

Art projects

Longtime vacant lots are finally being filled, but exterior design, neighbourhood esthetics, and affordability are taking precedence for developers

BY BRIAN HARTZ

With the downturn in our rearview mirror (we hope), local developers are moving ahead on some hotly anticipated mixed-use projects emphasizing art over accoutrements.

“Mixed” — in the sense of old meets new — describes Union, a five-storey, 133-unit development straddling a lot between Fisgard and Pandora, in the heart of Chinatown. The Anthem Properties project rehabilitates and fully incorporates the crumbling façade of the Finlayson building, which dates to 1881, when it was built to house Chinese workers. Two buildings — one on Fisgard, the other on Pandora, joined by a courtyard — comprise the \$30-million development designed by Robert Ciccozzi Architecture Inc. and Merrick Architecture.

Anthem bought the site in 2007 in keeping with its practice of acquiring and developing distressed properties. It also redeveloped — and still owns — Market Square on Lower Johnson Street. A mixed-use project called Bambu had been proposed for the lot where Union rises, but the developer got into financial trouble. Anthem refunded buyers’ deposits and started from scratch, says sales and marketing manager Robert Marchand.



An artist's rendering of the Pandora side of Union, a \$30-million, 133-unit, mixed-use development slated to open in Chinatown in spring 2013. It incorporates the facade of the Finlayson building erected in 1881.

“We’ve been sitting on it, trying to decide what would be the right project to build,” he says. “As the market took its turn in 2008, things got put on hold, and we were fortunate enough not to have anything on the books for that land. We moved forward and put together what we feel is a great plan.”

Union offers junior one-bedroom, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom suites ranging in size from 491 to 828 square feet, priced from \$239,000 to \$399,000, with five floor-plan options. Anthem expects a spring 2013 opening and has sold some 30 units thus far.

“What we’re seeing are people who are looking for value,” says Marchand. “It’s not necessarily price point, although everybody’s driven by that initially. They’ve got to be able to feel the value in the space and the dollars they’re spending, and that’s where I think we’re a little different.”

The marketing of Union is different, to say the least. You could be forgiven for mistaking its brochure for a neighbourhood association publication — such is the emphasis on the history and vibrancy of Chinatown as you flip the pages. You get halfway through before you start to see renderings and floorplans.

“We’re proud of the neighbourhood and what it offers,” says Marchand. “This isn’t your standard condo where you drive into your underground parkade, go home, and just hang out. Here, you go home, you get ready, you head back out. We’re talking about the community more than we’re talking about the space.”



A garden courtyard will be built between the two Union buildings, on the roof of the parkade.

The Mondrian

The Mondrian, at the corner of Cook and Johnson in the Harris Green neighbourhood, broke ground in September. Designed by de Hoog and Kierulf Architects, it boasts 93 residential units ranging in size from 400 to 850 square feet. It’s the latest Victoria offering from Alpha Project Developments, whose credits include Cityplace at 826 Fairfield Road, Aria at 737 Humboldt Street, and Monterey at 1011 Johnson Street.

The building was inspired by the primary colours and rectangular forms of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian. And like other recent projects such as David Chard’s 834, the 10-storey Mondrian aims to attract first-time condo buyers with prices starting from \$169,000 for a studio. Strata fees are modest (\$123-\$250), which could be seen as a reflection of the building’s relative lack of amenities. The Mondrian site was previously approved for development, but it never got off the ground and Alpha swooped in with a new, stripped-down plan of attack.

Like Union, the Mondrian is all about the 'hood. Turn to page two of the brochure, and you see the names of 18 nearby businesses — Market on Yates, Zambri's, GoodLife Fitness, etc. These appear under the heading "Amenities," rather than a list of the building's notable features. The development's address, 1090 Johnston Street, rates a 95 out of 100 in Google Maps' Walk Score index.

Alpha president Bijan Neyestani says sales have been "slow but steady" thus far, and split fairly evenly between investors and first-time homebuyers. "Since we broke ground, there has been more interest. But due to market conditions, people can take their time. The deciding factor is price. We're trying to build something efficient and practical, keeping fees low and amenities basic. We'll be seeing more of that going forward."

Jarret Matanowitsch, a planner with the City of Victoria, agrees. He says previous proposals for the Mondrian and Union sites hit the market at the wrong time, price, and size.

"Unit sizes have gotten substantially smaller," he tells *Douglas*. "You rarely see anything over 800 square feet anymore. Developers know they can't sell a condo for \$400,000 right now."

Other Projects

Concert Properties' 15-storey Era building, in the 700 block of Yates Street, appeared set to join the Mondrian and Union for a fall groundbreaking. But the developer hit the brakes on September 21 — just days before sales were set to commence. In an e-mail message to prospective buyers, Concert Properties blamed the decision on "uncertainty that currently exists regarding the HST for new housing."

Concert has developed other properties in Victoria, among them Astoria, Chelsea, and 365 Waterfront. Like Union, Era rejuvenates and utilizes a heritage façade while offering soberly priced suites (starting at \$198,000 for a studio). But, says the developer, "at present, the HST is still in place with no announcement of transition rules that could remove the uncertainty of this extra tax cost for new homes."

No such delay for Bosa Properties' 21-storey Promontory, part of the Bayview development in the Songhees. Beverly Carey, a realtor with DFH specializing in the property, says groundbreaking is expected by February at the latest. Sales have been strong, she adds, with 70 of the building's 177 units already sold. "It's been phenomenal," she tells *Douglas*. "We haven't been at it that long and when people see shovels in the ground they'll really get enthused."

Bosa Properties expects Promontory to open around Christmas 2013 or January 2014. ■

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