

THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

November, 2005



1 The curved glass facade forms new public spaces.
2 Suburban context and slightly surreal juxtaposition of scales.
3, 4 The glass facade energetically mixes colour, transparency and reflection, but also hints at the activities within.

South of downtown Vancouver with its soaring high-rises and snow-capped mountains, the city peters out into the murky flatlands and flood plain of the Fraser river delta. Here, rolling acres of suburban housing are interspersed with huge shopping malls. As in most North American cities, the car is king, so people drive to their local malls to shop and socialise, but the architecture is generally unimpressive. Opened last year, the new Aberdeen Centre in Richmond by Bing Thom Architects is a lively and laudable attempt to confound the stereotype of the banal mall box and engender some sense of place and civic spirit.

Named after the fishing village in Hong Kong as opposed to the dour Scottish city, Aberdeen serves and targets Richmond's affluent Chinese community. Since the mid '80s, Pacific Rim proximity and the Canadian government's open door policy has stimulated successive waves of immigration from Hong Kong (and latterly China), and the industrious, prosperous Asian community is now very much part of Vancouver life. The Aberdeen Centre is the brainchild of energetic entrepreneur Thomas Fung, who, as local architecture commentator Trevor Boddy notes, 'may be the closest Vancouver has to a business-builder who is



2

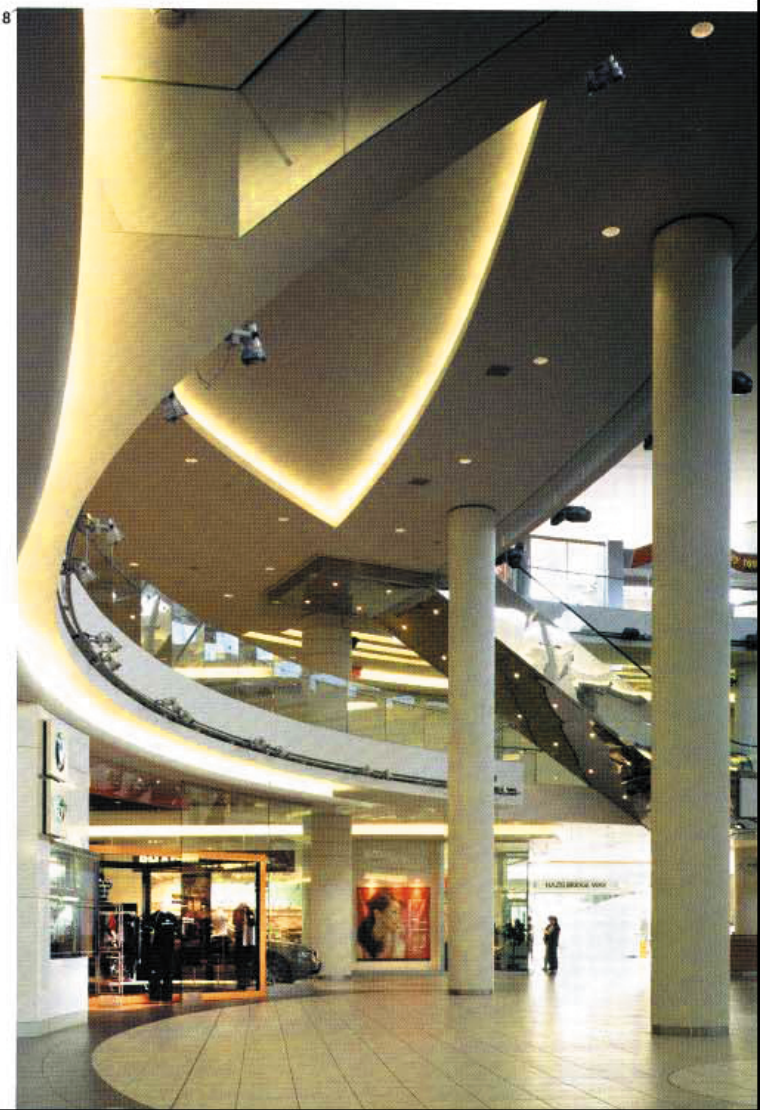
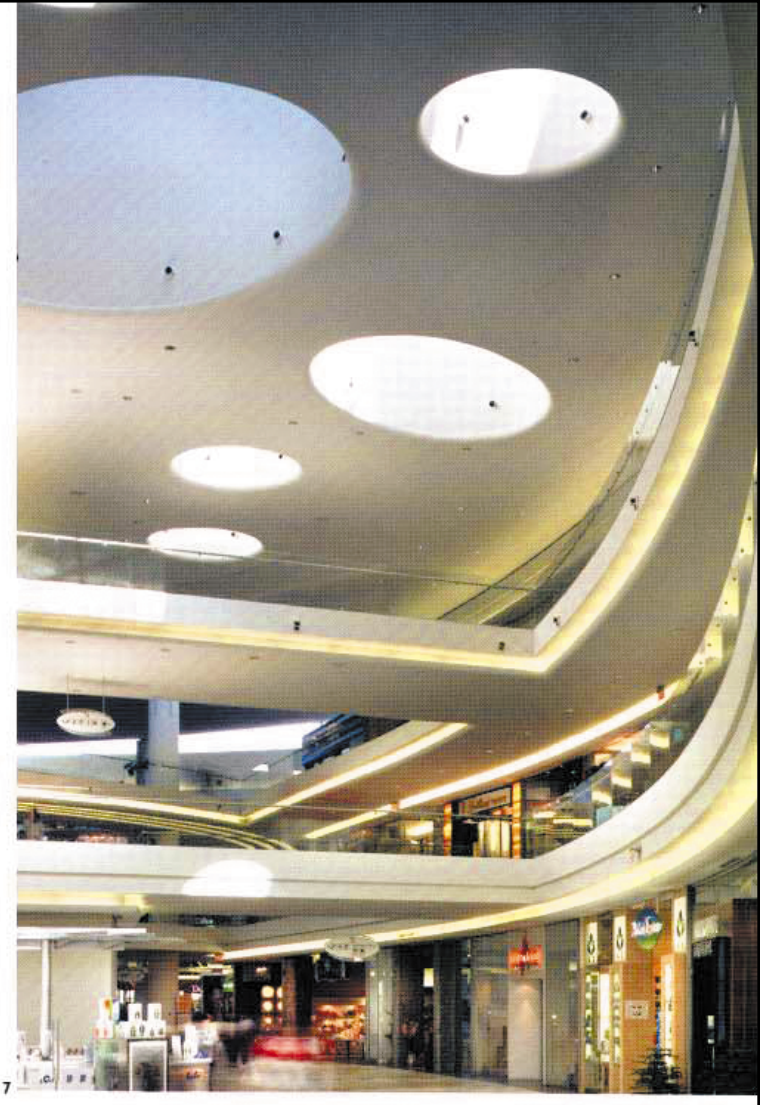
SHINY SHOPPING

