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Mid-rise innovation hits heights

Striking developments look to break monotony of Vancouver's tall towers

The Vancouver skyline is being transformed with a new generation of residential towers that twist and twirl into the sky. But many of the most striking new developments are lower to the ground.



JASON PAYNE Sixth and Willow, a three-storey townhouse development, is an example of a fresh approach to design seen in mid-rise buildings around Vancouver.

“It’s kind of a well-kept secret — for a city known for its tall towers, and unfortunately in many cases, (for) the monotony of its tall towers, we’ve been doing pretty good mid-rise buildings,” said Brent Toderian, Vancouver’s former head city planner.

Case in point: South Creek Landing, a six-storey building at Sixth and Cambie.

Designed by Arno Matis Architecture, it features metal spandrels that angle down the exterior, in a big ‘L’ shape. The angled spandrels give it movement, like a streamlined car from the 1930s.

The spandrels aren't just ornamental — they're part of the support structure of the building and are strategically placed.

"They're shaped to create privacy, to deal with sun angle, and to create a kind of shape to the building itself," Matis said.

"If you stand down below on the sidewalk and look up, you can see that every floor kind of tapers in — there's a curving section to each facade. We modelled it using digital modelling technology.

"So the profile of the building, when you visually connect one floor to the next, kind of creates a subtle curve as the building rises up."

From some angles, the building looks a bit like a ship.

"We like to dig a bit deeper than the surface of the context," Matis said. "We look at history, we look at many different aspects of the context. This particular site was the original waterfront of False Creek — everything from First Avenue north is basically fill.

"That original shoreline was the home of a major shipbuilding industry in the city, so we wanted to bring a subtle metaphor into the building, to make people think a little bit about how the city has transformed. (So) there are these kind of nautical themes that run through the architectural elements of the building."

A couple of blocks west is Sixth and Willow, a three-storey townhouse development with an unusual feature: rust-coloured steel slats in front of a white body.

The slats are made of a special "weathering steel" called corten, and were added by architect Michael Green to break up the "visual and noise distraction" of the thousands of cars that zip by each day.

"I sort of thought about that building like an egg," said Green.

"It's got an outer shell that's made out of the corten steel, and then this inner sort of whiteness that's very pure. That inner courtyard is very different from the outside."

The steel slats were added to deal with the traffic on Sixth Avenue, without losing the view.

"It's got trees across the street on the north side, which are really lovely, and it has views to the city," Green relates.

"I wanted those units facing the street to get a great view of the trees and of the city, without the visual distraction and noise distraction of all the cars rushing by on Sixth Avenue right in front of you.

“Those slats create this kind of visual buffer, so when you’re driving along you can’t see into somebody’s unit, even if their windows are wide open. From inside you can’t see out to all these cars rushing by, it kind of blocks them. You see the car just in front of you, but you don’t see this constant stream of cars, and you don’t hear the cars.”

Green knows the slats aren’t everyone’s cup of tea. But he thinks Vancouver architecture needs some fresh approaches.

“I think one of the biggest risks that Vancouver is facing right now is that we have a real cookie-cutter kind of quality of buildings,” he said.

“We’re seeing all our towers start to look and feel the same. They don’t have a lot of colour to them, it’s kind of all the same — cold and concrete and glass and green.

“The same is true in smaller buildings. There’s a risk that they start becoming too much of the same. Or that they become cartoonish, that in order to be different, they become so cartoonish and gregarious, a kind of almost silly architecture that’s trying too hard.

“There’s a sweet spot in-between that says buildings should be contextual. They should work with their context. That doesn’t mean they have to look the same as the buildings next door and around them, but they should somehow suit the feeling of that neighbourhood, and not try to blow that apart.

“Everybody’s going to have a different opinion. For Sixth and Willow there will be a huge range of opinion about whether that was successful or not, but the intent was to do something special for the location, that made sense for that location, that context.”

A good example of building in context is Boheme, a block-long development at 1588 East Hastings by Millennium, the Olympic Village developer.

Many people still think of that stretch of Hastings as gritty and industrial. Architect Joey Stevens designed a building that takes its cue from that industrial past, but brings a bit of elegance to the street.

“Millennium really liked the old industrial buildings that are repurposed into lofts, that was kind of the initial starting point,” said Stevens, who works with GBL Architects.



“Doing something in that vein, but also recognizing it’s a new building, it’s not an old historic industrial building that’s repurposed into lofts. (So we were) kind of melding that vernacular

industrial feeling and throwing some more contemporary elements into it, and treating it as one building.”

‘Architectural risk-taking is most important’

But in those ... moments where more adventure would be warranted, we’ve done something typical. The building is basically divided in two, with a smaller white brick warehouse-style side on the east and a larger contemporary side on the west. But there’s white brick on the base of the contemporary side, and some modern touches on the warehouse-style side.

“We went through a ton of different schemes to try and successfully break down the block,” said Stevens. “There were so many schemes where it felt oppressive, or it felt relentless going down the street. It took a lot of work to get to something that felt like it belonged, but also filled that block, and feels human-sized.”

The key was putting in a deep lobby, which makes it feel like two buildings.

“The lobby is defined by a deep slot that goes in with the canopy, and that breaks up the side that’s all brick from the side that’s primarily metal and orange glazing,” said Stevens.

Millennium is known for highend developments, and didn’t scrimp on materials.

“They’re actually very keen on making sure it was a quality building,” said Stevens.

“They wanted to use brick and metal panel, and not a lot of cheaper products.”

It worked. Joe Chaput runs Les Amis du Fromage cheese shop at 843 East Hastings, and thinks Boheme has brought Hastings up a notch.

“That’s a really good-looking building, especially with the white and the lighting,” he said.

There will probably be a lot more to come, all over the city.

Matis has designed another building, Aperture, which is being built at 795 West 41st Ave., near Oakridge.

An aperture is “a hole or opening through which light travels.” In this case, Matis designed a series of white rectangles that look like the viewfinder in a camera.

“The aperture boxes are shaped in a way to try to address the sun angles and solar exposure on each of the four main building block facades,” he said.

“If you walk around the buildings, you’ll be able to see that each facade has a different kind of response to the way sunlight is being exposed on those edges.”

It's a very distinctive building, just the kind of thing former city planner Toderian tried to encourage at the city.

"There are moments in a city pattern where architectural risktaking is most important," said Toderian.

"But when you've got those key areas that terminate a view coming over a bridge, or frame a view, it's particularly important to be a little more adventurous.

"I think the mistake we've made in Vancouver is not in being monotonous with every building, because great cities all over the world have pattern buildings. But in those special moments where more adventure would be warranted, we've done something typical."

Arno Matis' designs for both South Creek Landing and Aperture are most definitely not typical. Neither is Michael Green's design for Sixth and Willow.

Which is why people will probably be discussing them for decades to come.