

CANADIAN

\$6.95 OCT/10
V.55 N.10

ARCHITECT

BUILDINGS FOR CULTURE



ART/HISTORY



AN ENLIGHTENED AND IMPASSIONED CLIENT GUIDES THE SENSITIVE CONVERSION OF A HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT HERITAGE BUILDING IN VANCOUVER'S CHINATOWN INTO OFFICES AND A GALLERY TO DISPLAY HIS IMPRESSIVE COLLECTION OF CONTEMPORARY ART.

PROJECT RENNIE ART GALLERY AND OFFICES, VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA
ARCHITECT WALTER FRANEL ARCHITECTURE INC.
INTERIOR ARCHITECT MCFARLANE | GREEN | BIGGAR ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN INC.
TEXT LESLIE JEN
PHOTOS MARTIN TESSIER

Rarely does a client come along that possesses both sufficient resources and the vision to realize a project of great historical and cultural significance. Bob Rennie, a highly successful marketer of condominiums in Vancouver's continually booming real estate market, saw an opportunity in early 2004 when he purchased the long-abandoned Wing Sang property located at 51 East Pender Street in the heart of historic Chinatown. The oldest existing building in Chinatown, it has

its own colourful history originating in 1889 when an enterprising immigrant named Yip Sang built first a modest two-storey structure for his import/export business, followed in 1901 by a substantial expansion to the east including a third storey over both structures. In 1912, a six-storey warehouse and residence (to house Yip Sang's four wives and rapidly expanding family) constructed behind the original buildings completed the ensemble, a narrow internal laneway

separating it from its street-fronting siblings.

Architect Walter Franel was commissioned to lead this ambitious project—a conversion of the cluster of dilapidated brick structures into Rennie Marketing Systems' headquarters and a gallery comprised of six principal exhibition spaces. Accomplishing the requisite seismic and structural upgrades was no easy task, but Franel and a highly competent engineering team met the challenge, permitting the construction of a great variety

of new spaces to accommodate not only offices but gallery functions suited to showcasing Rennie's vast collection of contemporary art, much of it sculpture and installation-based work.

Rennie and Franel agreed that the project should accomplish more than the preservation of the building's façades, and that they could go much further in revealing its complex past and over a century of history as explicitly as possible. Thus, the resulting building bears much more



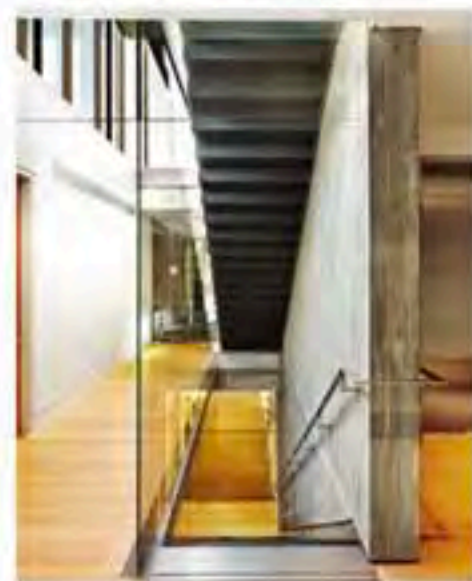
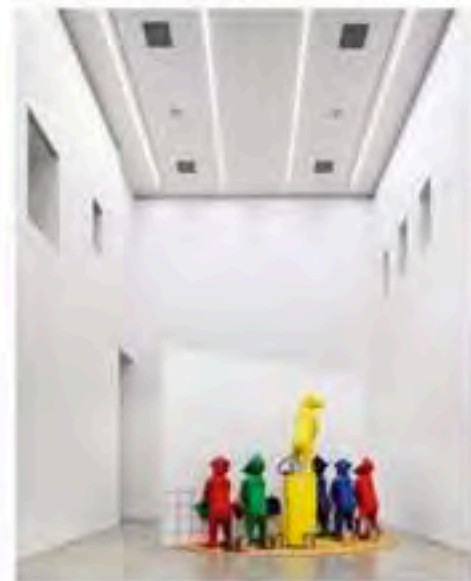
OPPOSITE SKYLIGHTS PUNCTUATING THE ROOF DECK ILLUMINATE THE GALLERIES BELOW DURING THE DAY, WHILE ARTIST MARTIN CREED'S NEON INSTALLATION INSTILLS A HOPEFUL MESSAGE.
ABOVE RETAINING TRACES OF ITS PAST, THE NARROW THREE-STORY SLIT OF A GALLERY OCCUPIES THE SITE'S FORMER INTERNAL LANEWAY THAT SEPARATED THE TWO BUILDINGS.



than a mere trace of the past or an incidental palimpsest, but makes its story legible through several deliberate gestures. To begin with, they left the façades exactly as they were, making the narrative of the building's three-phased components

clear and unambiguous. There was no attempt at seamless cohesion; the original 1889 two-storey structure is clearly distinct from its 1901 expansion, and the six-storey rear building is only visible from the street when one stands very far back.

