



Of heart & home

STUNNING CAMBRIDGE CONDO IS LIKE A WINDOW TO HER PAST

By Kevin Swayze

Photography • David Bebee

BARB DONALDSON HAS travelled the world over four decades, but she knows there's no place like home.

So when it became too much work to maintain her big, 115-year-old house on Brant Road, she didn't look far. In May, she moved into her new home: a double-sized unit on the top floor of Waterscape Condominium tower overlooking the Grand River in Cambridge.

"When I bring people in from Toronto, they think this is a piece of heaven," says Donaldson, 65.

"I knew it would be a wonderful view, but I was shocked the first time I saw it."

Born and raised in Galt, Donaldson can look out her new windows and see the story of her life. Growing up on Blenheim Road. Attending Galt Collegiate Institute. Starting her own travel agency in downtown in 1973 – the year Cambridge was created out of Galt, Preston and Hespeler. ▶

A GRAND VIEW

Barb Donaldson relaxes on the balcony of her new home in the Waterscape Condominium in Cambridge. Her 12th floor unit overlooks the Grand River as well as key landmarks from Donaldson's life in Galt.





ELEGANCE AND COMFORT

Barb Donaldson's spacious sitting areas include the spot she calls "the perch" (above). Its large windows afford views of the Grand River as well as the city and countryside to the southwest and north. Below right is a chandelier she brought from her former home on Brant Road.



COOKING UP A VIEW

The view from the window in her kitchen (right) looks south over the city, with its river and bridges.

► "I think there would have been more ambivalent feelings if I went elsewhere. I'm still in my community," she says. "I feel I'm settling down now."

Not that she has any plans to retire from Donaldson Uniglobe Travel, with its frequent demands for global travel.

In Donaldson's mind, old Galt vistas hold up pretty well compared to what she's seen in Europe or the Middle East.

Donaldson is mum about exactly what her new home cost, but offers: "It's definitely a million dollar view."

In Toronto's condominium market, Donaldson's sprawling home would easily sell for \$3 million, says Waterscape devel-



oper Paul de Haas.

He expects units in the proposed second Waterscape tower to sell for much more than in the first.

Waterscape was pitched from the start as

a combination of luxury, maintenance-free living and stunning views.

"The building was not easy to sell. It was sold to a local market that was apprehensive in the early stages, about ►

► pre-buying,” de Haas says.

At first, it was locals like Donaldson who bought units. It was only as the building took shape that buyers started signing on from across Toronto, Oakville, Burlington and Hamilton. Some were people returning home; others bought in for business reasons, choosing Cambridge over Kitchener and Waterloo, de Haas says.

Residents are inviting friends for visits to their new home — and nudging them to buy one of the few left in the 115-unit building, de Haas says.

With the Cambridge Mill restaurant open next door, Drayton Theatre construction starting this year and revival of Main Street underway, de Haas says Cambridge is becoming a destination it hasn't been for a century.

Donaldson is also excited about what's unfolding in her hometown as she shows off her new home at dinner parties.

Almost everywhere a visitor turns, there's a vista to inhale — and history to



Even the bathroom has a beautiful view in this condo.

remember.

“It's almost a 360-degree panorama,” Donaldson says, walking in bare feet from room to room, lookout to lookout.

Turn left into the kitchen and the view is due south, looking along the Grand River through old Galt. The new \$8-million Cambridge Mill on the river is centre left,

while three downtown bridges — Parkhill, Main and Concession — follow the river downstream toward Brantford.

Turn right to enter what Donaldson calls “the perch.” It was likely marked as a breakfast nook on the original floor plan. The 90-degree corner room has big windows on both exterior walls, giving a panorama half-way around the compass, from south to north.

Donaldson put couches along the windows, offering a place to pause as the sun rises — or sets. Or to watch summer thunderstorms roll through the valley.

On an accent table at the apex, there is a framed watercolour of the “New Presbyterian Church” in Galt. Look up and the slate-roof landmark is clearly visible to the south, at Queen's Square. The 1889 building was renamed Central Presbyterian by the time Donaldson worshipped there.

A dozen strides to the right, through the dining area, are slider doors to the



The main bedroom has large windows looking west over the river and Barb Donaldson's childhood home on Blenheim Road.

balcony.

Before stepping outside, Donaldson intends first-time visitors to pause at a stained, framed original print of the Galt

skyline from 1858. Outside, the forested view from “the terrace” isn't much different today, except for more houses and a few apartment blocks rising ►

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► through the foliage.

Anyone wary of heights will swallow hard walking outside. With safety glass below the single metal rail, there's an exhilarating sense of standing on the edge of a cliff.

From 12 storeys up, you look down on ospreys fishing for lunch in the lazy river. Canadian Pacific Railway trains trundle below to the right, across the trestle heading westward to labour up the Galt Ridge. The tracks follow a sweeping arc to defeat a grade that's steeper than some found in the Canadian Rockies.

