

# What Vancouver needs 'is a tiny bit of grit'

**ARCHITECTURE** | Robert A.M. Stern, who's designing the Olympic Village, shares his views on downtown

BY JOHN MACKIE  
VANCOUVER SUN

Millennium Properties paid a king's ransom to snap up the Olympic Village site on the southeast False Creek waterfront. But rather than fill up its \$193-million property with the familiar glass highrises of downtown, the Vancouver company has opted to do something completely different — develop the 2.6-hectare (6.4-acre) site as a "classic fishing village" of lowrise structures of four to 13 storeys.

The showpiece building on the property is site four, which offers prospective condo buyers a vista of False Creek, the downtown skyline and the North Shore mountains. To design it, Millennium has hired Robert A.M. Stern, one of the most famous architects in the world.

"He's a world-class architect, and we see this as a world-class site," says Millennium's Shahram Malek.

The 67-year-old Stern seems to have done a bit of everything: houses, condos, office towers, hotels, resorts, retail outlets, universities, even planned communities like Disney's Celebration,

Florida. The lifelong New Yorker is the dean of architecture at Yale University, has written numerous books, and hosted a PBS TV series, *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream*. His Wikipedia entry says he may have been the first architect to use the term "postmodernism."

His website (www.ramsa.com) features some striking modernist office buildings, but in the main his buildings tend to be a modern twist on traditional forms: palatial houses that evoke Gilded Age mansions, condo developments that look like the grand hotels of the early 20th century.

"I am a great believer in traditional architecture as having a great deal still to offer us by way of example," says Stern, who was in Vancouver last week to check out the Olympic Village site.

"And sometimes the forms can be used and reinterpreted. I think the argument that every minute has its own genius is kind of silly. Buildings have to be built to last a very long time, or they ought to be built to last a long time, and they should have qualities that transcend the truly faddish."

Stern has already done two condo projects in Vancouver with



Robert A.M. Stern on Hastings Street. He likes our older buildings, dislikes too much glass.

Millennium, the Edgewater and the Water's Edge, both in West Vancouver. Both have a classical beauty and elegance, and both stand out because they use stone

cladding on the outside rather than being all glass.

Stern anticipates taking a similar approach to his Olympic Village building, which is still being designed. The tiered six-to-nine storey structure will be a key part of the city's much-ballyhooed "environmentally sustainable neighbourhood," which means he has to think in terms of heat retention and air flow when he's designing it.

"From an environmental point of view, glass is the hardest material to deal with," says Stern.

"Certainly on the south side and maybe the east and west we will probably not have so much glass, but punched windows and walls. You have beautiful light in Vancouver, certainly in the summer months but also in the winter. We can have some mouldings, some articulation on the walls to give the building a little more personality, individuality and detail."

Besides... "I think there are too many glass towers in Vancouver," says Stern.

"That's one reason they all look alike, there's nothing to write on, so to speak. So you get funny little hats on these buildings, and sometimes you get strange balconies. There are more triangular balconies in Vancouver than anywhere else I've ever been. I wonder if they're storing arrowheads on these balconies."

Andy Coupland of the City of Vancouver says 115 towers of 20 storeys and higher have been built downtown excluding the West End since 1986, and another 27 are under construction. It's given the city a whole new skyline, but Stern says taken as a group, the buildings aren't all that exciting.

"They try to look different, but somehow they all look exactly alike. So I think there's a kind of boring uniformity. None of them are really bad, they're not ugly, but [there are] too many identical things."

Stern argues that you need "street texture" to make buildings friendlier and more inviting to pedestrians. This can be accomplished in various ways: retail stores, townhouses, parks. He's not a big fan of lining up one condo tower after another, as has happened in Yaletown and Coal Har-

bour. "When you go out to Stanley Park you have one after another after another giant highrises, but that street [Georgia] is so pedestrian unfriendly and uninviting," he says.

"It could have been done, should have been done in a very different way. Could have had the high buildings, but should have had more street texture below."

