

## THREE: ABERDEEN CENTRE

Richmond, British Columbia, Canada

Bing Thom Architects designs a mixed-use complex that is helping a suburb become more of an urban kind of place.

By Trevor Boddy

**Architect:** Bing Thom Architects—Bing Thom, Luciano Zago, Allan Alomes, Brian Billingsley, Eric Boelling, John Camfield, Yi Mei Chan, Chris Doray, Stephanie Forsythe, Michael Heeney, Shinobu Homma, Marcos Hui, Stanton Hung, Eileen Keenan, Arno Matis, Michael Motlagh, Robert Sandilands, Michael Wong, Tony Yip, Francis Yan

**Owner:** Fairchild Developments

**Engineers:** Bush, Bohlman (structural); Keen (mechanical); RA Duff (electrical); MPT (civil)

**Consultants:** Fred Liu (landscape); Illuminating Concepts (lighting)

**Construction manager:** Dominion Construction

**Size:** 400,000 square feet (retail); 300,000 square feet (parking)

**Cost:** \$62 million

**Completion date:** February 2004

### Sources

**Glass and skylights:** Advanced Glazing Systems

**Curtain wall:** Vanceva Glazing Loadings

**Floor and wall tile:** Savoia Canada

**Paints and stains:** Zolatone

For more information on this project, go to Building Types Study at [archrecord.construction.com](http://archrecord.construction.com).

As many of us learned from studying the works of Aldo Rossi, never count a building typology dead. I remember being thrilled by Rossi and Carlo Aymonino's massive Gallaratese housing project outside Milan when it opened in 1974 for its updating of Trajan's market in Rome and the continuous arcades found in Italy's Veneto. With the rise of big-box stores and so-called power centers, and the drift of chain stores back to urban streets, there has been speculation in North America that shopping malls are a dying breed. But simultaneously, the rest of the world has shown increasing zest for malls, with the most impressive examples now found in South America, the Middle East, and East Asia.

Bing Thom's Aberdeen Centre for Vancouver's heavily Asian suburb of Richmond is the first of the new, globalized shopping malls to be built on this continent. It is a truly 21st-century reinvigoration of the type, with a layout that ignores the tired bipolar model that places the super-market at one end, the anchor department store at the other, and double-loaded rows of shops in-between. With its smartly detailed, colored-glass walls, the sinuous Aberdeen Centre breaks all the conventions of shopping-mall design: It has an innovative layout, an unconventional leasing strategy, shopping

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floors that are vertically stacked with multilevel parking to one side, a 120-unit condo tower right over the mall, and a net-to-gross ratio that's low due to all the space devoted to public amenities. The design may also point to something many cities talk about these days, but few have accomplished: the urbanization and densification of postwar suburbs.

### Program

Aberdeen represents the vision of its owner, Hong Kong-born media entrepreneur Thomas Fung. Educated at the University of British Columbia and N.Y.U., Fung produced and wrote a number of Chinese-language kung-fu and comedy movies, then settled in Vancouver to manage his otherwise Hong Kong-based family's real estate and media empire, including Fairchild Group, North America's largest

Chinese-language TV, radio, and Internet operation.

Built in the early 1980s, the original Fung-owned Aberdeen Mall was underperforming economically two decades later and had become difficult to manage (its movie theater and arcade attracted local gangs). To revive the property, Fung engaged a fellow Hong Konger-gone-Canadian, Bing Thom, who had emerged from the shadow of his former employer, Arthur Erickson, to become Vancouver's most progressive city builder. Seeking a wider customer base for the mall, Fung took Thom's radical advice to demolish the existing shopping center and build a new, 562,000-square-foot retail-residential-entertainment complex on its site, renamed Aberdeen Centre in English. Aberdeen refers to Richmond's equivalent in Hong Kong—an upscale suburb. But the

The architects worked with Molo Design to develop a color palette for the building's curtain wall (right two and below). Colored-glass panels come in opaque, translucent, and transparent versions and can be changed over time. A deeply recessed courtyard (far right and opposite) provides access to produce stalls and restaurants.



