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Toronto's condo king **Brad Lamb** has big plans for Hamilton.

## IN LIKE A LION

**BRAD LAMB HAS HIS SIGHTS SET ON HAMILTON AND TELEVISION CITY IS JUST THE BEGINNING.**

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DEVELOPER BRAD LAMB IS KNOWN AS THE CONDO KING OF TORONTO. HE'S LOOKING TO BUILD A NUMBER OF HIGH-PROFILE PROJECTS IN HAMILTON.



# IN LIKE A LION

DEVELOPER BRAD LAMB IS KNOWN AS THE CONDO KING OF TORONTO. HE'S NOW TRAINED HIS SIGHTS ON HAMILTON IN A \$350-MILLION PROPOSAL CALLED TELEVISION CITY.

WRITTEN BY MEREDITH MACLEOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY JON EVANS

**B**rad Lamb strides into a James Street North coffee shop like he owns the place.

The high-profile Toronto developer owns plenty of places, after all, and is now turning his condo king sights on Hamilton. He's a partner in Television City, a two-tower, 619-suite proposal for the former CHCH property on Jackson Street West.

There is no doubt he's flashy. He's also the flashpoint of a debate about where Hamilton is headed and if city officials and residents will have any control over it.

Lamb says he's been checking in on Hamilton periodically over the years but the time wasn't right to build in the city until now.

"I came here five or six years ago and stayed at the Sheraton. I wanted to see the fun quotient of Hamilton with some friends. What's important to me is bodies on the street. That's worth a lot. There just wasn't a lot of life on the streets."

But he kept an eye on economic news in Hamilton, watching as house prices soared and new condo sales climbed. He's fol-

lowed the story of steel in the city, too.

"I found it interesting that as Stelco was struggling, Hamilton was flourishing. Steel had defined the city for many years but the dependence on steel was over. That made me decide to take a deep look."

He says he was "truly amazed" at what's happened on King William, James, Hess and Locke in the last few years. Those corridors are extremely important as neighbourhood links and meeting places, he says.

But it's Barton Street that he sees as the true key to unlocking Hamilton's fortunes. He says it reminds him of Queen Street West in Toronto when the Metro Ontario Group transformed the Candy Factory Lofts in 1988. Lamb sold condos there.

"It had beautiful bones but it was so depressed. It was a scary area. But within a few years it was buzzing. Barton feels like it's in that early time of flourishing."

He'd love to have the time to buy 20 or 30 properties on Barton, he says, to bring brew pubs, taquerias and pizza joints.

But Lamb is almost exclusively a condo builder. The suburbs and single-family homes don't interest him, he says. He thrives on the hum of cities and creating instant communities in his buildings.

He's made his name in Toronto but now has projects in Edmonton, Calgary (where one condo project includes an apple orchard), Ottawa and Montreal. His sweet spot is 500- to 1,000-square-foot units he describes as "exceptional middle-class housing."

He won't waver on certain features — nine-foot ceilings, exposed concrete, extra thick stone counters, gas appliances, deep balconies. He's deeply involved in every decision, from the name of the project to the design aesthetic.

Lamb Development Corp. has completed 17 projects in Canada, including Toronto's gläs, Parc, Worklofts, Flatiron Lofts, The King East, Theatre Park, King Charlotte and The Brant Park. He also has future projects in the Dominican Republic, Honduras and Turks & Caicos.

Lamb owns a couple of other sites in Hamilton for future development, including a Main Street West car wash near Dundurn and another property on Queen Street.

"The really hard work has been done by the pioneers here who took risks," he says, comparing Hamilton's "organic" revival in the shadow of Toronto to that of Brooklyn that was then accelerated by a massive infusion of investment from Manhattan.



"I get that there is resentment, that it seems Toronto money is coming now when the heavy lifting is done. But there is still a lot to do that requires a lot of money."

The current phase of transformation un-

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derway in Hamilton, including the Royal Connaught and plans for the waterfront, will lead the way to sales of downtown parking lots to build thousands of square feet of housing, says Lamb.

He believes Television City, a \$360-million project as proposed, will be the first real test for Hamilton.

"My project is going to test what people really think of Hamilton — the scale of it, the quality, the interior design, the attention to detail. No one has yet attempted this type of project here."

Lamb, 55, cuts an imposing figure. He's five inches north of six feet, bald and broad-shouldered. He's always dressed in a perfectly fitted custom suit and always sans tie. He's got an intense gaze and bears more than a passing resemblance to Smashing Pumpkins frontman Billy Corgan.

He speaks slowly and rarely checks a phone or the hefty gold watch on his wrist.

His King Street West realty office, a former art gallery, is all exposed brick, concrete floors and plenty of sleek black and white stone. A small lamb is etched into each office door and there is a neon sign screaming his slogan in red: "This Lamb sells condos."

His blue Ferrari sits outside behind a heavy gate.

"It's never a great day and it's never a completely shit day in the world of development," he says as he settles into a board room chair. He's got four sites under construction and another eight in development.

In addition to his condo development company, Lamb owns Brad J. Lamb Realty that exclusively sells Toronto condos, and has divisions that handle property management, construction, staging, engineering and mortgages. He employs 55 people.

His team is "working night and day" on landing a building permit for Television City, he says. There will a big party to intro-

duce himself and the project to Hamiltonians when the time is right. He says interest in Television City is far outpacing what's typical in Toronto, with more than 1,300 people registered to see a sales unit, and

they haven't started any marketing.

Though he's mostly "avoided heritage" in his career, the historic Pinehurst Mansion on the CHCH property, an 1850 stone structure, will make for a memorable project, says Lamb. Initial plans call for a public park, retail and potentially a restaurant in the mansion.

Planned amenities include a tech centre, party room and dining facilities, lounges and indoor/outdoor space, infinity pool, fitness centre, child's play centre, and dog yard and washing station. Prices are expected to start around \$220,000.

Lamb says there will be two slender towers — plans call for 30 and 40 storeys — with no "ugly podium" to interrupt the architecture. He says if everything goes smoothly with approvals, shovels could be in the ground by October 2018.

But nothing in building ever goes smoothly, he says, so it's likely to be at least two years.

Lamb says there will be people opposed to the height of the towers and they will be the ones making the most noise. He says he's heard positive feedback from the local councillor and city staff, though no one is committing to the proposed height.

(City staff declined to talk about Lamb's plans as there is no formal proposal on the table.)

Lamb's partner on Television City is Hamilton native Aaron Collina of Movengo Developments. He thinks he was the first potential buyer in to look at the CHCH site about a year ago and he had an offer on the table immediately with business partner Rick Paletta. The deal closed for \$7 million.

"It's about the location for sure," says Collina. "We had a drone go over the site and the Durand neighbourhood: the escarpment, the water, it's all just beautiful. The heritage home is a huge draw."

Collina says he knew immediately he would ask Lamb to become a partner. He had

worked on other investments with the developer and has been to all of his buildings.

"His reputation precedes him. He's a visionary, of course. He's a statement guy, from how he dresses to the product he delivers," says Collina. "The money he spends on architecture and design is like no other."

Lamb owns 50% of Television City and required that he be the managing development partner. Collina expected no less.

"Brad's the boss. He builds and sells condos better than anyone in Canada and we have him in Hamilton," says Collina. "Aaron Collina could never build a condo building that matches Brad Lamb. That's why I called him."

Movengo Developments is a holding company that manages a wide portfolio of projects, including the redevelopment of the London Tap House downtown, a commercial plaza in Winona, an industrial subdivision on Nebo Road, and a residential development in Ancaster. It's also managing the financing for a remediation of the GM plant in St. Catharines.

Involving Lamb in the Television City project is not about bringing the Toronto way to Hamilton, says Collina. Lamb is truly interested in what is already happening in the city.

"But he's noticing what is being built and knows we can do better."

Lamb is one of three sons of an Air Canada pilot father and a mother who was a registered nurse. Lamb was born in Vancouver and the family moved to Montreal when he was a child.

As a kid, he was always drawing buildings and loved empire-building games like Monopoly and King Oil. He had businesses mowing lawns, collecting golf balls and selling them back to golfers, and peddling ice cream sandwiches and lemonade.

He earned an engineering degree at Queen's University and then worked in sales for a large multinational manufacturing electric motors in the mid to late 1980s. The industrial waterfront of Hamilton was in his sales territory.

"It could be dark and depressing. I wondered about Hamilton's future. I never thought Hamilton would be where it is today."

Lamb realized a few years into his career that he only went into engineering to please his father. He actually hated it. He shifted to real estate, buying his first townhouse in London, Ont. in 1984 and getting his real estate licence in 1988. He concentrated on



selling condos while buying his own properties, too.

In the early years, he lived on only five or 10% of what he earned, he says, investing the rest in real estate.

A sign in Lamb's King Street West office says his Toronto brokerage has sold 22,000 condos. He made a name for himself by plastering his face on the body of a lamb and putting it on billboards and posters on garbage bins.

The cheesy gimmick sure got him attention. He became a brand unto himself and he aggressively marketed it. That only intensified when he became the face of Toronto's frenetic condo boom on HGTV's reality show *Big City Broker*.

But Lamb says he wasn't satisfied just selling. That doesn't change streetscapes or cities. His first foray into development came as a silent partner. He launched Lamb Development Corp. in 2001.

While he's earned a great living, Lamb, a divorced father of a four-year-old girl, says it's not an easy way to make money. There are thousands of moving parts every day.

"At any point in time, I have hundreds of millions of dollars of borrowed money in play. I don't have a jet or a yacht or a \$25-million house. I could do that but I take all the money I can and reinvest."

He admits to loving the thrill of buying real estate but has decided recently to step back and concentrate on what he already holds. He's also considering other ventures—something in the movie industry, perhaps a hotel.

"I just love going to hotels. I love the lobby bar, room service. I love it when hotels do things right."

It's a sunny May day and Hamilton has come to pitch itself to Toronto. The city's economic development team has rented edgy event space in a historic former department store on Queen Street West with a mission to lure investment and talent west down the highway.

Billed as the Hamilton Consulate, this is part of a bold push to shine a light on what the Ambitious City has got going.

Lamb is part of a panel featuring planning and economic development general manager Jason Thorne, restaurateur Erin Dunham, and Rob Zeidler, a partner in the Dabbert Group that operates The Cotton Factory.

There is a buzz in the room. It's the day after Lamb's comments in a Toronto magazine have created a social media firestorm. He's quoted as calling Hamilton a "suburb of

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Toronto" and a "dying city." Both are going over like lead balloons among many who are already suspicious of Lamb's presence in the city.

Lamb says he was taken out of context. He only said, he says, that for a portion of those living in Hamilton and working in Toronto, it will be a suburb. But Hamilton is clearly its own city, he says.

It's also not dying, he says. In fact, an "explosion of growth" is coming and Hamilton better be smart about managing it. Chiefly, it would be highly unwise to end development incentives, he says. He argues they are still needed to help developers cover the 35-40% gap between what they can make in Toronto versus Hamilton on the very same product.

"If the levies are the same as Toronto and the construction costs are the same or higher, where is the opportunity to make profit?"

The large-scale projects that will truly transform the city need incentives, he says. That won't always be the case but it is now and there are plenty of deep-pocketed eyes carefully watching what city leaders do.

"Hamilton has to manage the growth that's going to come. But it's easy to get arrogant about it because it will come fast — hotels, retail, residential, commercial. But you need to ride it until you have economies of scale that allow you to be arrogant."

