has been renovated to act as a temporary showroom to demonstrate the kitchens, finishes and craftsmanship available in the J.F. Brennan construction. Because the floor level and ceiling heights match those of the new homes, the existing house - which will eventually be torn down - gives future buyers a good feel for the views and the surrounding landscape, Mr. Hewitt says.

The developer adds that the new buildings will feel as if they belong to the original estate, which belonged to prominent entrepreneurs such as James Rylie and John "Jack" Hamell.

Now he continues to invite prospective homeowners behind the stone walls. Buyers in 2010 are knowledgeable and sophisticated, Mr. Hewitt says. They're also just as interested in long-term value as they are in finding the right place to live.

"As the price point climbs, they look at it as an investment more and more."

He expects more buyers will sign on when they can see the first units built, which should be ready for occupancy in November of 2011.

For, as well-versed as potential buyers are, they often respond to something intangible.

"Many of the big, expensive houses in Oakville are sold very quickly on impulse," Mr. Hewitt has learned during his conversations with realtors. "People just walk right in and have a feeling."