

Merrick Architecture – Borowski Sakumoto

EXPLORING THE ELEGANT MARRIAGE OF HERITAGE AND CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

by Robin Brunet

It's not uncommon while visiting Merrick Architecture's Vancouver or Victoria studios to witness its principals drawing plans by hand and building cardboard models rather than relying on computers – although the latest technology is abundant in both locations.

Amidst the studios' myriad nooks and crannies and a pleasing density of paperwork, the principals freely associate with staff, which total 30. At any given moment, there is vigorous debate, quiet contemplation, friendly disagreement and a passionate exchange of ideas. An observer soon realizes that more than mere teamwork is at play: this is a group of fiercely independent professionals who are at the top of their game and use each other's strengths to advance what they call "humanistic architecture," which seeks to reconcile human needs with the natural and man-made environment.

Merrick creates buildings that are firmly grounded in their surroundings, have a distinct identity and contain an unusual amount of eye-catching detail. Since its inception in 1984, the company has applied its design philosophy to a broad range of sectors, including residential, commercial, institutional, heritage restoration/rehabilitation, master planning and resort/waterfront developments. "We've structured ourselves as a boutique firm that handles boutique projects, giant undertakings and everything in between with equal amounts of care," says principal Graham Fligg.

The latest additions to Merrick's portfolio demonstrate the company's range. The first phase of the master-planned Talon at Eaglewind community in Squamish, the Whistler Olympic Park and Vancouver's Dolce and Vita residences are recently completed projects, capped by what is arguably the most ambitious example in Western Canada of a sustainable urban village: the \$1-billion Millennium Water development on the southeast corner of Vancouver's False Creek. Millennium Water is touted as a model for sustainability and incorporates energy reduction systems, high-performance buildings, pedestrian-friendly streets and functional green space, which together contribute to the standards required for the neighbourhood's pending LEED Gold certification.

As a leading architectural firm in Victoria, Merrick is busy designing affordable housing and has, in collaboration with Townline Homes, redeveloped downtown's 96-year-old Hudson's Bay building to include lofts, retail space and luxury condos. The project is a provocative mixture of restoration and contemporary elements: the building's fully restored neoclassical exterior contains thoroughly modern living spaces, and the site is bisected by a pedestrian-friendly carriageway with boutique-style shops and access to new underground parking. "The elegant marriage of heritage and contemporary is something I see Merrick exploring for the next 25 years," says Fligg.

Merrick's enthusiasm for restoration has earned numerous accolades, including the 2009 BC Heritage Award of Honour for the Federal Motors Building and the 2009 City of Vancouver Heritage Award of Honour for The Pennsylvania Hotel. Merrick's work on the Segal Graduate School of Business for the downtown campus of Simon Fraser University also earned both these awards in 2006/2007, as well as the 2006 Lieutenant Governor General's Special Jury Award.

Though recognized for achievements in the field of adaptive re-use, the principals point out a strong interest in applying the holistic philosophy to contemporary architectural works, as exemplified by the Social Science and Mathematics Building completed at the University of Victoria in 2008, with LEED Gold certification pending.

How exactly does humanism exhibit itself in the architectural realm? Merrick's principals offer O2, a mixed-use and strikingly contemporary residence created for Barco Canada Ltd., as an example. Through careful planning and execution, Merrick proved a functional, stylish edifice could be created in such a small space. "O2 is literally sandwiched between two highrises at the tip of Davie and Denman Streets in Vancouver's West End, and we were confined to a 66-foot-wide site," says principal Gregory Borowski. Inspired by the proximity to English Bay and the surrounding buildings, Merrick designed the 4,400-square-foot O2 floorplate with the complexity of a Chinese box puzzle, with triangular balconies aimed at the Bay and giving the building the appearance of a ship's prow.

O2 is also an example of the strong working relationships Merrick has established with city planners over the years. "We had designed a green roof but wound up having to secure special zoning to provide access to that roof, which was considered over-height,"



PHOTO: BOB MATHESON



PHOTO: SAMA

Clockwise from above: University of Victoria Social Sciences and Mathematics Building, Victoria, B.C.; O2, Vancouver, B.C.; Laguna Park, Richmond, B.C.