As Jennie puts it, he "likes to show every intrusion on history," believing in the importance of not erasing or concealing what has been done in the past. Consequently, after some initial trepidation, most of the windows in the taller



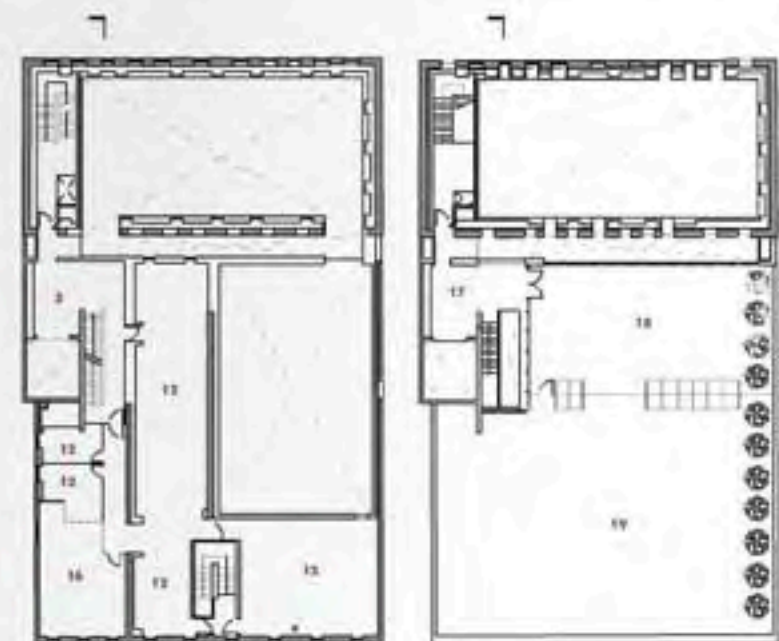
building housing the main gallery were filled in with concrete, a pretty bold gesture but one that honestly reveals the building's evolution and its changing functions.

While the interiors were stripped down considerably, existing materials and spaces were retained where possible, which Franzel describes as being one of the greatest challenges. He states that it was important to arrive at a design solution and parts that accommodated the complex program while respecting and clearly acknowledging the building's history, form and materials. In furtherance of these objectives, mcfarlane | green | biggar were hired as the interior architects for the project, and they were responsible for the design of most of the interior spaces. One of these is the awe-inspiring main gallery at the rear of the building. With its soaring 40-foot ceiling, it is highly suitable for exhibiting the larger pieces in Rennie's collection.

Another way that the original spirit and form of the complex was retained was through the creation of a three-storey "slot" gallery that traces the internal laneway that once separated the front and back buildings. Illuminated by a band of clerestory windows two storeys above, art is hung on the pristine white drywall on one side of the narrow slot, while the other side offers the startling contrast of the rough red brick that once functioned as the exterior load-bearing wall of the 1912 addition.

