

REDEVELOPMENT

The key to Columbia St.

Developer Robert Fung has bought the historic Trapp Block, the most elegant building on the province's oldest street. What he does with it may change the face of New Westminster, MARCIE GOOD writes

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The furniture store selling sleek condo-sized couches in Columbia Street's Trapp Block is one indication of where the province's oldest street is going. In one way, it's a perfect fit: the space-challenged masses will soon be here, providing the market for budget-priced leather chairs. But Robert Fung, whose Salient Group owns this building, might prefer the Yaletown Sofa Co. be known by another name.

Mr. Fung gets a little irked when people say they want Columbia Street to be like Vancouver's swanky high-rise neighbourhood. It seems that this area has a lot in common with Yaletown of a decade ago: tracts of vacant former industrial lands along the waterfront, history as a transportation hub, and old buildings. But he insists this emerging district has something all its own.

"I think it can be better than Yaletown," he says. "Old neighbourhoods have a heart and soul that's missing from new neighbourhoods. These are familiar places because it's where the city came from. When we complete a building and play on the heritage style, it's amazing, there's a sense of warmth that it tends to have. People identify with that."

Mr. Fung is currently in discussions with the city of New Westminster about what he will do with this 1900-vintage building, which originally housed a family-owned hardware store.

Currently, it's considered one of the most important landmarks on the street; its distinctive terra cotta ornamented facade and seven-storey height make it one of the street's most impressive buildings. Mr. Fung plans to maintain the historical look and feel while renovating it for retail, residential and office uses. Typical of its era, the structure contains a lot of timber and brick, materials which he hopes to feature in some way.

While a collection of high-rise towers are sprouting up to the west of Eighth Street, the entrance to this district, Mr. Fung is one of a few developers willing to take a chance on a deteriorating Columbia Street property.

His company bought the block last June for \$1.89 million, but he doubts that anything behind the facade can be retained.

The floors above street level were last occupied by the Army & Navy department store, which left in 1977, and since then they have been vacant. Because the building sits on a historic shoreline, the structure has sagged and leans to one side.

The challenge of rehabilitating a derelict, however, is one he relishes. "There's a real demand for character space," he says. "because we've just got so much of the same cookie cutter crap out there, anything that's interesting and different always seems to carry good value."

While a bent for property development may be in his genes (his father Robert headed up the controversial Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation until May) he's carving his own niche with a number of heritage restoration projects in Gastown. He graduated from the University of Western Ontario with a degree in anthropology, which may explain his enthusiasm for the social implications of buildings.

In part to escape Toronto, he came to Vancouver in 1990 and started working for Concord Pacific Developments Corp., and over the next eight years he watched as the company colonized the north side of False Creek. In 1998 he left to join the Narland Group as head of development, and then started the Salient Group with a silent partner in 2000. Their first project was the Taylor Building at 310 Water St. in Gastown, a warehouse conversion with restaurants and retail space on the street and 22 lofts above. It now boasts many of the original 1911 architectural features along with stainless steel appliances and up-to-date high-speed cable.

The company currently has eight projects in development, with a total value approaching \$200 million. While it has experienced tremendous growth in a short time, there have also been some pains. Earlier this year, higher-than-expected construction costs temporarily sabotaged a mixed-use project on the site of the old Varsity Theatre on 10th Avenue in Point Grey. The company had to return deposits from purchasers and redesign the venture.

Other plans include a three-phase reworking of five consecutive buildings on Water Street, eventually for offices, retail, residential and live/work studios. The anchor of these is the Alhambra building on the corner of Carrall Street. This is the home of Salient's offices, and Fung holds this building especially dear. It was rebuilt within months after the fire of 1886 as a luxury hotel, one of the first in Vancouver with running water. In following years it also served as a courthouse with a jail. "In a city with a short history, it has real stories," he enthuses. The back alley of this block, known as the Gaoler's Mews, is a distinctive passageway with storefronts and the back patio of a pub. As part of the renovations, Mr. Fung envisions extending this space to make it more vibrant and closer to the original idea.

When he started working in the area, there was very little retail other than tourist traps stacked with stuffed mooses and maple-leaf emblazoned sweatshirts. Now, bistros, coffee shops, and interesting independent fashion and design shops have moved in. It has been

the perfect laboratory for him to try out his theory of urban regeneration: that reviving a sagging structure brings back life to a whole block.

In that way, Columbia Street is a little like Gastown; while they've had their rough days, both neighbourhoods have evolved over time. Still, Mr. Fung prefers to let the first provincial capital be considered in a context of its own. The scale of the buildings, the complexity of the transportation network, the surrounding residential projects, are all distinctive characteristics that need to be considered. "It doesn't have the same sort of 'we've got to keep the tourists coming' mandate as they had in Gastown and it isn't the same blank slate as Yaletown was," he points out. "One of the potentials it has is to be what it is -- the original city, that people will come back to."