

HOME OF THE WEEK

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 31, 2025

An architect buys into his own creation at converted abbey

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TORONTO



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RAFFI TUTUNDJIAN/RAFFI TUTUNDJIAN/JAGGED LENS



385 Brunswick Ave., unit 408, Toronto

Asking Price: \$3,250,000

Taxes: \$11,575.23 (2025)

Monthly maintenance fee: \$2,753.77

Agents: Ophira Sutton and Eliana Sutton Balaban, Sutton Group-Associates Realty Inc.

The backstory



The façade of the building at 385 Brunswick Ave., designed by architect Neil Beggs in the early 1900s, was protected under heritage conservation rules.

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In the 1990s, architect Alex Spiegel often admired the landmark Loretto Abbey as he cycled past the Edwardian-era building on Brunswick Avenue.

By the early 2000s, Mr. Spiegel was working for Context Development when the vacant structure was put on the block.

The Loretto Abbey Day School had been part of the Annex neighbourhood since 1915, when the Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary opened the academy for the education of young girls.

Decades later, many of the retired nuns lived on the upper floors of the Loretto Abbey.

In the late 1990s, a fire broke out in the basement. The building suffered only minor damage, but the Loretto Sisters moved to a new location soon after.

Context was not the successful bidder at auction, recalls Mr. Spiegel, who was the firm's director of development. But in 2004, Context had another chance to buy the vacant building.

“ I lived, ate, and slept this project for many years.

— architect and owner Alex Spiegel

The developers were already experienced in finding new uses for aging structures after creating residential lofts from the former Tip Top Tailors headquarters and a 1920s public school in Kensington Market.

Context purchased the property and began drawing up plans to convert the building into a boutique condo with a row of townhouses behind.

When Mr. Spiegel broached the idea of buying a unit with his wife, Chari Cohen, she was reluctant to leave the large detached house where they raised their four children.

But Mr. Spiegel was looking ahead to the day when their last two children would leave and the couple would become empty nesters. He had his eye on a sub-penthouse on the fourth floor.

“It was hard to convince Chari at first, but she came around,” he says.

For Ms. Cohen's part, she did not want to stand in the way of Mr. Spiegel's chance to realize his vision.

“Having an architect-developer husband pushed me ahead of my game plan,” she says. “But when an opportunity came to hone off a corner of the Loretto, Alex could see the opportunity.”

As the design process began, the retired architect immersed himself in plans for each unit, along with the couple's future home.

“I lived, ate and slept this project for many years.”

The unit today



The solid maple wood floors were reclaimed from the CBC Broadcast Centre.

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The façade of the building designed by architect Neil Beggs in the early 1900s was protected under heritage conservation rules.

“The inside wasn’t frankly that nice,” says Mr. Spiegel. “It was the exterior that had the character.”

The thick walls and bay window openings were fixed in place, but Mr. Spiegel had free rein when it came to laying out the floor plan.

“I pretty much had a blank space.”

The 2,000-square-foot unit has three bedrooms, a den and three bathrooms.

“We could craft it to exactly what we wanted,” says Ms. Cohen. Her main request was for lots of storage, including a place to put the vacuum cleaner.

The open plan living area has space for lounging and dining, with the kitchen in the centre.

Having light from the windows on three sides makes the space feel more like a house, Mr. Spiegel says, and the fourth-floor perch provides pleasant views over the treetops. There’s also a balcony overlooking the building’s courtyard.

The unit’s solid maple wood floors were reclaimed from the CBC Broadcast Centre, says Mr. Spiegel. The organization was revamping some studios and needed to get rid of the half-inch-thick flooring.

Throughout his career, Mr. Spiegel was interested in sustainable development.

“If you’re reusing a building, you’re reusing all of the energy that went into it. You’re recycling the building instead of sending it to a landfill.”

The developer’s overhaul of the building included new plumbing, wiring, insulation and energy-efficient heat pumps. Punched windows are more environmentally friendly than large sheets of glass, Mr. Seigel adds.

Over the years, new young families have moved into the Loretto, and new venues have been built in the area around Avenue Road and Bloor Street.

Mr. Spiegel says the couple often walks to the Royal Ontario Museum, Art Gallery of Ontario, Koerner Hall and Alliance Francaise.

The trees have grown taller since the couple moved in, and Brunswick Avenue now has a bike lane.

“Brunswick is such a great cycling street,” he says. “Now it’s even better.”

The best feature



A breakfast bar hides the kitchen from the living area.

RAFFI TUTUNDJIAN/RAFFI TUTUNDJIAN/JAGGED LENS

The kitchen tends to be the heart of every gathering, Ms. Cohen says, so she favoured placing it at the centre of the unit.

That way, the people doing the prep work can always be part of the conversation, she says.

A breakfast bar hides the kitchen from the living area, and a pocket door closes the area off from the dining room.

Double-sided cabinets provide plenty of storage.