

Globe Real Estate

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DEVELOPMENT

Builders find their roots

Turning their backs on snazzy project names with instant cachet, housing developers have found value in connecting to local history



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It's a shame Henrietta Anderson isn't around to see the condo project that will be her namesake.

Anderson Walk, the upcoming three-building project in North Vancouver, is named after the long time principal of Lonsdale Elementary School, where the new condo project will be built. Not many people would know of Henrietta Anderson - she worked at the school until 1933.

She came from Scotland in 1912 as a mail-order bride, but once she arrived at the dock her supposed fiancé told her he'd married someone else. She didn't want to return to Scotland and be pitied, the story goes, so she stayed in Canada and became one of B.C.'s most respected teachers, earning a PhD while she was working at the school.

It's the perfect local hero story for the marketing of a condo project on the former site of an old school, and it illustrates the trend toward celebrating Vancouver's own history and culture.

"Anderson Walk is paying tribute to one of the more popular teachers going back to the 20s," says Polygon Homes president Neil Chrystal. "Mostly we did that because we are next to the new school district building."

Anderson Walk is a three building, 234-unit development project that started presales about three weeks ago. More than 40 of the units in the first phase have sold, mostly to local North Vancouver buyers who are looking for homes, not only investments.

Mr. Chrystal says local context gives more power to the development. If a developer can work a local story into a project, it has more impact on the buyer and the community. Polygon also preserved about 30 or so of the 100-year-old chestnut trees that ring the property, and commissioned local wood-making sculptor Brent Comber to create public art projects.

Not long ago, when Vancouver was undergoing a real estate boom, it seemed that condo names were as shallow as the in-



Developer Robert Fung's heritage buildings stick closely to their roots, such as the Flack Block office building. LYLE STAFFORD FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

stant lifestyle they were supposed to represent. Instead of representing an evolving culture and community, an urban core was quickly transformed by developers as it filled up with names of buildings that would imply exclusivity, wealth and sophistication. Condos with names like the Beresford, the Brownstone, the Brava, Espana, the Elan and the Moda fed the fantasy. It all sounded so New York or European that it didn't matter what the names really meant.

"Almost all of those names I would venture to say are generated by some marketing group coming up with something snazzy and catchy," says Salient Group president Robert Fung, who has made it part of his business philosophy to tie project with community.

"Really, our goal is for something that is going to be strongly identified with the community. Not something pulled out of the air."

Developer Mr. Fung does extensive archival research on his heritage revitalization buildings,

combining marketing with historical detail. His heritage buildings stick closely to their roots, such as the Flack Block office building at Cambie and Hastings, or the Alhambra in Gastown.

"With Gastown, the heritage context part is to show people that there is a history here and something to know about those buildings," says Mr. Fung. "Thomas Flack started the gold rush - this is not American history, it's Canadian."

"The Alhambra Building is significant - the people that were there are the people who built our entire city and I think that is significant and we try to draw on that."

His Paris Block condo project is named after logging boot manufacturer Pierre Paris, circa 1919. But even if the building is not an old restoration, he'll find a local reference, such as the Varsity project on W. 10th Ave., where the Varsity Theatre once stood before it burned down.

"The goal is always to do a project that adds to the community, and to the local area," says Mr.

Fung. "And to create [projects] that are strongly contextualized."

These days, with the market no longer in a frenzy and Vancouverites basking in the afterglow of Olympic Games pride, it seems more common to take a grass-roots approach to condo marketing.

Community leaders, old-time shopkeepers, beloved schoolteachers and politicians are being acknowledged with a condo namesake. Rize Alliance's the Rolston, a tower to be built on Granville Street, is named after an admired cabinet minister named Tilly Jean Rolston, who introduced sex education into schools, among other major reforms, before she died in 1953. The 23-storey tower will be constructed on Rolston Crescent, the current site of the Cecil Hotel.

"It gives the condo personality," marketer Bill Szeto says of the name. "It has emotion attached to it, like the Kerry [in Kerrisdale] or the Sophia [on Main Street]. It creates a better story for us. It's a much better story to blend in with the community. The Rolston

had a history with the community and there was a lady named Mrs. Rolston who was part of the city."

Others are more obvious. The Beasley is named after celebrated former city planner Larry Beasley, and Concord Pacific's The Erickson is named after Vancouver's most famous architect, Arthur Erickson. The iconic Hudson's Bay store in Victoria is being transformed into The Hudson condo building, including restoration of its striking terra cotta facade, by Merrick Architecture.

Mr. Chrystal concurs that the Olympics helped fuel the spirit. "I think the Olympics changed everybody. And it's all for the better, too. People have more sense of pride in their towns and their communities, and they're not ashamed."

His company hasn't always stuck to local references, mind you. They've fallen under the spell of the California dream.

"We've got the Santa Barbara, the Catalina, the Sausalito and the Monterey - we've been down the California route."



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ASKING PRICE:
\$1,100,000

SELLING PRICE:
\$1,065,000

PREVIOUS SELLING PRICE:
\$313,000 (1989)

TAXES:
\$4,080 (2009)

DAYS ON MARKET:
65

LISTING AGENT:
Brad Leslie, Re/Max

The Action:

After serving as a family home for 23 years, this 4,131 sq. ft. house will now serve as a community service care home for seniors and the handicapped, says agent Brad Leslie. "Within an hour of the sign going up, I got a call from a top local realtor."

What They Got:

"[The realtor's] clients were a local community service organization caring for seniors and handicapped people. They were looking for more space, and what better than a seven-bedroom house with a huge living room and a huge recreation room. They have rooms for all their needs and activities."

The home was constructed by an Italian builder in 1978 with a curved staircase with marble detailing. While it is has a Vancou-

ver Special floor plan and a lower level with extra bedrooms, there is also an unfinished attic that can be converted into living space. With nine-foot ceilings in the basement and rooms that are, "twice as big as any you might find in a usual home," it was a perfect fit for the new owners, says Mr. Leslie.

The Agent's Take:

"The new owners were as giddy as kids at Christmas when this home hit the market," he says. It may have taken over a month to finalize financing for this community service project but, in the end, "It was my first call, within the first hour of this home hitting the market, that made the sale."

"It was serendipity," says Mr. Leslie, and "both parties are very happy with this transaction."