"And no retail. Those people don't eat," he chuckles, "they make reservations."

Stern has taken some flack from critics about Celebration, Fla., which looks like an idyllic small



Stern's Edgewater design has a classic beauty and elegance.

town from the early 20th century. Former *Sun* architectural critic Robin Ward derided it as "a fake-heritage small town straight out of a Norman Rockwell illustration that's designed to appeal to nostalgic baby boomers."

Stern thinks it has been a huge success.

"It's virtually complete now, 10 years ahead of the anticipated schedule," he says.

"The public has embraced it with open arms. I think the same principles we used there are what are being used in the Olympic Village site: small blocks, keeping the parking away."

"We have a downtown in Celebration facing the water, and we have people living above the shops, which is really unusual in Florida. People haven't done that in a very long time. Some of these

ideas sound so obvious, but they are revolutionary in the context of reviving concepts that were thrown out for a long time."

Not surprisingly, Stern likes old buildings. He thinks Vancouver is a bit too tidy, and sees a lot of potential in the heritage structures in and around the Downtown Eastside.

"[Vancouver] is very tidy, it could use just a tiny bit of grit," he says.

"This little neighbourhood, east downtown, has great potential if it doesn't get screwed up, to become a kind of gritty inner-city mixed-use neighbourhood. I think what is lacking in Vancouver right now is mixed use. You have residential areas, you have businesses, a few great shopping streets, but it doesn't all kind of yet congeal in the best possible way."

Revitalization of older neighbourhoods often involves demolition of old buildings and their replacement with new ones. But Stern thinks with some imagination you can save many historic buildings.

"A block away down the street [at Pender and Beatty] there's a gigantic parking garage, about four floors," says Stern, who was interviewed in Millennium's office at 198 West Hastings at Cambie.

"What a waste of a piece of inner-city land. There are lots of sites where you could infill with substantial buildings but still keep the historic quality. And there's a wonderful old office building right around the corner [the Sun tower]. I don't know what's happening inside it, but it would be a sensational place to live, or maybe combine living and working use."

He's fond of live/work spaces, which he thinks give buildings a flexibility that is needed as cities and buildings evolve.

"Because one of the problems with master planning is that it doesn't allow for growth: this is the way it is, and it never changes. Cities are about growth and change, and over time they get younger populations, or older, whatever, and if there isn't a way to change things or be flexible, then the thing just atrophies."

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## Site to resemble 'classic fishing village'

The Olympic Village site that Robert Stern will be working on is located in the middle of the southeast False Creek lands. The city of Vancouver sold the 2.6-hectare [6.4-acre] site to Millennium Properties for \$193 million in April, a record price for undeveloped land in Vancouver.

Condo king Bob Rennie will be marketing the site, which will include 12 residential buildings ranging from four to 13 storeys high.

"The whole idea is, instead of defaulting to this ultra-contemporary [look], to build a classic fishing village," says Rennie.

"That's more the vision for the Olympic Village, and I think it's really smart. It's sitting on the water, and it's lowrise buildings, it's not highrise buildings."

There will be about 93,000 square metres [one million square feet] of residential space, but how many units, or what they will cost, is still in the planning stages. Stern's building is in a prime waterfront location, and will be a tiered structure of six to nine storeys, with 15,800 square metres [170,000 square feet] of space.

"I think it will stand out in terms of the quality of architecture and the materials that will be used," says Millennium's Shahram Malek.

"But it will also tie in to what's happening to other buildings around this particular site that he is designing for. He is actually a contextual architect; he tries to build within the context."

Several architects will be working on the site. Stern will be working with local architect Lawrence Doyle on his building, while Paul Merrick and Stu Lyon will be designing several buildings each. Arthur Erickson may design a community centre.

The buildings should be completed by the end of 2009 and will be used as the athletes' residences during the 2010 Olympics. Purchasers will be able to move into their condos in the spring or summer of 2010.

— John Mackie

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