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In the University of Toronto's new pharmacy building, lecture-room pods hang like mushroom-induced hallucinations in the entrance atrium.

CITYSPACE FOSTER AND PARTNERS

Fostering great buildings



Thanks to some smart clients, the Picasso of architecture is making his mark in Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary, **LISA ROCHON** writes

Superstar architects are given permission to play and to dream. The rest are punished for reverie. And there you have it: How wonderful and unfair the design world can be. Norman Foster is one of the blessed, a brilliant thinker who has enjoyed more aura than trauma since setting up his London studio in 1967. Though his iconic buildings grace much of the planet, it's only now, as conjurer

of urban visions in Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary, that Foster and Partners has seriously begun to infiltrate Canada.

It's well understood that by partnering closely with the boldest engineers, Foster has gained a reputation over the last three decades as an innovator. He is to architecture what Picasso was to modern art. With Foster and Partners, there has been a consistent reinvention of

building types: the airport (Stansted Airport, near London), the sustainable commercial tower (Commerzbank in Frankfurt), the corporate icon (the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank) and urban placemaking through the reinvention of a cultural monument (the Carré d'art in Nîmes, France, and the British Museum's Great Court in London). Along the way, clients were required to leave banality in the dust and indulge the creative process — which is what they did. About 600 people now work for the Foster studio.

Architecture can change your experience of the everyday. That's the messianic refrain convincingly argued by Foster, and institutions around the world want a piece of

that rhetoric. Ten years ago at the University of Toronto, it would have been nearly impossible to imagine that the Faculty of Pharmacy would occupy a pivotal site at the corner of the city's University Avenue and College Street and, indeed, that its signature Leslie L. Dan Pharmacy Building would be designed by Foster and Partners, with lecture-room pods brilliantly lit and suspended like mushroom-induced hallucinations in the entrance atrium. Nig Dancey, senior partner for Foster and Partners in charge of the Canadian trio of projects, says they were intended to add softness to an otherwise rectilinear building, and they are gorgeous things to behold.

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At 70, Norman Foster still the innovator

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Students and faculty will be able to cross a catwalk and drink coffee on the roofs of the ovoid pods — the lounges there will become the ultimate perch from which to gaze upon the city.

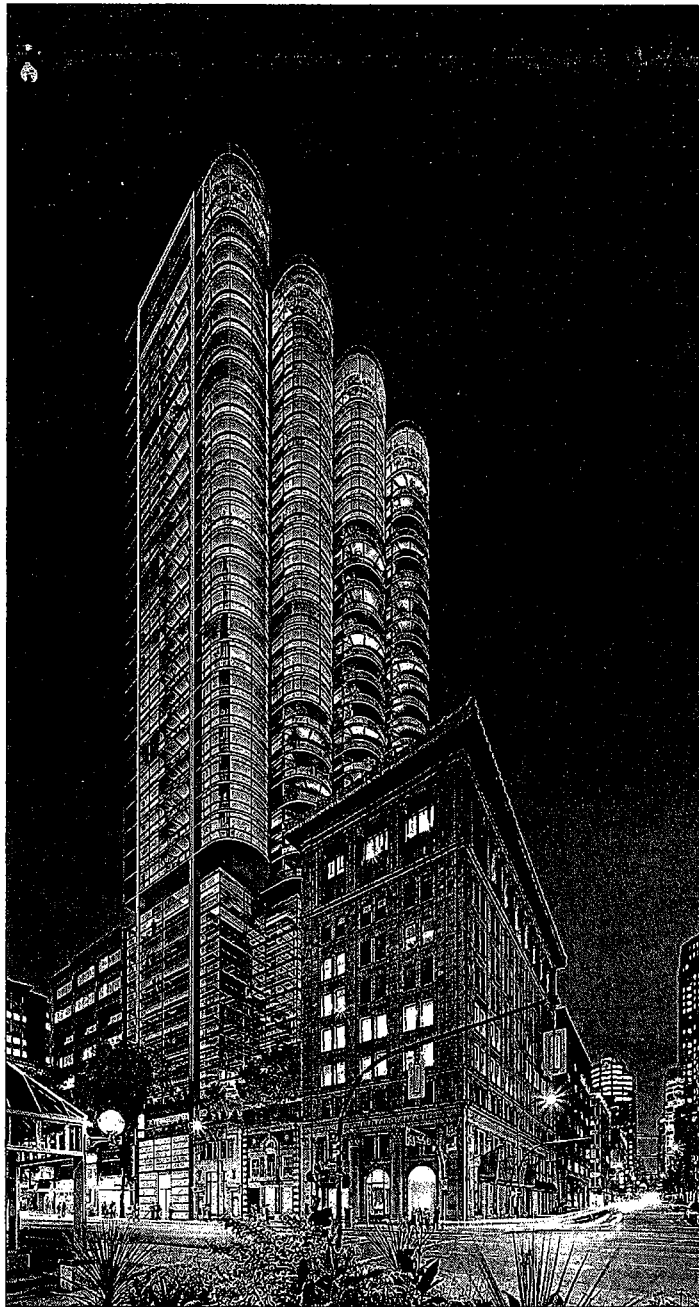
As a building held aloft on concrete columns poured 20 metres high, as a crisply detailed curtain wall with extra-large panes of glass shipped from Belgium, as a visual feast read from the street, the pharmacy building by Foster makes our hearts beat a little faster. The \$75-million building is enlivened by an atrium that drops 16 vertiginous stories from mechanicals to basement, bringing light to most of the offices and test labs. And, there are civic-minded pedestrian walkways around the tower connecting it to the new and historic buildings.

