

Lodgings for the elderly — Italian-Canadian style

This article, written by Forbes Brown, appeared in Vol. 20, No. 1 of *Habitat*, a publication of Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Following are excerpts:

A corner of sunny Italy seems to have dropped down on the north side of Toronto's Playfair Avenue. There the Mediterranean-style arches of Villa Colombo, a new home for senior citizens, stand in pink-tinged splendour on formal landscaped grounds.

Everything from the flower-festooned vine arbour in the gardens outside, to the ornate water fountain in the indoor "courtyard" tell the visitor that this isn't your ordinary old folks' home.

Villa Colombo, which took in its first residents early in 1976, will, when fully occupied, house close to 200 elderly Italian Canadians. In addition to the permanent lodgers, a daily drop-in program attracts some 90 elderly visitors from the community outside. They are driven to the Villa and returned to their homes five days a week in a pair of buses named, appropriately "Pinta" and "Nina" after two of the ships that brought Columbus to North America. On weekends the Villa is often the scene of concerts by local musicians — well-attended by residents' friends, relatives, and visitors from a Jewish old folks' residence in the area.

Youthful visitors

Another feature that makes the Villa more of a community centre than an old people's home is the children's day-care centre in the colourful basement area. Here, in bright, well-equipped rooms, youngsters from two to five years of age, led in activities by a youthful supervisor, have a mid-day meal, afternoon nap, and games in the enclosed yard outside. The elderly residents may stop by to have a look, pat a young head, or do some "babysitting" if they wish.

This unique experiment was realized through the hard work and imagination of members of the Canadian-Italian Benevolent Corporation, which owns and operates the \$4.6-million home. After careful investigation of several similar Italian homes that had been established in the United States, the financial groundwork for the project was laid through a fund-raising dinner, personal canvass and



The old-world style courtyard.

telethon in the Italian community. The association then approached Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation for help in financing the mortgage. As a charitable organization, the association qualified, under the provisions of the National Housing Act, for a 50-year mortgage at the lower-than-market rate of 8 per cent, and a contribution of 10 per cent of the capital cost. Through CMHC's Toronto branch, a loan was negotiated for some \$2.65 million along with an outright federal grant of \$311,040. Through Ontario's Community and Social Services Branch, the province assists with operating costs at a *per diem* rate of \$13.50 per bed. (The five-storey building provides for 192 beds.) Residents pay on a sliding-scale basis according to ability, and the difference in the cost of operation is covered by the charitable contributions from the Italian community.

Home away from home

All the touches are there to make the residence a home to its inhabitants — from the espresso at the "café", to the wine and pasta on the dining room menu, to the tomato patch in the backyard. And this attention to detail is echoed in the features of the structure itself.

Upon entering the building, you find yourself within an old world courtyard with water musically cascading down a five-tiered fountain into a circular pool. The glass-domed skylight, tiled floor and *colonnade* add to the atmosphere and charm of the *galleria*. This charm extends to the *piazzetta* beyond, where wrought-iron tables and chairs, arranged in a corner under the green and white canopy of the tuck shop, provide the ideal spot for the men to gather for cards. An adjacent lounge is used by the residents for

chatting with visitors, with an electric organ available for the musically inclined.

On the west side of the courtyard is the *Sala Caboto*, fitted with stage and sound system for concerts, meetings and dances. Next to this area is the dining room, and a kitchen equipped to serve 1,500 people at one sitting, if required. The north side of the *piazzetta* is dominated by a floor-to-ceiling mosaic tile mural depicting the immigration of the Italian people to Canada and their settlement here. As you approach the elevator, large ornate doors indicate the entrance to the chapel, trapezoid in shape, with stained-glass windows on two sides and the 14 stations of the Cross in bronze on the third.

Dining on all floors

Each floor boasts its own small dining room so that residents do not have to go down to the main dining area. Doorways to the bedrooms are recessed to eliminate the straight, institutional look and also have a small alcove for people to stop and gossip without impeding traffic flow. A sunroom at the end of each corridor offers a bright corner for quiet pursuits such as reading or sewing.

Windows overlook the gardens and courts used for *bocce*, a game similar to lawn bowling. Each floor is equipped with a nursing station, medicine room, bathroom with hydraulic chair in the tub, shower room and "quiet" room. The rooms are tastefully decorated, bright and airy, each equipped with a washroom.

The below-grade level has areas for a full laundry as well as washers and dryers for individual use, an exercise gym, hair-dressing salon, games room, wine cellar and woodworking shop. Crafts are taught to those residents who are interested.

The Villa was constructed adjacent to a Roman Catholic Separate School and some of the students assist at special functions, in crafts and in the kitchen. This two-way arrangement gives the elderly a feeling of belonging in the community while the students learn the responsibilities of looking after their seniors. With a small shopping area only a block or two away, those persons able to walk without difficulty can get a bit of exercise and a change of scenery.

All in all, the visitor concludes that the adventurous spirit and foresight of Christopher Columbus has surely inspired the designers of Villa Colombo.