

Chicago's best new homes

The experts choose the top city developments of 2003

by Barry Pearce

Anyone can build homes in a booming market, but when sales start to slow, the best projects tend to separate themselves from the pack. Today's buyers are savvier than ever, and if builders aren't aware of how they measure up to the competition, buyers will let them know soon enough.

In reviewing developments for this year's *New Homes* awards, the pack mentality that has guided residential development in Chicago during the last decade became abundantly clear. In neighborhoods such as the West Loop, South Loop and River North, endless projects offer small variations on a theme – the same finishes and amenities, the same price points, the same materials and to a shocking degree, the same architecture.

And developers afraid to do anything different are scratching their heads, blaming the economy for sales that while still healthy overall, have slowed to anxiety-raising levels at some projects.

A few years ago, even unremarkable developments were selling out before they delivered their first units. Now, builders are left holding dozens of condos long after the first buyers have moved in.

But many projects with the right combination of pricing, product and location continue to come on line and continue to sell well. These are the developments – the best of the best – that we've focused on for the 2003 *New Homes* awards.

In some categories, the choices were easy. American Invscio's new highrise, the Lakeview, matches a coveted site – three prime acres of Lincoln Park land, overlooking the park, lake and city – with a classic Lucien La-grange tower. The architecture is conservative – limestone, mansard roof, vintage detailing – but the multi-million-dollar units, lake views and 1.25 acres of gardens in Lincoln Park are hard to beat.

The architecture at Contemporaine, Ralph Johnson's dramatic glass mid-rise in River North, is on the other hand, this project's crowning feature. The building's protuberant balconies, fully glazed garage and exposed corner column are just some of the trade-

marks that will benefit buyers when they decide to sell these singular units in a deep and homogeneous downtown condo market.

Printers Row lofts was likewise an easy choice at a time when few true loft buildings are being converted and even fewer in settled neighborhoods like Printers Row. Formerly known as Polk Street Station, the building has the kind of heavy timber beams, exposed brick and ductwork, hardwood

floors and open floor plans loft lovers can only find in resales in many neighborhoods.

The single-family and townhouse categories were more difficult. We settled on two Northwest Side projects that provide family housing and copious space in quiet settings. Rezmar Development Group found an especially well placed site for its River Park North project, overlooking 70 acres of riverfront parkland.

In making our selections, the editorial staff considered everything from location and floor plans to amenities, architecture and pricing, imagining that we were buyers of new construction. We chose projects that scored well in every category and so represented the best available housing. Our choices admittedly are subjective, but we think that the following projects would at least be good starting points for anyone in the market for a new home.

Contemporaine

Chicago's best new mid-rise condominium

Most residential developers in Chicago seem to start with the proposition that they want their projects to look like everyone else's and then, almost as an afterthought, find architects equal to that ambition. For Contemporaine, builder Colin Kihnke, of CMK Development, took the opposite approach.

"Ralph Johnson is an architect I always dreamed of working with; I love his designs," says Kihnke, whose condo mid-rise, Contemporaine, is underway at 516 N. Wells. "I met with him and said, I want a building completely different from anything ever seen in Chicago."

The result promises to be just that. The 15-story glass tower designed by Johnson, of Perkins & Will, is as much a grand piece of sculpture as a condo highrise. The four-story base is fully glazed, so passersby will be able to see cars making their way down the parking ramps instead of staring at a blank wall decorated with obvious attempts to break up monotony and hide vents.

The wall of glass continues in the residential units, which have floor-to-ceiling windows. Cantilevered balconies extend forcefully over the street like mini-catwalks, changing the tone of what is usually boring outdoor space both for those who will use them and for observers below. Setbacks add variety and texture to the façade, and the visu-



al interest reaches its peak at the top of the building in a sculpted corner cutout centered around a 45-foot concrete column, a theme begun at the base.

The condos at Contemporaine have open floor plans, and penthouses feature glass atriums 20 to 32 feet high with unobstructed city views. Prices range from the \$350s to more than \$2 million.