But, let's keep a clear mind and resist idol worship, even if Lord Foster is considered a British national treasure. The building has its faults. For one, though slick and seductive from the outside, the suspended pods suffer from poor acoustics and are essentially claustrophobic — classes there will be like teaching in a sweat lodge, without the benefit of a purifying fire. Undergraduate students have been sequestered to a mostly lifeless and lightless existence underground, where they will spend most of their day travelling from one lecture hall to another, along dreary hallways made all the more formulaic by the inclusion of 1,000 grey lockers.

Across the Atlantic, on the second floor of Foster's London studio, a couple dozen architects are at work on the Calgary project for the latest Canadian client to walk in the door. EnCana is the largest oil and gas producer in North America, an employer of 4,000 that is awkwardly spread over five different office facilities in Calgary. Though details of the project are being kept quiet until zoning is secured, the complex is intended to regenerate the area east of Centre Street and is likely to include two towers rising to 60 storeys.

The goal is to animate the street experience, and to provide courtyards and landscaped paths as a rich alternative to the deadening above-ground walkways known in Calgary as the Plus-15 system. Calgary may be booming, but its skyline is bogged down with uninspired towers of reinforced concrete. Foster is aiming to introduce steel structures animated by an abundance of natural light and roof terraces. Finding skilled labour to erect the steel towers will require some tenacity, new immigrants and a little magic.

While Foster and Partners will be the lead design architects on the EnCana project, the consultants include Calgary urban designer Jeremy Sturgess, interior-design firm Gensler, and project architect Zei-



Jameson House: More than two years in the making, the design for this Vancouver tower changes shape as it rises from retail to residences.

idler Partnership. What's been noticed by the Canadians is that playtime is intense work. "Norman Foster at 70 years old isn't embarrassed to have a lot of innovative ideas out on the table and he's very comfortable with that position," says David Jefferies, managing project architect for Zeidler Partnership. "There's a very free and open flow of ideas. They can turn on a powerhouse of ideas generation."

Foster also remains intensely competitive, still determined to improve his performance at cross-country skiing, a passion that leads him to cover 700 kilometres every winter before completing a marathon in the Swiss Engadine Valley. This could help to explain why Foster has become an international phenomenon.

"I know of no firm capable of generating the amount of work [Foster and Partners] can generate in a period of seven days," says Jefferies, who has been in meetings with Foster in London. "Whereas we might say 'Our client is happy with this, let's go with the concept,' Foster will say, 'Wait, there's more, and go another round for review.'" Dozens of models are brought to a meeting and clients will be encouraged to play with the models, to stack them in different ways, to see how light can enter the building.

The Pappajohns from Vancouver are the third major client from Canada to commission Foster. Engaged in the past with regeneration of historic buildings, the Pappajohns — a trio of brothers — have cultivated a sophisticated taste for

contemporary architecture and are fans of the British architect. Their 37-storey Jameson House is a sustainable tower that generates its own power and changes shape according to its uses: from the rectangular ground-floor retail and office space, the building takes on an expressive, organic shape for the condominium units.

Jameson is located on a tight site on West Hastings Street, with one 1921 historic building to be restored and another historic façade to be retained. The curtain wall has been carefully articulated to reduce excessive heat gain while exploiting views. A fully automated parking system — the first of its kind in North America — is estimated to cost less than excavating 2½-storeys down to rock on the site.

"We were very lucky here," says Foster and Partners architect Lee Hallman, who is now based in Vancouver to manage the Jameson project along with heritage architect Robert Lemon and Walter Francl Architect. "We have a client that is very sympathetic to good architecture and appreciates that it's not an easy thing to achieve. It takes time and they gave us that time."

Jameson House has been two years and four months in design development — an excruciating loss of time for most developers — and is now about to begin construction. Last week, the marketing suite opened to the public, showcasing condominium units priced from between \$600,000 to \$2.5-million. Two of the exclusive penthouse suites have already sold.

Jameson's marketing studies indicate that Vancouver can sustain high-end design by celebrity architects (though designer condominiums in New York have indicated weak sales of late) and so Foster is not just lead architect of the mixed-use tower. His firm will also be outfitting the kitchens and washrooms with Foster-designed cabinetry, backsplashes and even faucets shaped to align with the shape of the hand. The palette for the kitchens uses white glass, black ceramic or wood. Washrooms use backlit translucent Spanish alabaster, white translucent marble from Turkey or green onyx from Italy.

Unless people begin to tire of innovation and reinvention, the work of Foster and Partners is sure to turn up more often in our cities. The firm has been short-listed for the \$20-million master plan and public-space design of Toronto's central waterfront. Though it may be considered small potatoes, the commission represents a strategic entry to other, potentially bigger commissions along the water's edge. Word is that other interested clients have been ringing from Canada. And they all want to play.

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