

HIGH-RISE MARKET ripe for retrofit

By Kathleen Sibley

Security installers find lucrative market in upgrading security at urban towers

Canadians have long had a love affair with residential high rises. It began about 40 years ago, when high-rise towers were erected across urban centres as low-cost housing mostly for new immigrants. Today, many of those high-rises are coming up for renewal, as cities look for ways to increase their stock of affordable, energy-efficient and neighbourhood-friendly housing. Security upgrades are often part of those projects.

The recent condo craze has also fuelled the growth of hundreds of new high-rise developments, and security is almost always a key selling feature in new condo construction.

That means plenty of opportunity for today's tech-savvy security integrator to sell developers, property managers and condo boards security systems that can increase efficiency and better protect people and property.

Graeme Brown, director of security and integration at Alberta-based Contract Security Inc., cites tailgating, vagrancy and break-ins into common areas such as laundry rooms and parkades as the biggest security issues for high-rise residential buildings.

Many new condo buildings are now being designed to accommodate IP-based access control and video surveillance technologies using products initially designed for commercial applications, he says. Such products provide a base security system on the common areas, including access control and video surveillance cameras, and expand through a bus communications system up to individual suites, providing each suite with its own independent security system running off the main panel, he says.

"It's basically suite and tenant integration into a complex IP-based system that enables property management to administer these systems remotely or onsite,"

he says. "Each tenant still has autonomous control of his or her own system."

Sometimes in older buildings, notes Stuart Armour, a relatively small security upgrade can save thousands of dollars.

Armour, whose Burnaby, B.C.-based firm Affordable Security Systems recently completed a project on a 20-year-old, 125-suite Burnaby building, says the client paid his company about \$6,000 to retrofit the existing alarm system for the property manager's suite and the recreation area, which included a swimming pool.

Affordable installed a new alarm system with scheduling capabilities to alarm and disarm automatically, and designed and built an enunciation system that plays a message every 15 minutes notifying residents it's time to vacate the pool, starting an hour before the pool closes.

"They were paying a private guard company to come every night at 11 to make sure the pool area was vacated and the alarm armed," he explains. "That was a significant ongoing expense when they were scrutinizing the project."

The client was able to eliminate that cost — an estimated \$15-\$20 a day, or about \$500 a month — and within a year, says Armour, the new system would pay for itself.

Another integrator, Carlo Di Leo, owner of Richmond Hill, Ont.-based Double Vision Group Inc., helped an Ottawa property management firm improve security and cut costs by switching from a key-based to a Brivo IP-based access system on 75 main entrance/exit doors across 10 buildings with about 300 units per building. The project cost the customer about \$200,000 for everything, including the keys and fobs.

Di Leo explains that not only was it expensive to have to rekey apartment and building entrance doors when a tenant was evicted, it was also a huge security risk, because anyone could make a copy of the keys.

"Now if they have to kick someone out, they just delete the person from the system and they're gone; the card is deactivated," he says.

The system provides automatic backup and data archiving for one year, and is easier to manage than a server-based system, Di Leo says.

In addition, property management can log in from head office and view all the doors across the network. They can also give each building its own permission and access levels, so each building manager can log in remotely from anywhere and see only the doors and buildings he or she has access to. All residents, contractors and staff can have cards with preprogrammed access levels and permissions.

The system can also "tag" certain tenants — such as those who haven't paid their rent — and automatically alert management when that person enters the building. Management can also use it to match a contractor's invoice for hours worked with building access records.

Often, high-rise building owners will keep an existing security system running virtually on duct tape, until it's apparent that's no longer feasible.

Ed Fitchett, owner of Fitch Surveillance Systems Inc. in Toronto and Ontario president of CANASA, describes a project his company did last year on an exclusive Forest Hill complex comprising 40 townhouses, one 14- and one eight-storey tower.

The \$200,000, six-week undertaking involved

replacing an outdated CondoPlex system with new Verex suite alarm panels, and installing an AWID long-range gate entry system, new Panasonic and GE cameras, GE DVRs and a fully upgraded Enterphone. The concierge gatehouse was also retrofitted for greater efficiency and improved ease of use.

According to Fitchett, the existing system had been designed so that all the CCTV cameras, insuite alarm systems, access control components and other building controls reported to a single platform. "So when the platform failed, it failed catastrophically," he notes. "It would take down nearly the entire thing."

The original system ran on a proprietary DOS-based PC with a number of add-ons. There was one PC for access control, a printer just for the alarm system and a large directory awkwardly mounted on the wall of the guardhouse so the concierge could call the residents. There were also numerous nine-inch monitors in various states of disrepair and some elderly panning-tilting units.

Once his company started to dismantle the system, it was clear nothing could be salvaged. The first step, he says, was to replace the insuite alarms, which might sound simple enough, but wasn't.

"It becomes very difficult when a new condo board is incorporated and in one or two years it wants to incorporate new cameras."

For one thing, there was no uniformity to the size of the old panels and the surfaces they were mounted on.

"It's not like a new building," Fitchett says. "Some had glass wall panels, some had wall paper; some were painted. All the surfaces were different, and in some cases the keypad was smaller ... so in some cases we had to provide a backing plate."

On top of that, he was unable to obtain any of the original building schemes to find out where there was conduit. He did find out, though, that some conduit crossed expansion joints in sections of concrete that moved, partially destroying cables. "We would find conduits sheared, disabled or destroyed, but we wouldn't know until we got into the job."

Once the insuite alarm systems were replaced, the company upgraded the Enterphone to a new Enterphone 2000, and outfitted the guardhouse with new monitors and computers. Then it added two long-range car

credential readers, which allow residents to enter and exit the compound and the underground via a device on the car windshield and two pole-mounted readers.

Subhead: Standing out among the rest

Ed Pauk, security account executive at Chubb Security Systems in Mississauga, Ont., says one way condo developers seek to differentiate their developments from others is by providing the amenities and features buyers are looking for. In today's market, where single women are an increasingly large percentage of the buying market, security is one of those differentiators, he says.

"Security is always a concern because you have lot of single-parent families (buying condos), so developers will put on their equity sheet that there are cameras in the underground parking areas, panic assist systems and other features such as telephone entry to let guests in," he says.

Panic assist systems function either via hardwired buttons on an intercom system available on every level of the underground parking or via a radio frequency button on the resident's underground access fob. If the system is properly designed, once that button is activated the concierge or security guard at the front desk will know who hit the button and where, he says.

Retrofitting old buildings is always more difficult than working with new construction where a system has been planned for, but even if a building is relatively new, it can be a challenge to incorporate new security equipment, Pauk adds.

"With new construction all the cabling is done in the slab," he says. "It becomes very difficult when you do a new project and then a new condo board is incorporated and in one or two years the board wants to incorporate new cameras. A lot of time developers will leave off a camera viewing the concierge desk, and nine times out of 10, the board of directors wants it."

The problem, he explains, is that "you can't get from point A to B easily — if there's a dropped ceiling, it's no problem, but if there's a solid ceiling, you have to use Panduit or conduit and they won't like that.

"So I will also caution developers that it's a good idea to at least plumb for it so in the future you can just add it. Doing it after the fact costs 10 times more."

Di Leo agrees, and adds integrators need to be able to show prospective customers not only the initial costs of implementing a new security system, but the ongoing maintenance costs. That's a challenge in the high-rise residential market where property managers know they may not be managing a building in five years but want to be able to demonstrate the biggest bang for their security buck today, he notes.

Kathleen Sibley is a Toronto-based freelance writer. ■