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NOTICED NOUVEAU RICHMOND



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To those of us who delight in the full-tilt whirl of urban life, the city of Vancouver, though stunningly beautiful, often appears to be without a pulse. Nobody rushes, nobody talks too fast — beneath the mountains, at street level, nothing much seems to be going on.

Part of it is physical, but it is also cultural: Tucked away behind cartoonishly large hedges that shield even the most ordinary homes from view, Vancouver's long-time residents, cozy in their cultural dominance and layers of zip-up polar fleece, seem content to enjoy their soy lattes without ever having to make small talk with the cool Asian kids at the sushi takeout on the corner (and vice versa).

While visiting the city this holiday season, however, I stumbled upon what must be its hidden heartbeat. Across the Fraser River, in the once sleepy suburb of Richmond, is a giddy mess of gridlock and pink stucco strip malls, dim sum palaces and electronic stores locals call the Aberdeen District, after the first enclosed Asian-themed shopping mall in the area, the Aberdeen Centre.

Like other fast-growing Asian suburbs in Canada, such as Toronto's Richmond Hill, the community is putting down some increasingly stylish roots. The mall's new \$130-million incarnation, a luminous curve of glass four times the size of the original, opened its doors to the public just before Christmas. And it, and its buzzing environs, just might be the first



The new 380,000-square-foot Aberdeen Centre in Richmond, B.C., is turning the once sleepy suburb into a hotbed of Asian style.

crackle of a new cosmopolitan sensibility on the edge of the Pacific Rim.

Designed by renowned Vancouver architect Bing Thom, the new Aberdeen Centre is a stunner. One's first impression of the three-storey, 380,000-square-foot structure is its *Jetsons*-like sweep of coloured glass in rhythmic, Reitveldian patterns as it hugs the curve of Hazelbridge Way. Highly irregular for a shopping mall anywhere, let alone Richmond, no football field of ugly cars mars this impression. (A four-level, 1,200-car lot is located behind the centre.)

"Richmond is a city that's evolving from a suburban city to one of

the fastest-growing edge communities in North America," Thom explains. "We didn't want to build just another shopping mall surrounded by a sea of parking, so we brought the building right to the street, where it takes a curve, in an effort to make it more hospitable."

Another Thom innovation is the building's radical skin, an extensive, undulating and luminous mural of glass by artist Stephanie Forsythe that the city of Richmond, in a rather forward-thinking gesture, supported through its community arts fund as a form of public art.

"The building breathes from the inside out and the outside in," Thom says. "It glows like a lantern.

We see it as a way to animate the city and celebrate the idea of community. Shopping, after all, is a social experience. People like to come together and watch each other buy."

Inside, that is exactly what people are doing. At my visit, even though only a handful of stores were open, the mall was busy with shoppers trolling stores for the next hip thing.

At Color Living, Asians and non-Asians alike seemed amused by throw pillows silk-screened with pop images of Mao. Nearby, cool kids with dyed hair, ironic Burberry hats and mismatched sneakers were scouring the BMW lifestyle

store for patent Mini travel bags. Watching them for clues were shoppers with status strollers whose toddlers were marvelling at the light projection that slowly changes from daylight to a starry night sky on the ceiling of the high domed atrium and squealing over the sprays of the musical water fountain just like the one outside the Bellagio in Las Vegas.

Every shopper was loaded down with bags from the brilliant Daiso, the high-energy Asian discounter with two floors of everything from mysterious Japanese toilet brushes to funky stationery — all for \$2 (sales here, the first North American location for Daiso, which

opens a store a day somewhere in Asia, have broken all previous sales records).

In 1990, when Vancouver developer and media baron Thomas Fung of the Fairchild Group built his original Aberdeen Centre, it was designed as an alternative to seedy Chinatown for the influx of well-heeled immigrant Hong Kong shoppers. Like Toronto's Pacific Mall, it was a rather basic mix of mom-and-pop herbal tea shops and knockoff boutiques with a street presence best described as rudimentary. Since then, not only has Asian street style — everything from graphic art to sneakers — come to set the pace for global fashion and design, the community that originally flocked to these malls has matured.

"I think it's the new global village," Thom says. "We are now dealing with the second generation of immigrants, children of people came to Canada in the '90s." In his opinion, not only is this new generation more sophisticated, they also have "all this pent-up retail energy."

To cater to this cosmopolitan crowd, the visionary Mr. Fung plans to add Lotte, the largest department store chain in South Korea, as well as new and different names in furniture, fashion and design from Thailand, Japan, Italy and Spain to the retail mix at Aberdeen.

"When I first started out with the original Aberdeen Centre 13 years ago, my goal was to build a really international place, with different tenants from all over the world. But back then I couldn't find any international tenants who wanted to come to a Chinese shopping mall," Mr. Fung says.

Luckily enough for Vancouver, it looks like he might have finally gotten his wish.

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