There's also a view of Dickson Park, created in 1871 and named after Galt's founder, William Dickson. The baseball diamond and grandstand are home to the Cambridge Cubs on sultry summer evenings.

“My dad used to take us to Galt Terriers games as a child. Now I see the ball games at night. It's so nostalgic for me.”

Down the hall past the living room is her bedroom along with the main bathroom, another room with two walls of glass meeting in a corner. This room is minimally decorated, dominated by an oversized, stand-alone bathtub for a luxurious soak with a sunset view.

Donaldson isn't bothered much by all the floor-to-ceiling glass. Even though she can see clearly out, friends tell her nobody can see in these windows high over Galt.

Next door is the guest room. There, the window is smaller, but the view just as important to Donaldson.

On the table is a collector's plate of Galt Collegiate Institute, marking its 150th anniversary in 2002. It's the place where she learned basic office skills that helped her later launch a self-made business career. Look up from the plate to see the limestone towers of what's believed to be the oldest continuously operating school in Ontario.

It's a utilitarian lookout, compared to the river vistas offered by the rest of the windows. Where those picture-postcard views tell a story of Galt's roots as a factory town, the north is all about today and tomorrow.

To the left, on a clear day, look for the exhaust towers over the sprawling Toyota Motor Manufacturing factory north of Highway 401. To the right, a white water tower pops out of the surprisingly verdant landscape along Pinebush Road near Townline Road. And up the middle is busy Hespeler Road, the city's new commercial heart.

The only rooms without a view are the laundry — it's nearly as big as the kitchen — and a study just inside the front door.

The Waterscape property at the north junction of Ainslie and Water streets is no stranger to Donaldson. She remembers walking past the three-storey Dobbie textile mill building that stood there when she attended Galt Collegiate.

She vividly remembers the wreckage of two steam railway engines beside the school in May 1956, after they collided on the railway bridge and tumbled onto Water Street. Two train crew died. One was Tom Watson, 20. Donaldson knew him as a family neighbour on Blenheim Road.

Donaldson doesn't lament moving from 1 Brant Rd., a home she spent two decades restoring from apartments into a showpiece.

Keeping it looking like a spread in a home fashion magazine, however, required a lot of work. Four years ago, a fall on the ice-covered lane left her with a shattered ankle and a long recovery. It didn't stop her annual New Year's Eve party, but it reinforced her search for a home needing less work.

As she was looking around Cambridge for a condominium, she learned of plans for Waterscape. She took two units on the top floor, joined them, and put her house up for sale.

The old house took 18 months to sell as Waterscape climbed floor by floor into the sky.

“It was exciting, so exciting” to plan a new home, from scratch, she says.

Waterscape interior designer David Hooper helped with the room layout. Donaldson hired Tami Van Dyke to design window treatments and bed coverings. Willow ►

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► House on Main Street was also called upon to help with decorating rooms with three-metre (10-foot ceilings).

"I always knew what I wanted. It wasn't overly difficult," Donaldson says.

It wasn't, however, always easy to stay on the path from Brant Road to Water Street, Donaldson says.

When friends asked why she was leaving her beautiful house, her resolve wavered. She'd pause in her gardens, wondering how she could live without them. The daughter of an antique dealer, Donaldson faced a deep cull of fine things collected over a lifetime. It took years – and three yard sales – to ready for a move from a 5,600-square-foot house to a 2,810-square-foot condominium.

Early on, she asked longtime friends and Brant Road neighbours Gord and Ceilia Chaplin to look over her Waterscape plans. Gord Chaplin remembers being impressed with Donaldson's choice –

and promptly signed on for a double-size unit on the 11th floor, immediately below hers.

"We were in a three-floor house, the children had moved out and we were down to only using a couple of rooms," he says.

"When we went to look at it, we thought it was a heck of a good thing."

A lifelong railway buff, Chaplin, 70, enjoys watching the Canadian Pacific diesels rumble below his windows. By spring, he hopes to have one room set up with his railway memorabilia and model trains.

Preparing to move from 6,000 square feet to 2,810 took almost four years and multiple visits by Old Town Hall Auctions in Paris, Ont. But picking away at 30 years of memories wasn't the heart-wrenching process Chaplin expected.

"After Paris auctions came by and took some items, a couple days later we'd look at the empty space and say: What did we

have there?"

Even so, he advises big doses of patience when making so big a life move.

"It took longer than we planned, but it all worked out," he says.

"You want to be ready before you make your move. You really have to look before you leap."

Looking back, Donaldson is glad she didn't waver on the path to Waterscape.

"I think it's a matter of not waiting too long" to decide a life change is needed, Donaldson says.

"I'm really glad I started when I did. I can't imagine starting now. It's been four, five years."

The purchase agreement closed April 14 – her birthday — and she moved in May 2.

"To leave the responsibilities of Brant Road was a relief," Donaldson says.

"It's the package. It's simplifying my life and the views of a beautiful setting. The views here: it just doesn't get any better." ☺

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