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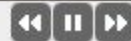


## Brandy Lane walks where others fear to tread

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The bulk of the projects Brandy Lane has undertaken in the decade and a half that David Hirsh has been at the helm have been infill developments on neglected sites in otherwise promising parts of the city.

AARON HARRIS/FOR THE TORONTO STAR

### Ryan Starr

Special to the Star

David Hirsh has found his forte transforming under-utilized urban properties into thriving new communities.

Where others have seen problems, the 53-year-old chief of [Brandy Lane Homes](#) likes to say, he has seen possibilities.

Indeed, the bulk of the projects Brandy Lane has undertaken in the decade and a half that Hirsh has been at the helm have been infill developments on neglected sites in otherwise promising parts of the city.

Since its launch in 1986, Brandy Lane, a small company of which Hirsh was a founding partner, has built more than 2,000 homes across the GTA.

Throughout the 1980s and most of the 1990s, Brandy Lane built communities of single-family houses, averaging 200 units a year in places such as Newmarket, Mississauga, Ajax and Pickering.

But once Hirsh took control of the company in 1997, Brandy Lane shifted its focus to condos and townhomes, setting out in search of “undiscovered urban sites,” he says. “Ones that other builders haven’t looked at too closely.

“I love a challenge”

For Brandy Lane’s maiden condo project, The Annex, Hirsh bought a vacant triplex on Clinton St. with an extra-large backyard and built nine townhouses.

The company’s next development, Liberty Walk, at Lawrence Ave. W. and Dufferin St., was another infill project but considerably larger, with 245 stacked townhouses.

Then there was Loggia, Brandy Lane’s two-tower, 316-unit condo on The Queensway near Islington Ave., which replaced a defunct car dealership.

“It’s the biggest thing I’ve ever undertaken,” Hirsh says. “When I bought that property it was with much trepidation, because southern Etobicoke had nothing in terms of intensified development at the time.”

“When you’re talking about pioneering something, it’s always a challenge,” he adds. “But I love a challenge, so I said, ‘What the hell.’ ”

Loggia’s development coincided with the launch of the City of Toronto’s Avenues program, an initiative aimed at encouraging intensification along the city’s main avenues.

Hirsh notes that Loggia was the first project on the first avenue included in the program, The Queensway. “Loggia helped to define some of the criteria of the Avenues project citywide,” he says.

The project also won an urban design award from the city. “It kind of put me on the map.”

Brandy Lane's more recent developments include Wyldewood, a condo community in Collingwood, and The Station, a 388-unit project on Wilson Ave. near Allen Rd. that is helping transform a less-than-lovely area of the city into a pedestrian-friendly hub.

Driven to succeed

David Hirsh is a driven individual.

He attributes this determination to his adopted parents, Holocaust survivors who wanted him to have all the things in life they had been denied. "I've always been very ambitious," Hirsh says. "I was raised by my parents to be successful, and that's what drives me."

As a kid he dreamed of one day building for his folks "the greatest house they could ever have." He enjoyed conceiving of ways to redesign and expand their North York home. "I would sit there for hours on end and draw it out," Hirsh recalls. "If I hadn't been a builder I would have been an architect."

He didn't become a builder right away. Hirsh dropped out of high school in the mid 1970s and bought a Tie City franchise with money his father had given him. He ran the business for a few years before he decided to close shop and get his real estate licence. "Real estate was my calling," he says. "It was where I wanted to go."

Hirsh started off as a resale agent in Scarborough in the early 1980s, but with interest rates sky high, things didn't go so well. "I couldn't make a dime," he says. "I sold one house."

He went on to work for Great Gulf Homes and Senator Homes before joining Brandy Lane as a founding partner in 1986.

The company expanded rapidly in its early years, building an average of 200 homes a year in subdivisions across the GTA.

But by 1997, Brandy Lane's establishing partners found they had different visions for the company's future. "I wanted to be urban, I wanted to be infill, I wanted to be interesting," Hirsh says.

So Brandy Lane's founders decided to go their separate ways, leaving Hirsh at the helm, which was fine by him.

"I really wanted to be the master of my own destiny, without operating partners."

Not afraid to be innovative

The Station is a project Hirsh says embodies the exact sort of development he had in mind.

He acknowledges that Wilson Ave. and Allen Rd. isn't the first location buyers would typically think to purchase a condo. "The challenge was convincing the public this would be a great place to live."

But Hirsh recognized the opportunity that the neighbourhood presented. "It was about getting in on the ground floor of an area that's changing and developing."

His hope is that The Station, along with other condos going up in the area, will help to create a more pleasant, pedestrian-friendly streetscape along Wilson Ave. The Station, which is located on the subway line, also will include live-work units and ground floor commercial spaces with condos above.

The project eventually found a market of buyers who were "loathe to pay big dollars downtown but still wanted to own real estate and have a great lifestyle," Hirsh says.

The way he sees it, the success of The Station is an affirmation that his modestly sized operation, with only 18 on staff, doesn't have to be big to be good. "Even though we're a small company," Hirsh says, "I've always been creative and never afraid to be innovative."

## **Star Contest**

In 1977, the first New in Homes section appeared in the Toronto Star.

Back then, most new homes were detached and built in the suburbs; today, condos have overtaken new home sales, both in the city and the 905 regions, according to a report by [RealNet Canada](#).

Here at the Star, we're celebrating a special anniversary of 35 Years of New in Homes with special new features, including a contest.

The [Building Industry and Land Development Association](#) (BILD) is offering a hefty \$35,000 toward the purchase of a new home or renovation to help us celebrate. All you have to do to enter is go to [thestar.com/contests](http://thestar.com/contests) and tell us what a new home or renovation means to you.

You can also read all the profiles of our Industry Innovators at [thestar.com/specialsections/newinhomes35years](http://thestar.com/specialsections/newinhomes35years)

**Gale Beeby, Real Estate Editor**



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Brandy Lane's Wyldewood project in Collingwood will include a four-season outdoor swimming pool.

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Loggia, on The Queensway, was Brandy Lane Homes' first big condo project, which came to market in 2004.

SUPPLIED ILLUSTRATION



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For Brandy Lane's maiden condo project, The Annex, David Hirsh bought a vacant triplex on Clinton St. with an extra-large backyard and built nine townhouses.

RENE JOHNSTON/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO