



A room with a view and an award

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A building that once served as a convent for Catholic nuns on the shores of Lake Temiskaming in Haileybury is now a unique housing option for seniors.



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Place Sainte Marie, which opened in September, is a former 70,000-square-foot convent originally built in 1927. It served as a nunnery and school for more than 80 years until the nuns dwindled in number and the school became too big and difficult to maintain. But instead of levelling the building to make way for new construction, a developer in Guelph saw the potential to give the heritage facility a new life.

Place Sainte Marie, which opened in September in Haileybury, is a former 70,000-square-foot convent originally built in 1927.

The apartment building's developer, Skyline, which officially opened Place Sainte Marie this past September, was recently recognized for its innovation in combining assisted living options with a not-for-profit partner. The Federation of Rental Property Owners (FRPO) named Place Sainte Marie the rental development of the year — one of several awards handed out as part of the 2010 FRPO Marketing, Achievement and Construction awards held in Toronto earlier this month.

An independent panel of 10 industry professionals including representatives from Coldwell Banker, the Ontario Home Builders' Association, the Ontario Real Estate Association, TD Commercial Banking, Deloitte, the Canadian Association of Accredited Mortgage Professionals and Fleiss Gates McGowan Architects judged submissions for the FRPO award.

Place Sainte Marie is located about 134 kilometres north of North Bay, which is part of Temiskaming Shores. The distinctive red brick building is close to the downtown core and public waterfront area of the town.

When the building was first listed for sale, Jason Ashdown, cofounder and chief operating officer of Skyline, saw an opportunity to bring a mixed-use assisted living building to seniors and disabled people in the north. For two years, Ashdown developed the business plan to bring it to fruition.

For Ashdown, the numbers made business sense. The current population of Temiskaming Shores is 11,000, with the surrounding area populated by another 40,000 people.

About 50 per cent of the population is over 45 years old and the senior population is expected to double over the next 16 years. He also found that housing options for aging adults is limited, especially for those who need any type of assisted living services.

He decided to proceed with a full renovation of the building. The property was gutted and re-named Place Saint Marie, which came from the building's former name, Accueil Sainte Marie. The name was chosen with the help of nuns to help appeal to local residents, many of who attended the school, took music lessons or attended dances in the building.

The building has 48 units with a variety of suite layouts. There are 18 one-bedroom apartments and 30 two bedrooms with monthly rents ranging from \$750 to \$2,000 for a penthouse suite on the top floor. About 80 per cent of the units have a view of the lake.

While the building was essentially gutted, Ashdown says, the original design and structure was maintained but improved upon by incorporating high-efficiency systems and make it a "greener" building overall.

"It was much more difficult than building from the ground up," says Ashdown. "

But while reclaiming a historical building is an interesting concept, Ashdown says it was the partnership Skyline struck with the non-profit organization that he believes really helped with the award.

"As much as the development is interesting, I think the fact we partnered with a local home support group is what won it for us," says Ashdown. "We brought the population density of the people in need into the same building while also supplying support."

Skyline partnered with Timiskaming Home Support, a non-profit service provider which rents about 5,000 square feet of commercial space in the building, giving residents of the building access to on-site assisted living services.

Ashdown is hoping to replicate the model in other areas of the province. Skyline manages almost 100 apartment buildings in 36 communities from Thunder Bay to Cornwall to Leamington.

"People have recognized that when private partnership meets not-for-profit it can really work," he says. "As our society ages, we need to understand that seniors live a longer, healthier life the longer they can stay independent. There's an obvious need."