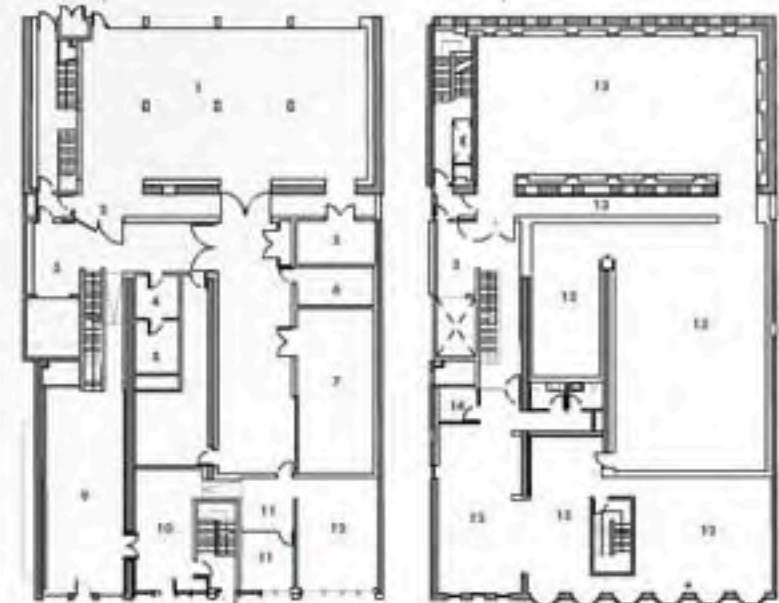
Most poignantly, Vancouver's first Chinese school was housed in the Wing Sang building, and the original schoolroom on the third floor overlooking Pender Street appears very much the same as it did a century ago. Rennie explained that over the decades, the room remained remarkably intact despite the rest of the building experiencing multiple changes in use over time and falling into neglect. The original wood was retained on the floor, ceiling and walls, along with two blackboards—now protected behind glass—on which Chinese characters rendered in chalk decades ago have survived, amazingly. According to members of the Yip family, the characters on one of the boards date back 80 years, while the writing on the other board is likely

OPPOSITE TOP A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE WING SANG BUILDING ON PENDER STREET REVEALS THE HISTORY OF ITS GROWTH—THE ORIGINAL MODEST TWO-STORY STRUCTURE (1889) IS VISIBLY DISTINCT. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** THE CHARACTER OF THE ORIGINAL SCHOOLROOM STAYED MIRACULOUSLY INTACT, AND IS NOW USED AS A CORPORATE BOARDROOM. ARTIST RICHARD JACKSON'S WHIMSICAL INSTALLATION OCCUPIES THE MAIN MULTISTORY GALLERY SPACE. A DRAMATIC VIEW OF THE STAIR REVEALS THE MODERNITY OF NEW MATERIALS INCORPORATED INTO A CRITICALLY IMPORTANT HISTORIC BUILDING.



THIRD FLOOR

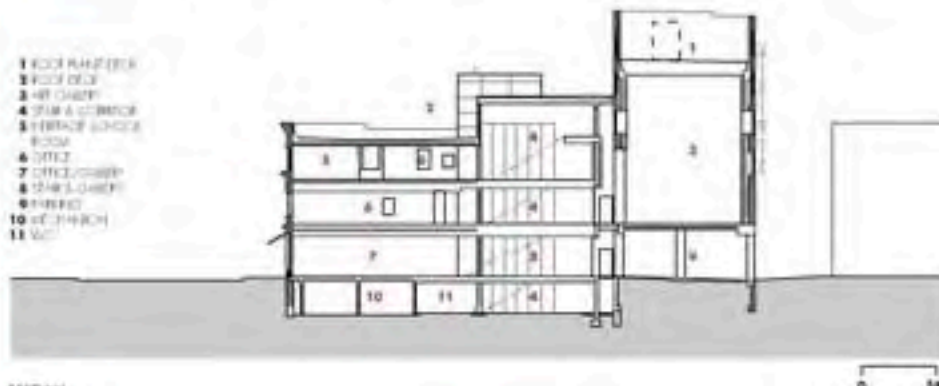
FOURTH FLOOR AND ROOF GARDEN



GROUND FLOOR

SECOND FLOOR

- 1 HUBBING
- 2 SUBWAY PASSAGE
- 3 ELEVATOR LOBBY
- 4 CONFERENCE ROOM
- 5 CARRIAGE
- 6 RESTROOM
- 7 ART STORAGE/WORKSHOP
- 8 OFFICE/BOARDROOM
- 9 OFFICE/BOARDROOM
- 10 OFFICE/BOARDROOM
- 11 OFFICE
- 12 OFFICE
- 13 OFFICE
- 14 OFFICE/BOARDROOM
- 15 OFFICE
- 16 CHINESE SCHOOL ROOM
- 17 OFFICE/BOARDROOM
- 18 OFFICE/BOARDROOM
- 19 OFFICE/BOARDROOM



SECTION

- 1 FLOOR PLASTER
- 2 FLOOR DECK
- 3 AIR CHASE
- 4 STAIR & CORRIDOR
- 5 TERRACE/SLOTTED ROOM
- 6 TITLE
- 7 OFFICE/BOARDROOM
- 8 STAIR/CHASE
- 9 HUBBING
- 10 AIR CHASE
- 11 VOID



ABOVE THE ROOFTOP SCULPTURE GARDEN FORMS A VERDANT FORECOURT, A PLACE OF RESPITE FROM THE GRITTY STREETS BELOW. AN INTRIGUINGLY ORGANIC SCULPTURE BY THOMAS HOUSEAGO IS CAPTIVATING, AS IS DAN GRAHAM'S MIRRORED CURVING PAVILION IN THE BACKGROUND.

from the 1960s. But the schoolroom is not merely a museum artifact: it functions as a boardroom and has proven so popular that many non-profit agencies have rented it as a meeting space. Rennie is not surprised, and describes the room as possessing "a real energy."