Lamb believes a brain drain to Hamilton will intensify, accompanied by the migration of large tech companies. He says the population projection for Hamilton — 660,000 people by 2031 — is on the low side. The city's quality of life, cultural scene and urban character is no secret any more.

"I think Toronto will get much more expensive than it is now. And I think more and more people are going to wonder what they are getting in Toronto that they can't get in Hamilton."

Without labelling it as such, there is plenty of advice bandied about at the Hamilton Consulate for developers such as Lamb heading into Hamilton.

"We are not a clean slate or a blank canvas," said Thorne, who mentions a half-dozen Hamilton developers he admires. "Hamilton is different than Mississauga or Vaughan or Richmond Hill. Hamilton has a great history and legacy. We are far from a masterpiece. We're welcoming to those

who want to come and add their brush strokes."

Zeidler, a Toronto import himself, is more direct.

"Hamilton is not a suburb of Toronto. It has its own history, its own story and its own personality. Pretension is not a Hamilton trait. It's a great market but you must understand it," said Zeidler.

"Often the biggest defenders of Hamilton are people from Toronto who feel they have found something perfect."

Retired Toronto city planner Paul Bedford only knows Lamb by reputation. But he does know that with intensification always comes arguments and hand-wringing.

## "WHAT KIND OF DEVELOPER WOULD I BE IF I LISTENED TO EVERYONE TELLING ME TO CHANGE MY PROJECT? I WOULD HAVE NO VISION THEN."

"Most people don't like change. You can see that with the endless debate about one-way streets. It's an absolute no-brainer that it's the right thing to do but it's never easy."

More people living downtown will be good for the core and good for Hamilton as a whole but developers always face the brunt of the opposition to more and taller buildings, says Bedford.

"The smart ones cater to the market and are sensitive to the scale of the area and reinforce the streetscape."

Frances Murray, president of the Durand Neighbourhood Association, says the group met with Lamb's people in April. The neighbours were shown a rough rendering of a plan that originally called for two towers of 35 and 45 storeys but has been scaled back by five storeys for each tower.

That doesn't satisfy the residents, says Murray. She says the two proposed towers would dominate the skyline and add to existing traffic concerns.

"The DNA is against that kind of height and density. The Durand is already the densest neighbourhood in the city. It's just too much mass for that site."

Lamb's people listened politely to the concerns and didn't argue with any objec-

tions, says Murray. They also vowed to protect the heritage home on the property. She also gives Lamb points for meeting with the neighbours so quickly.

"We're always happy when a developer comes to speak to us instead of just dealing with the city and lawyers."

Councillor Jason Farr is well aware of the DNA's concerns but says there is little to be done until a plan comes to the city, says Murray.

She thinks some Toronto developers come with the attitude that Hamilton has been waiting for them to arrive.

"We've been a city since 1846 so I think we know what we are doing. We will do it our way."

She would tell Lamb to carefully look around his Television City site. "Use some creativity when you come up with your design, taking into account the character and feel of the Durand neighbourhood instead of giving us just more glass towers."

Lamb says he's willing to listen to neighbours and city planners on things like parking, green roofs and amenities but he will never compromise if he thinks it will make for a weaker, poorer building architecturally. When he's made changes just to get a building built, he always hates the results.

"What kind of developer would I be if I listened to everyone telling me to change my project? I would have no vision then."

He no longer goes to public meetings on his projects because he gets frustrated by the "misinformation."

He faced enormous opposition to his 47-storey Theatre Park development beside the historic Royal Alexandra theatre on King Street.

In fact, he says a city planner said it was the "worst design I've ever seen and over my dead body will it get built."

Lamb says it's among his favourite projects thus far.

"They were wrong. We were right. It was the right building for that place. The problem with my industry is that everybody thinks developers are greedy, visionless and care only about money."

And some are all of that, he says, but it's developers who have built the world's great buildings.

"We aren't building the Louvre but we are building middle-class housing that is the best."