

# Robert Fung

By Andrew Petrozzi



## Heritage storeys

**A passion for community and Vancouver architectural heritage has helped the Salient Group founder build a \$200 million inner city development business**

It's fitting that **Robert Fung**, 40, chose Gastown's Alhambra Building to house the **Salient Group**, his upstart development company.

The 1886-vintage Alhambra was the first building to rise from the ashes of the fire that had destroyed Vancouver earlier that year. When Salient acquired the \$3.5 million building in 2001, it was the first of many Downtown Eastside heritage properties Fung would seek to preserve and redevelop after they'd endured decades of neglect and decay.

"I'm crazy enough to want to take on these projects," said Fung, sitting casually in his boardroom on a recent sunny Friday afternoon. "Apparently, most people didn't want to when we started doing them in an area that most people shied away from.

"I'm passionate about the buildings and what these areas mean to the city."

Fung's enthusiasm for the Downtown Eastside's architecture and history grew from his involvement in the development of False Creek North when he joined **Concord Pacific Developments Corp.** in 1990.

"I developed an affinity for this area at that time," he said. "The historic component is really, really limited, and in the early '90s we were losing a lot of our historic fabric."

His educational background in anthropology as well as extensive global travels during and after his undergraduate degree at the **University of Western Ontario** provided Fung with a sense of space and an appreciation of community.

That same passion followed Fung to the **Narland Group**, where he was head of development before leaving to

start Salient in 2000.

He said that, at the time, the city's core heritage buildings and the sense of community in the inner city areas faced being lost forever.

"It was an opportunity to get into an area that very few people were working in, but also to work with some of the most important buildings in the city architecturally, socially and culturally in terms of what they mean to our history."

The Salient Group's own history has been short, but sweet.

It has catapulted Fung into the ranks of the vanguard of Vancouver's new wave of developers, which also includes **Bosa Development Corp.**'s **Colin Bosa**, **Mosaic Homes'** **Rob McCarthy** and **Townline Homes'** **Rick Illich**.

The value of Salient projects under development has climbed from \$8 million in 2003 to almost \$200 million today.

Included in the company's current list of a dozen or so projects in various stages of completion are the redevelopment of Gastown's Taylor Building, the Flack Block at Hastings and Cambie streets and the Bowman Block, formerly the Marquise Block, near the Sun Tower on the southeast corner of Pender and Beatty streets.

Salient is also developing residential projects in Point Grey Village – although escalating costs recently forced reconsideration of its Varsity redevelopment.

Its largest single project to date is the redevelopment of the 80,000-square-foot Trapp Block on Columbia Street in New Westminster.

Fung's success in following his passion for redeveloping heritage proper-

ties required him to take risks.

He said that maintaining his philosophy of keeping every project individually significant, iconic and in historical context has been the toughest part of building his company.

But Fung added that Salient, which has eight employees, is looking to expand into larger projects.

"Once we grow the company to a certain overhead, it almost obligates us to look for slightly larger projects as opposed to many more [small ones] because the burden of the administration is the same if not more," he said.

**Gair Williamson**, principal of **Gair Williamson Architects**, has known Fung for the past 15 years and is working with Salient on the Bowman Block redevelopment.

"I consider Robert to be a developer who is also a dedicated urbanist in the tradition of [writer and activist] **Jane Jacobs**," said Williamson. "His concern for the repair and regeneration of dysfunctional neighbourhoods has led him to make development decisions that operate on the cutting edge of city design."

According to Williamson, Salient's developments succeed because of Fung's careful attention to project quality and his belief that the consumer is smarter than marketers think they are in understanding the evolution of the city.

Fung, the married father of three young daughters and godson of former Canadian Prime Minister **Paul Martin**, now fills his time with work and family.

He had spent much of his earlier career involved with organizations such as the **Canadian International Dragon Boat Festival Society**, the

**Mission:** To restore a sense of history and community in the Downtown Eastside and preserve Vancouver's architectural heritage

**Assets:** Over 15 years in the building and redevelopment business and a willingness to tackle projects that others avoid

**Yield:** Almost \$200 million in project value under development and the restoration of some prime Vancouver architectural heritage

**Vancouver Economic Development Commission**, the **Vancouver Board of Trade**, the **BC Technology Industries Association** and **Covenant House**.

"Some of my best business relationships are ones that were forged in the non-profit [sector]," said Fung. "In terms of one's network, it's really important to look at all aspects. Sometimes it's not just within your own industry.

"All of these things to me have helped my career as much as my career has."

Despite the many issues facing the Downtown Eastside, Fung remains committed to the redevelopment of the area's heritage buildings and its re-establishment as a thriving downtown neighbourhood and community.

"This is where the city started to grow and moved on from here. Now the city is growing back around this area in a way that is embracing it as opposed to steamrolling over it," he said.

"I think therein is really the secret as to why the Downtown Eastside – Gastown, Chinatown, Hastings, Victory Square – will be successful as an economically and socially diverse part of the city.

"Twenty years of social housing investment has created a foundation on which we can layer in market housing, business and office space without displacing all those thousands of social housing units.

"It creates a great foundation for a really unique and interesting mixed community in the heart of the city. That is one of the reasons why all of this is going to work." ◆

■ [apetrozzi@biv.com](mailto:apetrozzi@biv.com)