

VOL. 13 NO. 2 OCTOBER 2014 GREATER TORONTO APARTMENT ASSOCIATION

BUILDING BLOCKS MAGAZINE

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20 PRINCE ARTHUR — CANADA'S MOST ICONIC RENTAL BUILDING

The year was 1968 in Toronto, Ontario. At the time, the Yorkville neighbourhood was relatively underdeveloped, yet alive with youthful energy, optimism and an intrinsic desire for change. Amongst the hum of Joni Mitchell and Neil Young and the buzz of poetry slams at the Purple Onion, the community was flourishing as Toronto's bohemian cultural centre. It is amongst this dynamic scene that 20 Prince Arthur was born, an iconic rental apartment building designed by world-renowned architect Uno Prii.

Youth of the day flocked to the area to debate women's rights and the Vietnam War. The University of Toronto, directly to the south, attracted an unmistakable diversity, vibrancy and character. Students, artists, musicians and US draft dodgers alike congregated in Toronto—specifically Yorkville, which was known as the Canadian capital of the hippie movement. Until reforms were introduced in 1976, Canada's immigration policy was “virtually free of discrimination,” and with borders wide open, the Great North Strong and Free beckoned many a free spirit.¹



Located in the Annex on the border of Yorkville, 20 Prince Arthur stands just off of Bloor and Avenue Road. Uno Prii's designs are architecturally significant as a protest against the dark and grey stark lines of the prevalent Modernist style. Similar to the confrontational political climate at the time, Prii's work challenged existing dogmas of design, which involved pragmatic right angles and

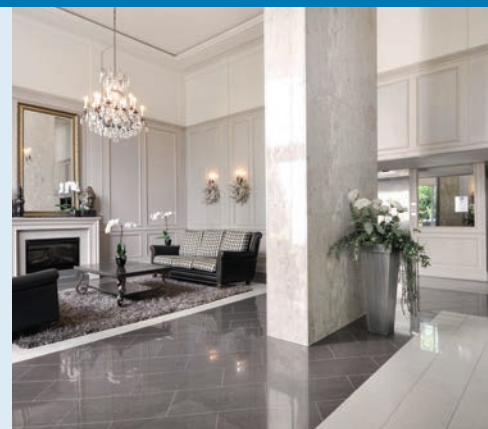
repeating patterns, forever changing the landscape of urban Toronto with his unique artistic vision.

Rising 22 stories, the elaborate apartment tower at 20 Prince Arthur has become the “canonic Prii statement,” its sweeping space-age form incorporating curvilinear sculptural elements and influences of futurism.² Soaring high into the sky, the base of the building curves into flared buttresses, much like a pair of bell-bottomed jeans. Important exterior features are the “pattern of fenestration, the contrasting blue balcony rails, the canopy over the entrance, circular fountain and the spectacular landscaped grounds.”³ The building made a statement back then and as much today, helping to define the eclectic character of the Annex and Yorkville neighbourhoods. 20 Prince Arthur was one of Prii's most expressive designs, and his self-professed “favourite” execution out of more than 250 buildings in Ontario, Ohio and Florida.⁴

In the 1960's, apartment living was growing in popularity as a result of thousands of immigrants arriving in Toronto. New planning concepts were introduced to encourage higher densities, with elaborate green spaces and landscaped grounds designed to attract renters with their whimsical appeal. The Prince Arthur Tower was constructed using Uno Prii's preferred medium of poured white concrete, allowing the architect to achieve sculptural elements and artful details in his designs. Prii's ground-breaking reusable slip-form moulds enabled contractors to pour concrete floor by floor, significantly reducing building time and costs in what has now become industry-standard. The result for Prii was the completion of some of Canada's most distinctive urban residential architecture. Unfortunately, the introduction of drastic provincial rent controls soon thereafter effectively ended the age of significant rental construction. With revenues controlled, innovation and investment in rental properties ceased. Prii's 20 Prince Arthur flagship building

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was added to the City of Toronto's list of heritage properties in 2003 precisely for its cultural resource interest.

The landscape of urban Toronto was changing, and this neighbourhood was no exception. Major developments began to take place in the early 70's and 80's. High end retailers established shop, displacing the mom and pop businesses, and instead attracting chic boutiques, cafes and first class art galleries to the area. After the construction of the Bloor-Danforth subway, land values increased and office towers, hotels, museums and high-end department stores took over where bohemian cafes once existed, with rapid condominium development to follow shortly after.



20 Prince Arthur was now located right in the heart of Toronto's high-end shopping district, and one of the most upscale neighbourhoods in North America, akin to L.A.'s Rodeo Drive and New York's Fifth Avenue. As one of the first high rise buildings in the area, Prii's creation was

popular among tenants, who ignored industry criticism that the rental tower was strange or out of place, and celebrated its flamboyant characteristics reminiscent of a futuristic Miami beach. According to long term residents, the building developed a cult-like status, and over the decades, all of the "who's who" had either lived, or knew someone who lived, at one time at 20 Prince Arthur.

Uno Prii's buildings were at once a shock and a breath of fresh air to Toronto's urban landscape. Although these buildings have not always been perfectly appreciated, his designs were progressive and one of a kind. As Prii once stated, "Originality is the hardest thing to come by."⁵ Hollyburn Properties acquired the building in 1999 and is proud to have restored it to its former glory as one of the premier addresses in Toronto. ♦



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1. Jay Makarenko, History of Canadian Immigration Policy, <http://mapleleafweb.com/features/immigration-policy-canada-history-administration-and-debates>, (August 12th, 2010). 2. Alfred Holden, Concrete Toronto (Toronto: Coach House Books and E.R.A. Architects, 2007), 42. 3. Uno Prii Survey, Heritage Preservation Society. 4. Holden, 229. 5. Holden, 224.