

condo

[THIS IS THE LIFE!]

Star Next Door

*Dropping in on
Gabrielle Miller
of Corner Gas and
Robson Arms*

**Outdoor
Rooms**
Balcony
gardens
and décor

**Show
Suites**
Smart
ideas
for you
to steal

Plus
Ottoman
beds, tiny
chandeliers,
furniture
for small
spaces



Go Big, Go Small
Inside a grand new
Erickson townhouse
and a 640-square-foot
Gastown loft



STYLE & substance

the fame game

Big-name architects are all the rage in condo development. Now what will they do for Vancouver? BY LAUREL WELLMAN

Sometime in the past decade, “Vancouverism” became one of the city’s most notable exports. One moment, the skeletons of condo towers were rising along the shores of False Creek; the next, urban planners everywhere wanted to know how they could bring high-density living to their own downtowns.

But while it’s been exporting planning expertise, Vancouver hasn’t enjoyed a reciprocal influx of great architecture. Oh, sure, that downtown wall of green glass towers is striking from a distance. Up close, though, most of its component buildings aren’t particularly distinguished—and in fact, the words many architects use to describe them are significantly less flattering.

Hong Kong’s Chek Lap Kok Airport was designed by U.K. architect Norman Foster. Next, Jameson House in Vancouver.

Top: The Millennium Bridge (left) and British Museum Great Court (right) by Norman Foster. Bottom: The Chatham, in New York by A.M. Stern.



That may be about to change. “What we’ve noticed is the developers who are coming to us are not looking for mainstream solutions,” says architect Mark Ostry of Vancouver’s Acton Ostry Architects. “They’re using design as an opportunity to distinguish what they’re doing.”

Avant-garde condo towers? Not quite—but the design bar appears to be rising. On a recent Saturday, would-be buyers flocked to the Jameson House sales centre, where wooden floor-plan models were tastefully kitted out with tiny Le Corbusier chaises and miniature, monochrome renderings of classic modern art.

The big-name architect behind this striking new tower is Norman Foster—the Pritzker Prize-winning modernist more famously responsible for projects like London’s Millennium Bridge, Hong Kong’s Chek Lap Kok airport and the Great Court at the British Museum. Meanwhile West Vancouver’s forthcoming Water’s Edge is the work of Robert A.M. Stern, whose previous projects include two Euro Disney hotels and the town of Celebration, Florida. And Arthur Erickson, who needs no introduction, has designed a sinuous condo tower that will soon rise on Concord Pacific Place.

Not everyone is impressed. Architect John Patkau, no admirer of many of the city’s condo towers, says their developers are using

celebrity architects not from concern with quality but as a marketing strategy: “What they’re doing is hiring architects who essentially have become commodities, brands.”

Still, it’s condo purchasers—already accustomed to the kind of perk inflation that’s made features like granite countertops standard in new developments—who will decide if they’re willing to pay a premium for big-name buildings. And despite the curatorial aspirations implied when sales materials describe a new condo development as a “collection” of “residences,” the question remains: are they likely to find the imprimatur of a top architect ensures truly artful design?

In some cases, yes. “You can actually tell there is a quality difference in the layout,” says UBC assistant professor of architecture Oliver Neumann. “You get a decent architect and they know how to design a box that might even work.” Neumann, who’s been shopping for a condo of his own, says prospective buyers should pay attention to floor plans; space and flexibility are better value than high-end finishes. Envision the exposure of the building and the unit you’re considering carefully, he advises; sales materials may depict mountain views, but on a lower floor “you get to look into the car dealership across the street.”

As yet, big-name architects have made only a small impact on the city. “We’re not going to have the quality of architecture in Vancouver increase overnight,” notes Ostry. Still, it’s not inconceivable that one day “Vancouverism” may connote not just a praiseworthy cityscape but praiseworthy buildings too. ■

PREVIOUS PAGE: DORIS CHEUNG THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: NIGEL YOUNG/FOSTER AND PARTNERS PETER AARON/ESTO DENNIS GILBERT/VIEW



FROM TOP: ROBERT KWONG, KIM CHRISTIE, JAMESON DEVELOPMENT CORP.

Jameson House

[BUY THE CONDO] Incorporating two heritage buildings, which are being restored, at its base, the 37-storey mixed-use Jameson House, designed by Foster and Partners from the U.K., is otherwise super modern. Its curved windows make it look aerodynamic, and so it is, designed to be sensitive to prevailing winds and other climatic phenomena. It's also green, both in terms of sustainability (fuel and water efficient) and vegetation (rooftop and other gardens). To be completed in 2008, the 126 suites are 600 to 2,100 square feet; \$600,000 to \$2.5 million. Five two-storey penthouses range from 2,500 to 3,500 square feet; prices upon application.

[STEAL THE LOOK] Foster and Partners design the interiors of their buildings as well as the shell. Here the walls are clad in sheets of tinted glass instead of tiles. Floors are Italian travertine, and a recessed translucent stone shelf runs the length of the room. The walk-in shower is the same level as the rest of the room thanks to a sunken floor covered with a stainless steel grate so water runs through the grate instead of through the bathroom.—F.S.