

Qualex-Landmark, has almost single-handedly reshaped the Beltline

By Richard White, August 31, 2014.

Since Calgary's urban living renaissance began in the early '90s, Vancouver developers have been instrumental in shaping our city's 21st century urban condo culture. Vancouver's Nat Bosa was one of the first developers to realize that Calgary's downtown could more than just a place to work before heading back to the 'burbs' to live. Today, his children - Ryan and Natalie Bosa - are championing the revitalization of East Village.

Calgary's largest single condo development project to date - Waterfront (eight buildings, 1,000+ condos and 1,200 parking stalls) on the old Greyhound bus barn site east of Eau Claire Market was the brainchild of Vancouver's Anthem Properties. This developer also has a 5.4-acre site across from Erlton Station that could accommodate a similar scale project.

Vancouver's Qualex-Landmark, has almost single-handedly reshaped the Beltline with five condo projects including sold-out Mark on 10th which is currently under construction. It just recently announced Park Point, a two-tower (500+ condos) in the heart of the Beltline north of Memorial Park; this means Qualex-Landmark will have built 1,500 new condos over the past 10 years.

The list of Vancouver developers shaping Calgary's urban condo culture doesn't end there Bucci Development Ltd. is very active north of the Bow with mid-rise projects in Bridgeland and Kensington. Maple Project is responsible for Ten and UNO, both in lower Mount Royal, with plans for a high-rise apartment in the Beltline, as well as the redevelopment of the Highland Golf course.



Mark on 10th will establish a new benchmark for urban design in Calgary. It is fun, funky and quirky without being weird and wacky.



The Waterfront condo project is the largest condo project in Calgary's history.



BOSA condos built in downtown's West End in the mid '90s.

International Influence

More recently, Calgary's new urban living renaissance has captured the interest of the global investment community. Grosvenor, an urban development company based in London, England that dates back to 1677, identified Calgary, Vancouver and Toronto as the best three cities in the world for investment potential. Currently, Grosvenor Americas based in Vancouver has three Calgary condo projects – Drake, Smith (Beltline) and Avenue (West End).

Vancouver's Concord Pacific (developers of the Vancouver Expo '86 site), with ties to Hong Kong, recently announced they will be proceeding with their uber-chic Eau Claire condo project west of the Princeton. Concord Pacific is associated with luxury condo communities with a reputation of choosing only the "best of the best" sites. Eau Claire and Mission are competing to see who will become the "Mount Royal of condo living."

Toronto developers get some skin in the game

Toronto condo developers, though late in the Cowtown condo game, have hit the ground running. Both FRAM+Slokker Real Estate Group and Lamb Development Corp. have entered the Calgary market in the past few years. FRAM+Slokker is focused on East Village with three projects - First will be completed in 2015, Verve in 2016 and a site for an unnamed major retail, office and residential development has also been acquired.

Lamb has acquired two properties for development - one on 10th Ave SW next to the iconic Uptown Bottle Depot and one on 12th Avenue SE next to Stampede Park. The latter named Orchard will be twin 31-storey towers with a one-acre apple orchard in the middle.

Rafiiville or Little Vancouver

Not only are Vancouver developers shaping Calgary's condo culture, but so are their Vancouver design and marketing teams. Vancouver architect Road Rafii has had more influence on Calgary's architectural look than any other architect over the past ten years. In 2001, the Vancouver Sun identified Rafii as one of the 10 architects who shaped Vancouver's urban sense of place. In 2014, you could say he has also shaped Calgary's sense of place as he was the design architect for Calla, Drake, Luna, Mark on 10th, Nova, Stella and Waterfront condo projects. Perhaps we should rename the Beltline "Rafiiville."

Grosvenor is also using a Vancouver architectural firm - James KM Cheng Architects - for its Avenue condo project in our downtown's West End while Concord Pacific is using Vancouver "starchitects" Arthur Erickson and Peter Busby for their Eau Claire condo project. In addition, Busby + Will Architects are designing a complete redo of the Eau Claire Market site for Regina's Harvard Properties. Could our downtown Bow River condo district become "Little Vancouver."

