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At the contemporary edge

Two Vancouver firms transform a downtown red-brick relic into a state-of-the-art gallery of international art

By Adèle Werder
Photography by Nic Lehoux

When an art gallery nests in a heritage building, it often bullies the historic component into the submissive role of background decor. But it doesn't have to be that way, as Vancouver's freshly reinvented Wing Sang Building demonstrates. A century after its construction in the city's Chinatown district, and a half century after its namesake occupant had moved elsewhere, the building's future was uncertain, until condo marketer Bob Rennie bought it and launched its metamorphosis into his new office and global-calibre gallery. The Vancouver firms Walter Pincel Architecture and McFarlane Green Biggar would be the transformers. "I've been collecting very seriously since the early '90s," notes Rennie, "and we promised artists we would have a space for their work, but we never knew what that meant. Then we found this building, and it just felt right."

Built in 1889, the Victorian Italianate building embodies a crucial sub-current of the city's social history. Wing Sang was the company founded by Yip Sang, a Chinese émigré, successful entrepreneur and community leader – a remarkable feat for those imperial times. (Equally remarkable was his prolific marital career: one historian recounts that his three concurrent wives and their 23 children resided with him in the building, with one family per floor – which goes a long way to explain the original labyrinthine layout.)

The Wing Sang was actually two separate brick buildings – one three storeys, the other six – built one behind the other and separated by a laneway and linked by a catwalk. Some of the structure was unsalvageable, and what remained needed heavy structural reinforcement. That labyrinthine interior required copious editing to allow the gallery spaces to stretch out to their



EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT

Rooftop view
Martin Creed's text art along the rooftop edge is one of the few exterior signs that the old industrial building is now a gallery. For the rooftop deck, landscape designer Allison Magill used Cor-Ten steel pilars that will rust over time.

The design team left dollops of white space, which set off the art the way generous margins in a book enhance the text and photos



Papa bear gallery
The main gallery's ceiling soars four storeys high; nine windows supply the space with natural light. Sculptures are by Mona Hatoum.



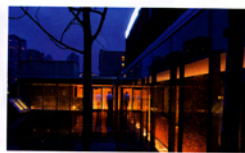
Slot gallery

The original site included two buildings joined by a catwalk. The architects retained the original facade of one building, creating a narrow gallery in between.



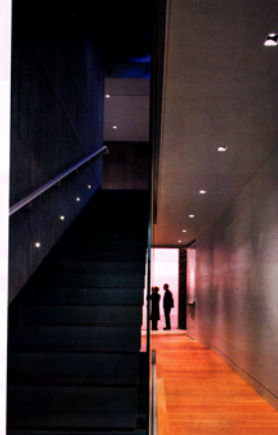
From the street

The street-facing facade was brought back to life with cleaning and refurbishing of the original bay windows.



Rooftop access

Glass cladding runs along the exterior wall that faces onto the rooftop garden. Visitors look directly down into the slot gallery below.



Stairway

The stairwell zigzags up the centre of the building. Nine-millimetre-thick steel plating makes up the steps. The fir flooring, used everywhere but in the galleries, was reclaimed from the original building.



- 1 Entry
- 2 Mechanical
- 3 Gallery
- 4 Office
- 5 Meeting room
- 6 Rooftop garden
- 7 Washroom
- 8 Lobby
- 9 Parking
- 10 Slot gallery
- 11 Main gallery

necessary contours. The design team left dollops of white space and acres of blank walls, which set off the art pieces the way generous margins in a book enhance the texts and photos. "We tried to simplify," says interior designer Michelle Biggar, "taking out more and more so the purpose of the space can ring true, giving the art the room to shine."

The building has small galleries in its basement, at street level and even outside, adjacent to a marvellous rooftop deck. But the ball game is on the second floor, where the design team has created a nexus of four interconnected spaces, including what Franel calls "the papa bear, mama bear and baby bear" gallery sequence. The largest gallery, papa bear, is a quadruple-height, 157-square-metre space covering much of the rear building's second floor. Its thick-reinforced masonry and, on the other side, concrete-filled ghosts of windows (mist filled in during the renovation) suggest a walled fortress. Slender bands of light slope down from the nine remaining upper windows, onto the heart-stopping Mona Hatoum installations below. (Although the permanent collection comprises over 1,000 works by art world heavyweights, only a handful of installations are on display at any one time.)

Franel and Biggar had to devise an approach to marry the two structures without obliterating the heritage walls that stood at the centre of the site. The final design scheme retained the second building's front facade, sheathing it on one side for reinforcement and leaving its other sides raw. The neighbouring facade was decayed beyond salvation, so was replaced with a new wall that stands parallel to the historic brick wall, creating a long

and narrow space – "the slot gallery," as it's called. In a building filled with brush and unsettling art pieces, this philosopher's walk of a gallery offers a powerful meditative break.

At every corner are moments of historic revelation, often decided ad hoc by Rennie as construction progressed. Here and there, a freshly exposed strip of the original 19th-century foundation has been left, showcasing a swelling totem of raw boulders and stones.

"It was important to me that everywhere we intruded upon the architecture, it showed," says Rennie. "That's why we left the brick exposed, and that's why we filled in the windows with rough concrete. It shows evidence of the past, which we shouldn't be smoothing over. That's what we wanted: a building in which the collection and the architecture were at equal terms and not overpowering each other."

Since its opening last October, the gallery has maintained a semi-public profile: you can't just walk in off the street, but anyone wishing to visit can register for a tour. "It's one of the most significant private exhibiting galleries of this scale in North America," says Franel. "For the cultural life of the city, it is going to mark a sea change."

That optimism is reflected in yet another Wing Sang art piece, affixed to one of the restored exterior walls. It's an installation of Scottish artist Martin Creed's casually spelled neon text art: "Everything is going to be alright." It's visible for miles around, in the face of commuters traversing the city's busy Georgia Viaduct. And if this project is a portent, maybe everything is going to be all right after all. **A**