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SELLING the
DREAM

As the city grows, Vancouver's
real estate visionaries raise their game



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rock'n'roll odyssey

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There's little doubt: Vancouver is Canada's foremost real estate boomtown. Now, just as the city seems to have reached its peak, along comes Jameson House. A downtown high-rise development that respects both urban ecology and high-tech living, it's also realty mogul Bob Rennie's homage to the clout of its architects — London's mighty Foster and Partners — and the rise of Vancouver to the international stage.

Cover photo by Doug Shanks

In Vancouver real estate, the future is now

As the city evolves, its most famous home seller keeps one step ahead of the curve

By Michael Harris

You are whom you associate with,” says Bob Rennie, of Rennie Marketing Systems, sitting over coffee at a Hornby Street café. The notion is enough to make a humble writer feel momentarily important, considering Rennie has been ranked, on more than one occasion, among the most powerful people in town by *Vancouver* magazine’s annual Power List (he topped it in 2004). In a city for which real estate is a favourite sport — the longest-lasting love affair, the most guilt-inducing form of pornography — it makes sense that a man like Rennie — director of sales for high-profile residential/commercial developments such as Woodward’s, Shangri-La and the Wall Centre — wields so much authority.

Too often, our homes are sold to us as mere investments, not living spaces. What Rennie has mastered (and, arguably, invented) is the selling of a lifestyle, rather than a box in the sky. And with Jameson House, a forthcoming multi-purpose tower at 838 West Hastings, he will be pitching his sales expertise toward the well-heeled urbanites who desire what he calls “the civil side of luxury” (the ill-mannered side of luxury being a market already cornered by many other realtors).

Due to open in Fall 2009, Jameson House will begin at ground level with a café that transforms at night into a cocktail lounge. Above it will sprout 13 storeys of commercial space, before transforming again into its crowning glory: “residential art” on floors 14 through 37. With its two-storey penthouses and curvaceous “O” suites (because, sometimes, right angles just feel wrong), the development has prospective buyers atwitter over tank-concealed designer toilets and transformable kitchen counters that double as office space. All these goodies are provided by the building’s architectural firm, London-based powerhouse Foster and Partners, in an uncommonly impressive amalgam of interior design and architecture. “It stands up to the best of Vancouver,” says Rennie, whose sales strategy is heavily enmeshed with the clout of Foster and Partners. For the uninitiated, these are the people responsible for designing the Millennium Bridge in London, the courtyard of the Smithsonian Institution, and Beijing Airport (the world’s largest).

Of course, the flipside to such refined taste is that form can often trump function. While other showrooms are festooned with silk orchards and elaborate displays of silicone foodstuff, the Jameson House presentation centre on West Pender has adopted the sort of minimalist/futurist aesthetic (sleek surfaces with nothing on



PHOTO: DOUG SHANKS

Bob Rennie (left), of Rennie Marketing Systems, and Foster and Partners architect Lee Hallman, at Jameson House’s minimalist/futuristic presentation centre.

them) that implies that the residents of such digs should not indulge in such base acts as eating or using the washroom. The blessed few who are immune to shedding hairs or leaving fingerprints will feel very much at ease in this gleaming pod.

The presentation centre includes models and photos of other Foster and Partners projects, upping by association the worth of the company’s first North American residential building. And Rennie makes sure those associations hold sway, tailoring his sales strategy to people who want “more than just a different shade of granite.” At Jameson House’s launch party, a local Mercedes dealership simultaneously launched the new S550, thus reminding the crowd just what sort of people they are. Rennie isn’t selling you a place to live; he’s selling you a life to live.

Still, for a six- or seven-figure condo, we might demand more than the real-estate equivalent of a pretty face; we want a meaningful relationship — so long as it doesn’t actually get in the way of that pretty face. Foster and Partners may be a world-class firm, but they haven’t entered the local market without appreciating Vancouver’s existing sensibilities. Jameson House will be a soaring glass sculpture, rooted by stone heritage buildings: the existing Ceperley-Rounsfell building, a heritage ‘A’-list building constructed

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in 1929, will be restored to its original double-height stature, complete with glass ceiling; and the adjacent Royal Financial Building is receiving a façade facelift since, says Foster architect Lee Hallman, the interior could not be saved. (Hallman argues that “...with that building, the heritage pretty much ends at the façade, anyway”). In a city where little more than tokenism is often paid to historic architecture, façade retention has come under fire of late, sparking the question: what do we mean by ‘heritage?’

The typical Vancouver buyer will find heritage qualities valuable at least as bragging rights, even if the designers of Jameson House had loftier intentions. And the Foster firm’s deference to Vancouver’s architectural scene does appear to go beyond lip service. When the Foster architects joined Rennie for dinner and found themselves in the company of local architectural guru Arthur Erickson, they literally bowed down before him. “It was so sincere,” says Rennie. “They respect what is here.” This ethos of respect — one that Erickson has devoted his professional life to nurturing — is an idea of buildings that stand undeniably and specifically in their landscape. Each home or office must be borne of its environment.

It’s a philosophy to which Jameson House’s developers, the Pappajohns brothers — who

have a considerable track record of heritage projects — are amenable, and one that Foster and Partners has always maintained. “The aspirations married perfectly,” says Hallman.

Jameson House also keys in to Vancouver’s eco-friendly self-image: the building has been designed “from the beginning, with sustainability in mind,” says Hallman. It’s an initiative that, aside from appealing to the PC sensibilities of Vancouver’s hippie-cum-yuppie consumer, also makes good financial sense. The building’s mixed-use nature allows for myriad energy-saving initiatives: rooftop gardens align with the dream of local landscape designer Cornelia Oberlander, who envisions a city in which the footprint of every building is replaced with green space on its rooftop; and an independent generator for the development will be powered by an as-yet-undetermined alternative fuel. Jameson House is even aerodynamic, a handy trick that Hallman says “increases the livability of balconies.”

One final ecological bonus: the coolest parking lot the West Coast has ever seen. Jameson House snubs its nose at old-fashioned “people” valets — why go for humans when you can install really big machines? Two auto-valets will shuttle vehicles into compact storage for the building’s residents and office workers, to be retrieved at the swipe of a card (the entire process takes 90 seconds). “It’s something that came out of need,” admits Hallman, citing the limited square footage that would have made a conventional parking lot too cramped. But this automated car park — the first of its kind on the continent — is now considered an eco-friendly (and safety-minded) asset. Rennie says worries over mid-morning retrieval congestion are unfounded since “this demographic, they don’t all go to work at the same time.” (Two floors of conventional parking will also be made available.)

Such innovative measures, and the crowded downtown core that necessitates them, are signs, to Rennie, of Vancouver’s imminent rise as an internationally competitive city. Its real-estate boom certainly points in that direction, even while detractors grumble about a soon-to-be-bursting bubble. Rennie, perhaps predictably, has a more optimistic vision. “It’s all in balance,” he says of Vancouver’s growth. “We’re Canadian, so we want it to be a bubble. We don’t accept success easily.”

Of course, the residents of Jameson House, who will pay between approximately \$500,000 and \$4.75 million for their slices of Foster pie, will most likely be acclimatized to success already. The staffers at Jameson House’s presentation centre clam up if you ask them for the final selling price of the one penthouse suite that has sold. Rennie has no such qualm: “\$5.4 million,” he says, smiling, before ducking down Hornby Street, reaching for his cell phone.

If you are, as Rennie says, whom you associate with, then Vancouver just gained a 37-storey social ladder. A ladder that is currently 60 per cent sold out. **W**