One would think the out-of-town developers don't think much of Calgary's architectural community. However, it is more a case of being more comfortable dealing with a design and marketing team they are familiar with. However, Brad Lamb, President of Lamb Development Corp., quoted recently in the Financial Post in conjunction with the

announcement of Concord Pacific's Eau Claire condo project said, "there are a few true luxury, high-rise developments in Calgary, but their architectural styles can be best described as pedestrian." Ouch!

Obviously, it is not a coincidence that Calgary's downtown skyline is perhaps looking a bit like Vancouver's given the number of high-rise Vancouver condo developers who are capitalizing on the residentialization of Calgary's urban core.



A rendering of proposed Orchard condo with the apple tree orchard between the two towers.

Fostering a sense of place

From an urban design perspective, I am not convinced Calgary is being well served by out-of-town developers as most of their architectural designs are not breaking any new ground and certainly not contributing to creating a "made-in Calgary" sense of place. However, I am anxiously awaiting the completion of Qualex-Landmark's Mark on 10th as it has potential to be a signature architectural statement for Calgary.

If I had to choose my favourite uniquely contemporary condo designs, I would pick ones designed by Calgary architectural firms. Arriva is probably my favourite - designed by BKDI. I have also come to admire what I like to call "The Chessmen" on Macleod Trail - SASSO and NUERA, designed by Calgary's Abugov Kaspar Architects and Alura and Nuera, designed by Calgary's S2 Architecture. These condo towers make a modern, robust and masculine statement with their massing and mechanical design elements. To me they have an engineering look that reflects Calgary's huge engineering community.

Good architecture doesn't have to shout out "Look at me! Look at me!" Rather, it just "stands out" over time as something interesting to look at.



These four condos by Cove Properties along Macleod Trail near Stampede Park have started to create a distinctive sense of place with their unique design.



South of downtown on 17th Avenue red brick is more common as the facade material for high-rises and the design elements are more art deco and Manhattan like.



The Beltline has an eclectic design sensibility, many of the new condos and apartments area adding an element of colour as part of their sense of place, like the Aura apartments across the street from the new Barb Scott Park.

Condo living is in its infancy in YYC

“Condo living will soon be the norm in Calgary,” says Michael Ward, Senior VP & General Manager of Grosvenor Americas. His rationale is that Calgary will have a very robust economy for the foreseeable future (although there will be periodic downturns) given its political stability and the large fixed costs and long-term commitments to the oil sands by both domestic and international firms. This in turn will attract young professionals, not only from Canada but internationally to work in Calgary’s downtown office towers. He believes “living in condominiums is a preferred choice for an increasing number of young people, looking for affordable housing and centrally located.”

He even postulates that “as seen in Vancouver, large parts of Europe and Asia, people are choosing to stay in condominiums after they form relationships and have families as they enjoy the convenience of living close to amenities, work and friends.”