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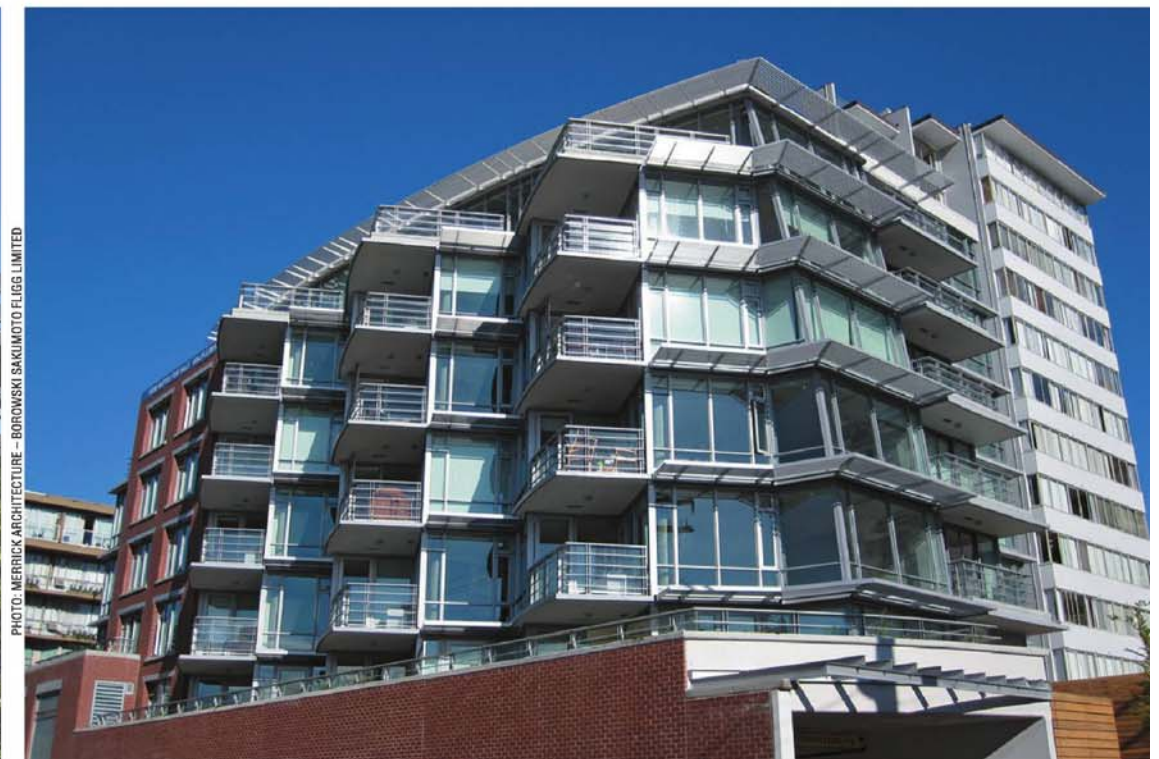


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recalls Borowski. "We reached an agreement with City Hall whereby we could have elevator access if it was fully encased by glazing, and this structure became an integral part of the building design."

Firms with Merrick's capabilities often expand their geographical reach by opening offices in far-flung locales. But mention expansion to any Merrick principal beyond what has already been achieved in a few locales overseas, and responses are reflective. "We don't rule out the occasional project outside of our normal jurisdiction, but we prefer being rooted in the Pacific Northwest," says Borowski. "Part of the reason we are able to create humanistic architecture is because we know the terrain, so to speak, and work from the inside out. The idea of parachuting into and imposing our vision on a city we don't know intimately can be anathema to us." That said, the firm currently has an employee living in China and exploring the application of the firm's acumen for sensitive redevelopment of historic regional contexts.

Maintaining an iconoclastic stance isn't easy. "We have a lot of challenges," says Fligg. "On a design level, it's challenging to realize our ambitions while working within the often iron-clad framework of community development. On a business level, we're trying to maintain our size and scope at a time when more and more architects are being swept up by mega-firms. On an operational level, we firmly believe that you can't design by committee, otherwise you get what our founder Paul Merrick calls 'pabulum' - and yet designing by committee is prevalent in B.C. as it is throughout North America. So we have many balancing acts going on while trying to promote unique solutions."

The principals discuss architectural philosophy with a refreshing lack of pretension and frequent references to Paul Merrick. "Paul's name is synonymous with humanism in the design world, and even though he has entered into a consulting role, his influence on us is extensive," says Borowski, who openly admits he hero-worshipped Merrick while attending UBC in the early 1990s.

Principal Mitch Sakumoto summarizes Merrick's style thusly: "He puts intensive thought into every aspect of design, from siting of buildings to the smallest details such as stained glass artwork. Paul's work contains multiple layers of detail, and everything is designed with a specific purpose. That's what grounds a project and makes it a success."

Identifying the forces that influenced Paul Merrick is a little more difficult. "All I can say is he's extremely charismatic," says Fligg. Examples of Merrick's quirkiness abound. "When he renovated the Orpheum Theatre decades ago, he



Above: Whistler Olympic Park Day Lodge, Whistler, B.C. Below: Talon at Eaglewind, Squamish, B.C.

had portraits of his then-infant children painted on the ceiling fresco of the facility," recalls Borowski. "When asked why, he replied, 'We wanted angels up there.'"

According to Fligg, the company flourished "thanks to Paul's creativity and co-founder Roger Bayley's tremendous business sense. It was a very good partnership." A significant restructuring occurred five years ago with the expansion of the company's partner base. "I became an equal partner, as did Mitch and Greg," says Fligg. "This strengthened the magic sauce. It gave us a strong base with which to continue our design philosophy when Paul phased himself out of the daily responsibilities of running the company."

The principals have varying opinions about the degree to which Merrick's design philosophy has been realized. Fligg says, "Diverse elements such as budgets - which we aim to

respect - and the overall economy have prevented us from fully realizing our dreams on some assignments, and occasionally I wonder if there will ever be a project that is in complete fulfillment of our aspirations. But I keep hoping."

Constraints notwithstanding, Sakumoto views the work achieved to date as trailblazing. "I see countless examples of how the design community is just now catching up to concepts that Paul was working with ages ago," he says. "The narrow urban streets and the maximization of space - all the rage today - are elements that Paul was experimenting with as a young designer."

Of course, none of Merrick's achievements would have been possible were it not for its productive working relationship with clients. "We state emphatically on our website that we encourage a forum of open expression with our clients," says Borowski. "We prefer an informal working atmosphere." This preference isn't surprising, given the friendly environments of the Vancouver and Victoria studios, the after-hours social time and Friday project presentations, which Borowski describes as "a meeting every two weeks in which we talk about designs we're working on or perhaps even have come across in a magazine or on holiday."

Just as Paul Merrick mentored the current crop of principals, Fligg and his colleagues are mindful about continuing the tradition. "We want to nurture the specific strengths of our staff in order to maintain the high degree of efficiency that characterizes our work," he says. "For example, Greg is less encumbered than I am in coming up with the grand artistic gesture, while Mitch is methodical and disciplined. I've been described as having the ability to synthesize the elements of large projects in a way that allows us to tackle challenges as they come. These diverse strengths intertwine on a daily basis." As for senior associate Bette Adams, who is one of Merrick's longest-serving employees, she is described by Borowski as "a guru of colours, styles and textures who makes her contributions to our projects appear easy."

While it's anyone's guess how the economy will evolve, Merrick's presence in numerous development sectors has put it in good stead to maintain a steady production flow. "Plus, in the past three months we've seen the reactivation of dormant projects and the emergence of new ones," says Borowski. "Our work of late has been focused in the downtown Vancouver peninsula, which suits us just fine."

To which Fligg concludes, "Arguably, Vancouver and Victoria might be among the last great places to develop a city, and hopefully we've contributed to the development in a useful and unique manner. Our goal is to continue to do our best." ■



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