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**Colourful character** Local architect's distinctive urban redesigns are popping up on every Corydon-area corner

siiteline / By Paul Clerkin

Spend any amount of time in the Corydon area these days, and you'll come across buildings stamped with the signature of **Ernie Walter**.

In a distinctive style, on Fort Rouge streets like Mulvey, Warsaw, McMillan, Dorchester, Wardlaw and Gertrude, the architect's self-named firm has taken once-grand old houses and subdivided or expanded them for clients into two- or three-unit upscale contemporary condos.

The projects, which have resulted in about 60 condos, are easy to recognize with their eye-catching new additions, respect for original design, and frequent use of bright colours and galvanized metal.

The additions, though distinctly modern, borrow from the past's use of balconies and porches. Heritage touches like verandas and fireplaces are frequently restored to complement new features.

It may seem as if these conversions are popping up on every corner. In fact, Walter, whose firm does not buy properties itself, makes a point of taking on corner properties for clients.

"I think very strongly that corners should have increased density," he says. "The lower density of residential living should be the interior of the street, between corners.

"The corners set the statement. They add a sense of competition within a community as well, because if you get beautiful on both ends, you're going to try and make beautiful in the middle."

One of his many corner statements started as a falling-apart 1912 home at the corner of Wellington Crescent and Grosvenor, bought by his client for \$75,000. He lovingly restored its character while also "contemporizing" it, then built on an adjacent luxury townhouse, gave both units carriage-house garages, and saw them sell for \$360,000 and \$300,000.

Walter, a colourful character and one-time Osborne Village hippie, could now be called the ultimate Corydon Villager. A huge believer in revitalizing urban neighbourhoods, he recently relocated his office right onto Corydon Avenue, and delights in watching the patio crowd at Saffron's from his window.

His firm is not only developing another 31 condos in the neighbourhood, it has an office in Belize that is engaged in multi-million-dollar construction

projects. Between the two offices, Walter employs 12 architects and a handful of engineers.

Standing in his new office, he excitedly describes his plans for its Corydon frontage. A gallery area will display his and other architects' paintings and sculptures. A partition screen will enable films about architecture to be viewed from the patio outside. He wants to push an architecture and design agenda for the area, and feels that a lack of planning has held back its growth.

"It's time that Winnipeg had that type of (planned) neighbourhood. Yorkville (in Toronto) had it 30 years ago," he says.

Walter came to Winnipeg in the 1960s from his hometown of Outlook, Sask., to study architecture at the University of Manitoba. For about two years in the 1970s, he was head of design at GBR (Green, Blankstein, Russell), then Winnipeg's largest architectural firm. But he has mostly marched to his own drummer, designing for private clients, pursuing art and even owning a restaurant, Nibblers Nosh.

He started designing condos almost by accident in the mid-1990s.

"I was taking it easy, doing painting and sculpture. I had bought an old house on Grosvenor and taken a chainsaw to it. Other people saw it and loved it. When I sold it and people saw how much I got for it, that was the catalyst."

New clients would come to Walter with an old house for development, other Winnipeggers would see the result, and he would attract more clients. "It's absolutely driven by demand," he says, "and sponsored by the beauty of Corydon Avenue itself, which has unlimited possibilities."

The architect lives on Dorchester, but is soon moving into another "very, very urban space" nearby.

Currently nearing completion is his firm's conversion of a character apartment block at 477 Wardlaw, behind Baked Expectations, into condos that will sell for \$230,000 to \$290,000.

"We're taking what was 30 units and converting them into 12," he says. One common complaint about such older blocks is the lack of off-street parking. Walter has addressed that by converting part of the ground level into covered parking spaces. Cast-iron balconies and roof terraces complete the heritage look.

Walter also builds projects from the ground up. He is creating two condos on the site of his old office at 710 Warsaw. Using the entire lot, the design features two units back-to-back with various terraces and decks. One has already sold to a professional artist.

On a bigger scale is 668 Jessie, where the new building will be three storeys, with large expanses of glass.

Walter recently had the chance to design for his beloved Corydon -- a new addition to the former Roca Jack's to add more restaurant seating. There has been some outcry from residents opposed to the expansion, but Walter is optimistic that the project will happen.

"I always felt strongly about this neighbourhood. It's an opportunity to have our own urban area. It has great personality -- you can walk down the street and talk to people."

-- with files from Alison Mayes

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