

THE BUILDERS DAVID CHOO



ASHLEY FRASER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Condo sales are booming in Ottawa, including a VIP launch at 111 Richmond earlier this week. Within 90 minutes, 95 condos were reserved.

BY PATRICK LANGSTON

COSMOPOLITAN MR. CHOO

David Choo is certain Ottawa is cosmopolitan-bound. And that's just fine with the ambitious president of Ashcroft Homes, an entrepreneur who has established himself during the past 17 years as a mover in Ottawa's urban housing market.

Upscale urban growth is Ottawa's inevitable evolutionary path, says Choo.

"So much of what we're seeing thrive in the city, whether it's the Byward Market or Westboro or the Glebe, that's urban living, not suburban."

As he sketches his picture of urban life, Choo, an engineer by training, developer by happenstance and a man seemingly lit from within by his passion for building, slouches behind his large, cluttered desk in Ashcroft's south-end offices.

Unlike the trim buildings he erects, Choo's large corner office is a catastrophe of piled building plans, banker's boxes, and his jacket and coat tossed on top of a table.

From here, the 57-year-old Choo runs a company that's built everything from Manhattan Square in Bells Corners, an infill project of affordable townhomes, to urban villages, including Central Park bordering the Central Experimental Farm and CitiPlace next to Colonnade Business Park.

At these sites, single-family homes and townhomes rub elbows with shops, lofts, condos and retirement living.

The company has also spun off Alavida Lifestyles, an operation that's busily building retirement campuses across the city. With five sites at varying stages of development, the campuses offer luxury retirement residences with optional restaurant meals, housekeeping services and some assisted-living suites.

Lately, Choo seems bent on capturing the title of Wizard of Westboro. His brick-and-glass condo development, 101 Richmond Road, is all about urban chic, thanks to its ground-level commercial space. The building is almost sold out.

The neighbouring sequel, 111 Richmond West, will add another 156 condo units and sexy amenities, including a rooftop terrace to the trendy neighbourhood. Earlier this week, investors and buyers lined up, reserving 95 of the condos in a 90-minute buying spree, proving urban sites are a hot property.

Across the road just west of Island Park Drive sits the five-acre, former Les Soeurs de la Visitation property Choo

The president of Ashcroft Homes is committed to urbanizing the capital, starting with a trio of condos on Richmond Road and a condo-hotel-office complex facing the Sparks Street Mall



CHRIS MIKULA, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Ashcroft President David Choo watched this week as eager investors lined up to buy at 111 Richmond, bottom left. He has plans for a condo-office-hotel on Sparks Street, right.

bought at the end of October for more than \$10 million. He plans to preserve the chapel and significant portions of the former convent, but is still mulling over ideas for the rest.

"These three properties are the gateway to Westboro, an area that's evolving into mixed use. That's what people find exciting. My two daughters (both twentysomething professionals) and their friends are my sounding board.

"When I ask them where they want to live, they say, 'Westboro and condos.'" "I'm an urban guy. I live in the Glebe, 300 paces from Bank Street," he continues. "Building mixed density is a lot more exciting than putting up 1,000 homes in the suburbs."

An early player in mixing living and business space in a former Canada Post building off Bank Street in the Glebe, Ashcroft is doing selected suburban building, including

Eastboro in Orléans.

Choo's urban vision is gaining traction, according to Roderick Lahey, the Ottawa architect who designed the Richmond Road condos and the more traditional Opus condo on the former Canadian National Institute for the Blind site at O'Connor and McLeod streets.

"All his projects," says Lahey, "especially in Westboro, are real city building projects. What I really like about working in traditional main-street areas is increasing the commercial activity in the city."

Ottawa must embrace such urbanization and smart growth, says Choo, who forces you to agree by frequently adding "right?" at the end of his sentences. The city, he continues, is at a critical juncture, with citizens hungry for the urban lifestyle, as opposed to just urban working.

builder went bankrupt, Choo took over and his entrepreneurial spirit has never wavered.

That entrepreneurial drive and urban vision have run afoul of some folks. Ashcroft's plan to erect a 20-storey building on the Opus site and a second tower on the Gilmour Street resulted in a community firestorm. Plans were whittled back to the nine-storey Opus and a seven-floor seniors' residence on Gilmour.

"Compromise is hard when you're passionate about what you do," he says.

His professional ardour — "My wife says I don't work, I just pursue passions," he jokes — has now taken Choo downtown.

After years as an eyesore of boarded up buildings and a parking lot, the "Canlands A" site between Sparks and Queen streets just west of Metcalfe Street was last year approved by its owner, the National Capital Commission, for development by Ashcroft.

The company will build the re, a linked two-building project — six storeys on Sparks Street, 17 on Queen — that blends condos, a boutique hotel, some offices and a stylish, ground-floor food market. A sky lounge on the 12th floor

promises a spectacular view of Parliament Hill and the Gatineau. Condo residents will have access to the hotel's restaurant along with other amenities.

The project, which will seek an environmentally conscious LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) silver rating, will be launched next year.

"It will be iconic," promises Choo. "It's going to give Ottawa something that will help to define it as a world-class city."

"Politicians and visiting business people will use it. It's going to be a modern foil to the grand old lady, the Château (Laurier)."

With the re and a dozen or so other projects to his credit or in development, Choo has evolved into a diversified builder, says John Herbert, executive director of the Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association.

"He's cherry-picked building forms that have done well in Ottawa."

And does this urban-loving fellow have a favourite spot in the city?

Several, actually, he says. They include Dow's Lake, where he jogs early on weekends. "The vistas of the lake are so wonderful, you feel like you own the city."

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DAVID CHOO, Developer.