An extraordinary component of the project is the creation of an outdoor sculpture garden. Occupying the roof of the fronting three-storey structures, a wooden deck spills out onto a wondrous expanse of green, where visitors can enjoy a mirrored pavilion installation by Dan Graham that captures and reflects the surrounding city, along with a sculpture by Thomas Houseago, which expresses the abstracted human form in a most dynamic fashion. And the backdrop to this most exceptional experience is the assurance that "Everything is going to be alright." Martin Creed's massive neon installation mounted on the rising brick wall forming the backbone of the courtyard. Rennie's partner Carey Fouks worked closely with landscape architect Alison Magill in the conceptual design of this outdoor space, and the results are breathtaking. Francl enthuses that he is particularly pleased with the sculpture garden, not only for its inherent qualities but because of the exhilaration of experiencing "the texture of the city" from such a privileged vantage point.

For one so passionately devoted to the architectural stories of the past, Rennie is equally passionate about his art collection, amassed over more than three decades. Perhaps Canada's answer to high-profile European collectors Charles Saatchi and François Pinault. Rennie introduced audiences to the work of established Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum when the gallery opened last fall, and his programming schedule accommodates two exhibitions per year. A show featuring Richard Jackson's whimsical bear installations has just ended, to be followed by Thomas Houseago and Amy Bessone in November.

It is curious that it was ultimately a Caucasian that spearheaded the revitalization of a flagging Chinatown. With more recent Asian immigration

being focused on suburban Richmond, the original historic Chinatown has suffered, also due in large part to the social problems plaguing the adjacent Downtown Eastside. Architect and client assuaged the fears and suspicions of the community and the Chinatown Heritage Association through several meetings and project presentations. As Rennie was sensitive to the opinions of the building's former owners, last August he hosted 375 members of the Yip family for a reunion in the building and received their blessing.

This project is a gift to Chinatown, to Vancouver, and to the preservation of Canadian heritage—of stories that must not be forgotten. Though the cost of the project is rumoured to be in the neighbourhood of \$20 million, the results are priceless. It has set in motion the reinvigoration of an important and richly evocative part of the city. Inspired by the latest chapter in the Wing Sang building's story, others have established new and thriving businesses in the area where none dreamed of doing so just a few short years ago. As the project evolved, Rennie realized that he couldn't set a budget for such an important heritage project. He maintains no corners were cut because "There's no use doing it if you're going to compromise."

It is rather moving to hear Rennie eloquently articulate his role as a custodian. Very simply, he feels that it's his job to take care of the building, a responsibility that carries over to his art collection. It is this realization, he jokes, that "made it easy to bankrupt ourselves." All kidding aside, he is deliriously happy with the results, and very proud of what he has achieved. As he should be. **CA**

CLIENT RENNIE MARKETING SYSTEMS
ARCHITECT TEAM PROJECT ARCHITECTS: WALTER FRANCEL, SCOTT MITCHELL, MARSH ASHBY, VINCE KRUGSEN, HAZEN SISE; INTERIOR ARCHITECTS: ANCHELLE BLOOM, MICHAEL GREEN, SUSAN SCOTT, TRACY McTAVISH
STRUCTURAL JIM ENGINEERING LTD.
MECHANICAL IMEC MECHANICAL LTD.
ELECTRICAL CANTEC ELECTRICAL SERVICES LTD.
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CONTRACTOR H. WALLACE & COMPANY LTD.
HERITAGE CONSULTANTS ROBERT LEMON ARCHITECT INC. AND DONALD LUTON & ASSOCIATES
ENVELOPE CONSULTANT MORRISON HERSFIELD LIMITED
CODE CONSULTANT CFT ENGINEERING LTD.
CITY HERITAGE PLANNER ZLATAN JANKOVIC
OWNER'S REPRESENTATIVE WALDRON MORTON CONSULTING LTD.
AREA 27,000 FT²
BUDGET N/A
COMPLETION OCTOBER 2009