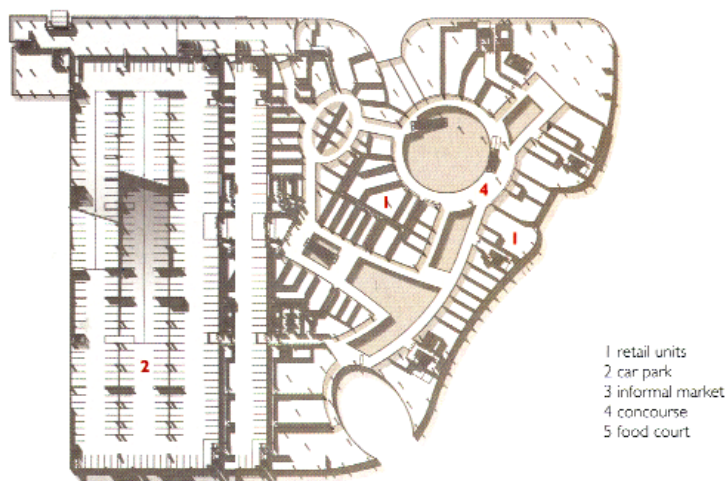
This Vancouver shopping mall reworks commercial and cultural stereotypes.

**RETAIL MALL,
VANCOUVER, CANADA**
ARCHITECT
BING THOM ARCHITECTS

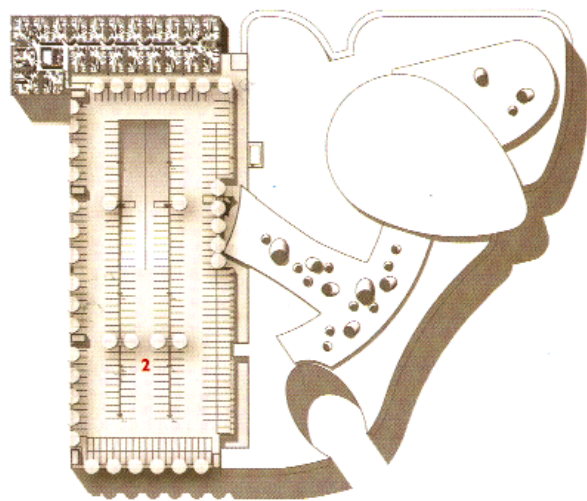


3

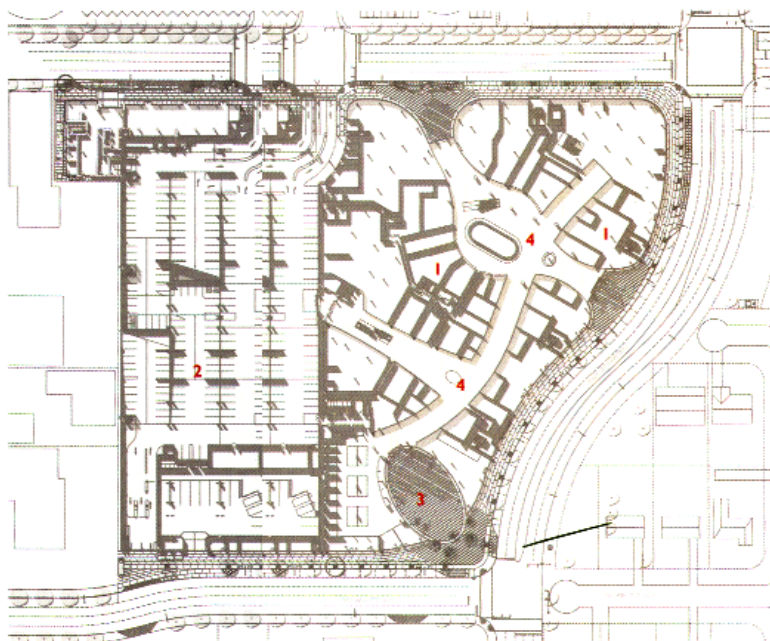




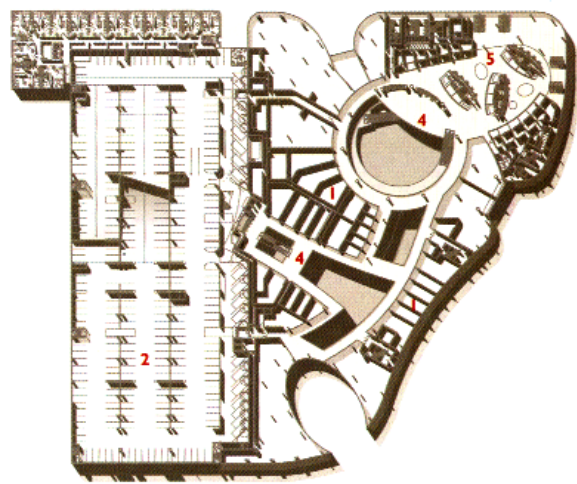
first floor



roof plan



ground floor plan (scale approx 1:1250)



second floor

guided by vision and intuition, not tired pro-formas and business school bromides'. In a career that has encompassed everything from kung-fu film production to property development, Fung's masterstroke has been to redefine the commercial and cultural dynamics of the traditional cluttered, rackety Asian mall into a more upmarket East-West fusion, given lucid expression by Bing Thom's inventive architecture.

Thom is no stranger to challenging commercial programmes; his mixed-use scheme in Surrey, some 40 minutes' drive from Vancouver, was an imaginative attempt to make an urban and social focus in sprawling suburbia (AR September

2003). At Aberdeen, the idea is to create a building that engages with its context and brings a sense of its internal life to the surrounding streets. This connection is made and emphasised through an undulating, luminous mural of coloured glass that wraps around the building, flowing with the curves of the streets and revealing the active life of the shops, market place, and restaurants within. The glass was tested through full-scale mock-ups in Thom's office to achieve a convincing balance of colour, transparency and reflection.

With 380 000sq ft of retail space and 255 stores, the new Aberdeen Centre has become a focal point in Richmond's downtown core. At only three

storeys high, its scale is somehow more manageable and inviting, humanised by the seductive curves of the kaleidoscopic facade. Inside, the deadening hermeticism of the typical mall is dispelled by contact with the exterior and the welcome presence of daylight, which floods in through great conical funnels punched into the hovering roof. Unusually, there is no department store or cinema as an anchor tenant; instead, food is a key attraction.

Though the quality of the architecture speaks for itself, recasting the traditional Asian mall has not been without its perceptual and commercial difficulties. As Trevor Boddy again observes, 'Thomas Fung

has achieved something with his Aberdeen Centre, but the marketplace jury is still out on just what it is: high-end fashion mall; el-cheapo Neo-Chinatown emporium with better visuals; e-business showroom; the ultimate gathering place of the new Vancouver; or a retailing chimera?' As with any new idea, only time will tell if there is a genuine public appetite for the Fung/Thom mall model. Aptly, however, the Chinese characters for the new Aberdeen Centre don't allude to its geography, but instead can be translated as 'Shiny, trendy place'. C. S.

Architect
Bing Thom Architect, Vancouver, Canada
Photographs
Nic Lehoux