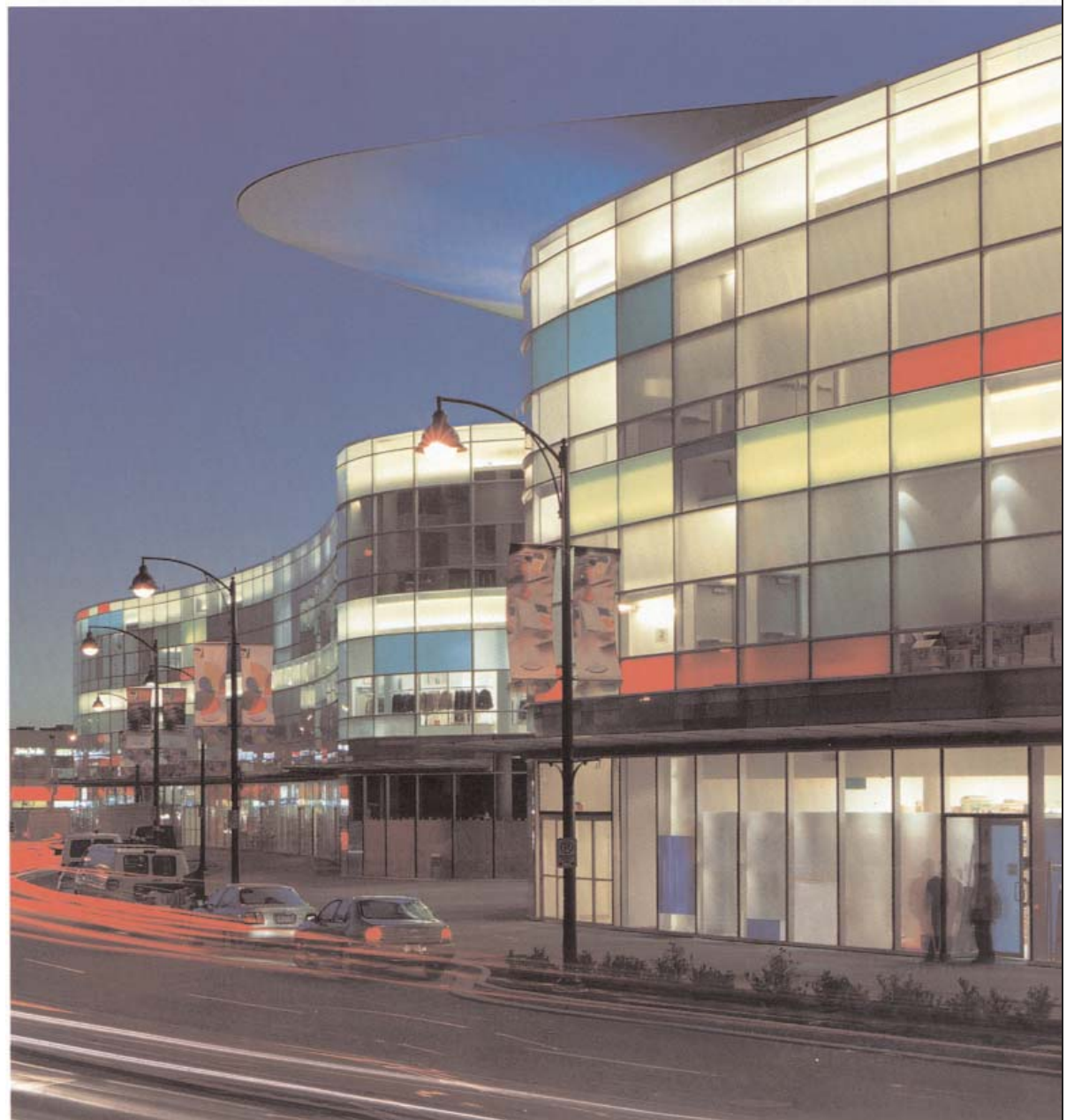
mall's more important and all-new Chinese name doesn't refer to location at all; its ideograms translate as "Timely" and "Trendy Place."

#### **Solution**

As the project moved through design and construction, Fung rethought the mall's retail mix. He renewed none of his former retail tenants, instead lining up leading-edge Asian retailers, such as Thailand's answer to IKEA and one of Korea's leading clothing stores. Then he secured the North American master franchise for Daiso, the Japanese equivalent of Wal-Mart.

Thom's curvilinear design responds to siting considerations, such as a realigned public street on the east side of the property that traces a large arc accommodating the mall's enlarged footprint. With a new rail line set to open for Vancouver's 2010 Winter Olympic Games and a transit station planned just north of the site, Thom placed condominium apartments closest to the rail connection. While cars pull into a garage on the west side of the complex, pedestrians can enter from the north, east, and southeast.

Inside the mall, Thom arranged stores mostly along single-loaded pathways, creating a more open and spacious environment for shoppers. The curving circulation routes also improve sight lines so storefronts are easy to find. Daylight is an obsession in Thom's design:



1. Fountain court
2. Retail
3. Food market
4. Courtyard
5. Parking
6. Residential lobby
7. Food court
8. Apartment



GROUND FLOOR



THIRD FLOOR



Retail floor trays step back in section to deepen penetration, while 20 light cannons inspired by Corbu's La Tourette brighten the generous public spaces without hitting storefronts with direct sunlight.

The architect's use of colored glass for the project's curtain wall establishes a strong visual identity for the building. Thom worked with Stephanie Forsythe of Molo Design to distill a palette of colors that picks up hues from the mainly Asian strip malls in the area. Using full-scale mock-ups of the curtain wall, Thom's team developed a range of opaque, transparent, and translucent panels for each color, so that exterior walls can be periodically modified to meet the changing needs of the retailers behind them. The random checkerboard patterning of the panels makes future changes less apparent. The architects designed window mullion caps so their bull-nose profile curves inward and can be fastened on the back, allowing flat-plate glass to be used even for tight curves. Project architect Luciano Zago says, "The benefit of this detail is the perception of curving surfaces but the economics of faceted glass."

Because both owner and designer were committed to increasing Richmond's public space, Thom created a pair of public outdoor plazas—a deeply recessed market

**Curving pathways and generous public spaces create an open, light-filled setting for the mall's retail outlets.**

court ringed by produce stalls and restaurants near the west end of the main elevation, and a smaller piazzeta under a giant, disklike roof shielding the main entrance to the complex. The disk's clear span, which stretches nearly a city block, caps the central atrium (Richmond's largest interior space) and is heavily programmed with entertainment functions. The disk's continuously curved plaster soffit serves as both a clerestory reflecting surface and a screen on which images can be projected. Look up there and you'll find animated views of clouds and stars—both the astronomical variety and the kings of Canto-Pop.

#### Commentary

A show-biz client and a know-biz architect combined strengths at Aberdeen Centre to create a mall that poses an elegant counter-argument to the shopworn clichés and bottom-line formulas that almost killed this building type. With single-family bungalows from the 1960s across the street, Aberdeen Centre engages the landscape of suburbia while enlivening it with a sensitively scaled but densely packed program of uses. The light-rail line now under construction next door will link Aberdeen to Vancouver's airport and downtown. And with a speed-skating oval for the 2010 Olympics rising just a few blocks away, Aberdeen may prove the germ to a retail, entertainment, and residential hub that could render this suburb a lot more urban.