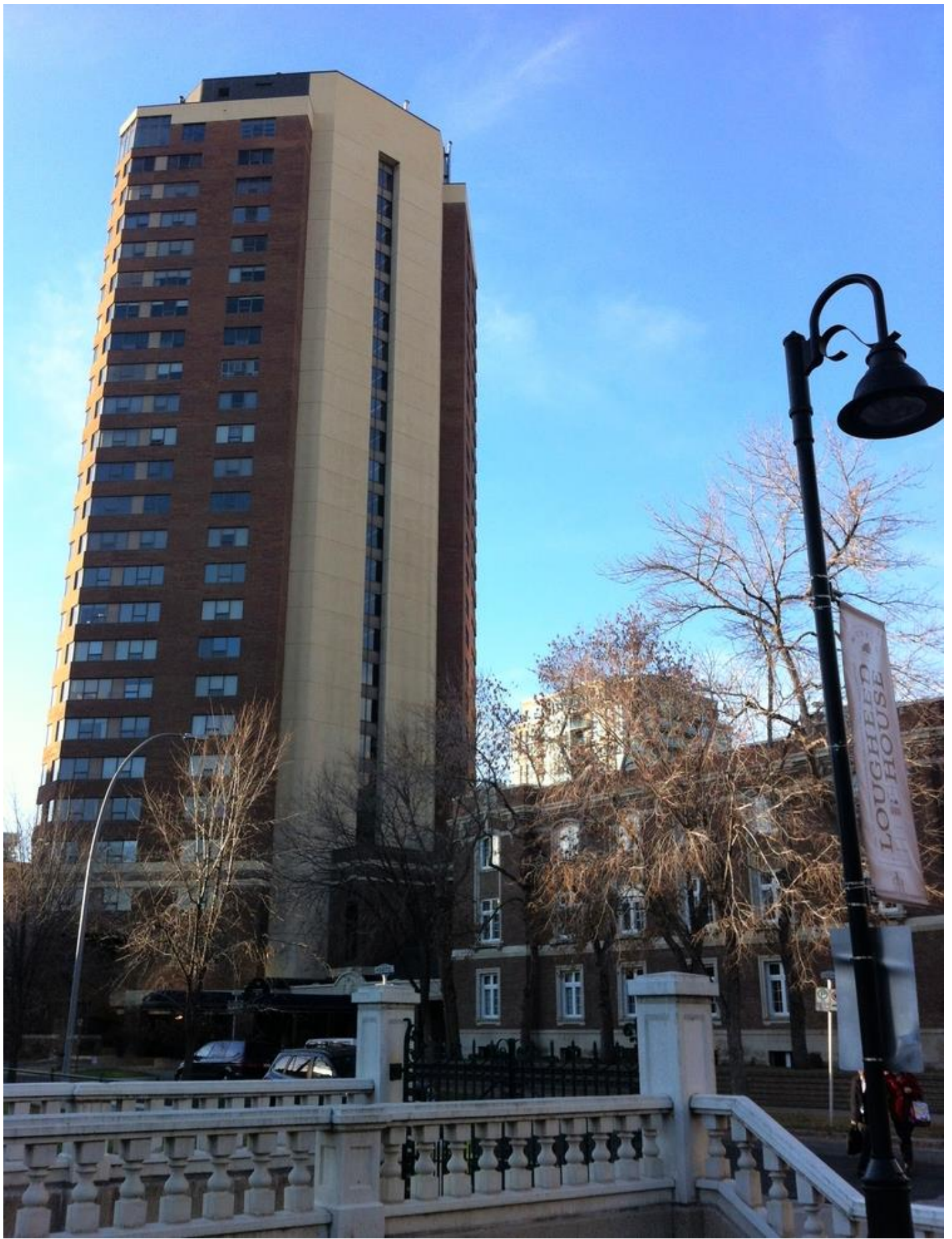
Ward notes, “Condominium development has in the past garnered some bad publicity in Calgary, as smaller, opportunistic developers have walked away from half-finished projects through tough times and held on to purchasers’ deposits for years before commencing construction.” He notes, “the fact Calgary is attracting major experienced national and international urban condo developers, means more condos will be completed on time with quality design and construction, which in turn will make condo living more attractive to more Calgarians.”

For decades, Calgary has been predominantly a single-family home city, but over the past decade this has changed not only in the inner-city, but in the ‘burbs’ also. For many the condo is the new ‘starter home.’ There are currently over 7,000 condos under construction across the city. As Bob Dylan sang, “the times they are a- changin.”

By Richard White. An edited version of this blog appeared in the September 2014 issue of Condo Living magazine, with the title " Cross Canada Connections."



Condo from the 70s and 80s and 90s along the Elbow River in Mission.



In 1982, the Estate condo was built next to the historic Ranchmen's Club. It was designed with town homes along the street with a tower above, nearly a decade before the podium and point tower became the Vancouver condo design craze.