

DWELLING OF THE YEAR

## A challenging site brings out the best

Concord Pacific's four tower Spectrum took a chunk of derelict land and created a model for Vancouver's eco-dense future.

TREVOR BODDY  
*The Globe and Mail*

December 14, 2007

There may be no more dismal a downtown site for eco-densification than this one. If being wedged in-between the grim concrete ramps of the Dunsmuir and Georgia viaducts were not enough, this leftover hunk of land sits between two huge sports stadiums and a SkyTrain station, with a steep escarpment on one side, to boot. What can you do with a difficult island, adrift in a sea of brutes like these?

For its bravura architectural performance, for its tilt at the chimera of affordability, but most of all, for its artful demonstration of how marginal bits of our city can be improved by high density combos of residential with commercial, I am naming the sandwich of four condo towers with a Costco store collectively called "Spectrum" as my 'Dwelling of the Year' for 2007.

These challenges — met with fine architecture, innovative land development, and inspired engineering — are the very limits that give Concord Pacific's Spectrum its power and originality. This becomes apparent while walking through the near million square foot development with Peter Webb, the Concord Pacific executive who saw it from inception right through to occupation by new residents over the past few weeks. "This is the largest concrete construction, the largest single housing development Vancouver has ever seen," he says matter-of-factly, as we walk behind the Beatty Street armoury onto the streets and parks set on a raised platform that continues the plate of downtown Vancouver. This place was once the dog end of EXPO 86, before it was sold first to Li Ka-shing, and now to Concord Pacific, led by chief executive Terry Hui.



James K.M. Cheng's dynamic and colourful architecture contributed to sales of the 900 condo units coming in at about 20 per cent above expectations, according to the developer.

This platform in the air is crucial to Spectrum's success. Up top, it provides a townhouse-ringed seamless extension of the streets of downtown itself, reminding me of reclaimed harbour lands in Hong Kong that instantly become an integral part of the city.

On December 11, the Vancouver Art Gallery announced they will build their new gallery right across Beatty Street, and what is likely to be a "starchitect"-designed extravaganza there may well match Spectrum's near \$250-million cost.

What to put below Spectrum's city-extending plate was the real problem, as towering neighbours on its flanks and a resulting lack of light and air meant housing could not be put below the level of the viaduct roadways. For Concord Pacific, it meant two full city blocks, six storeys high, before getting to a level where housing was even an option. The notion of a big box retail store going underneath the deck and residential zone came quickly to Mr. Webb and colleagues, but landing a deal took years of negotiation with potential retail partners and downtown planners. In the end it was Costco that took up the challenge, all the more impressive because the company had never previously done a downtown store, much less one with four enormous condo towers growing out of its roof.

Putting the four tall towers over the high-stacked shelves of this airy warehouse store, not to mention six site-wide trays of parking for shoppers and residents, took some slight-of-hand by Spectrum's structural engineers, Jones Kwong Kishi. In order to accommodate Costco's loading docks and the arrival and unloading of up to five tractor-trailers at once, one of the four residential towers has to be supported on expensive transfer beams, its entire weight shifted to open up a clear zone below for deliveries. Just as difficult was Costco's insistence on SUV-friendly, extra-wide parking stalls for its customers, meaning the pattern of support columns for their garage did not match the column pattern and spacing of the narrower slots for Spectrum residents above. That resulted in yet more expensive transfer beams. All of this added up, according to Mr. Webb: "We had \$20-million of sunk infrastructure costs before even starting to build the income-generating spaces of store and apartments."

Spectrum has done very well on the income-generating front, with the store sold outright to Costco, not just rented. Concord-Pacific aimed at the middle of the condo market, sensing (five years ago, when the project was being planned) a looming over-build of luxury units downtown, and worrying that this site and Spectrum's scale might spark buyer resistance, not to mention cannibalizing sales from some of their own nearby projects.

In large part because of an investment in James K.M. Cheng's dynamic and colourful architecture, and the designer's tight planning of the 900 condo units themselves, targets have been exceeded here, as well. "Our sales came in at about 20 per cent over expectations," says Mr. Webb, smiling the smile that only comes to developers after the last unit is sold.

The key to Spectrum's success is assertive urban design on a site where gigantic neighbours have eliminated pipsqueak humility as an option. Both the architect Mr.

Cheng and the developer Mr. Webb credit former City of Vancouver development planner Jonathan Barrett for his important role. Spectrum is also one place where our otherwise overdone "Vancouverist" model of thin towers on townhouse podia is the right design solution.

This does not mean — and how can I say this strongly enough — that towers on podia should now march on through Chinatown and the entire Downtown Eastside, as some in the development industry are now proposing.

Any further extension of high rise condos east would be a heritage and urban design disaster as huge as the community-obliterating freeway proposals down there in the 1960s.

With James Cheng's Spectrum and soon, Henriquez Partnership's Woodward's redevelopment, there are now two outstanding eastern sentinels framing downtown Vancouver's high rise character. Medium rise, equally dense solutions are preferable for the empty lots sprinkled through the zones to the east, so a line in the sand has to be drawn here, lest we render our oldest neighbourhoods sterile. Spectrum's townhouses flanking the Georgia and Dunsmuir viaducts humanize these high-velocity ramps.

Their welcome visual anchoring is achieved, in part, with L-shaped concrete parapets springing from the roof of each townhouse and running along their edges, their roof deck-sheltering undersides painted in bright colours. When viewed obliquely, these parapets provide jaunty caps to each unit — a kind of salute to the tall towers — their rhythm bringing scale along the block.

With design flourishes like these, Spectrum has more richly modelled architecture than any other downtown condo project. But it also has the most dramatic use of colour on high rise towers this side of Miami. The bright blue, red and yellow exterior embellishments have prompted some to label them "Lego-Land."

But James Cheng's architectural artistry comes from knowing where not to use colour. It is dabbed selectively on balcony rails, vertical fins and hidden soffits, with the reflections between the non-coloured building sides amplifying the effect. Stand amid the towers on a sunny day, and you will see some of the most complex and enthralling optical effects in this architecturally chary town.

With verve, an uncanny sense of façade and window proportions, plus a reconciliation of development realities with the testing of architectural limits, Spectrum leaves in the dust most previous downtown towers, including earlier efforts from Concord Pacific itself. If this were not enough, high residential densities with public zone amenity, both co-residing with job-generating commercial space make this one of many emerging models for an Eco-Dense future for Vancouver.

Congratulations to all at Concord-Pacific, Costco, James K.M. Cheng Architects (with associates Hancock- Bruckner), the engineers, builders and condo buyers for brightening up a once-dank corner of downtown.