

Vancouver House: This one's big

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Construction on Vancouver House will begin in the next four months and as it goes up, so, too, will the city's cachet as one of those places worthy of world-class architecture.

We've all seen the renderings of the tower that appears to twist, and few dispute that Vancouver House is a thing of beauty. It's also going up in a downtown location at Beach and Howe that needed a serious jolt of life, in a tight wedge of space darkened by a bridge off-ramp; a dead zone dominated by traffic and perilous for pedestrians.



Once finished, by 2018, Vancouver House will be the sort of sculptural building that lands in the pages of international architecture and design books. Sales of the 388 units began just three weeks ago, and the tower is already half-sold.

Developer Ian Gillespie believes sales are driven by the fact that the tower is unique, and has the lustre of being a Bjarke Ingels project. Since he hired Mr. Ingels for the job, the young Danish architect's demand has soared. He and Mr. Gillespie already have other projects in the works.

"Every city needs to have some special moments that take your breath away, that say to you, 'Okay, this is something unique. This is something beautiful,'" says Mr. Gillespie, the man behind Westbank Projects Corp. "And you can't have too much of that, because then it's not special. But you do need two or three or four special moments in a mature skyline, and Vancouver lacks that."



Ian Gillespie, left, and architect Bjarke Ingels look over a model of Vancouver House. | Rafal Gerszak, for The Globe and Mail

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Ian Gillespie

The tower appears to defy gravity, a top-heavy shape that ascends from a triangular base. It will be more than 500 feet tall and yet its foundation only 6,000 square feet.

"The total floor plate above is about 13,000 square feet, so your building is twice as heavy up top," says director of sales Jason Dolker. "It's the reverse of the usual building that gets skinnier and skinnier as it goes up."

It wasn't a creation driven by ego, or the "edifice complex" that drives development in cities such as Dubai and elsewhere, insists Mr. Gillespie.

"This wasn't some attempt at being extravagant or trying to shock people into some crazy form," he says. "Instead, the form came out of the constraints."

One of the minor constraints was a parcel of land adjacent to the project, which they couldn't buy because someone else snapped it up first. It wasn't

crucial for the tower, but it would have made sense to belong to the project because of its proximity.

"We have no idea what they intend on doing with it, as it's very limited in its development potential," says Mr. Gillespie. "Keep in mind our site is more than 100,000 square feet and that site is only 8,000 square feet. All in all, it wasn't something that was worth us chasing, so we just worked around it."

Floors 47 to 57 of the tower are "the estates," which means they are especially luxurious. The 58th and 59th floors are two-storey penthouses. The biggest penthouse, which has yet to sell, is priced at just below \$20-million. The lower-level units start in the \$300,000-plus range, with sizes ranging from studios to four-bedroom. As for sales, they've been swift due to a long reservation list of names the sales team is working its way through.

As part of its \$4-million amenities contribution, Westbank is building a market-style area under the nearby Granville Street Bridge. The project includes stores, restaurants and office space and 95 market rental apartments.

The tower will be connected to Mr. Gillespie's own, newly acquired utility company, called Creative Energy. It has long supplied heat to the downtown peninsula, and the goal is to convert from gas to low-carbon biofuels.



There's also a public art component, with Rodney Graham's spinning chandelier, located at market level. Over the course of the day, the chandelier will slowly descend and at 9 p.m. spin rapidly, then slowly ascend again.

Mr. Ingels, 39 – who was introduced to Mr. Gillespie by former city planning director Brent Toderian – has been directly involved in the design of the faucets, the copper backsplashes, the kitchen islands that are shaped like the building, an infinity pool, the lobby couch that resembles stacked sand bags, and floating mailboxes designed to encourage conversation between residents.

"There is a strong link between architecture and interiors, like some of the

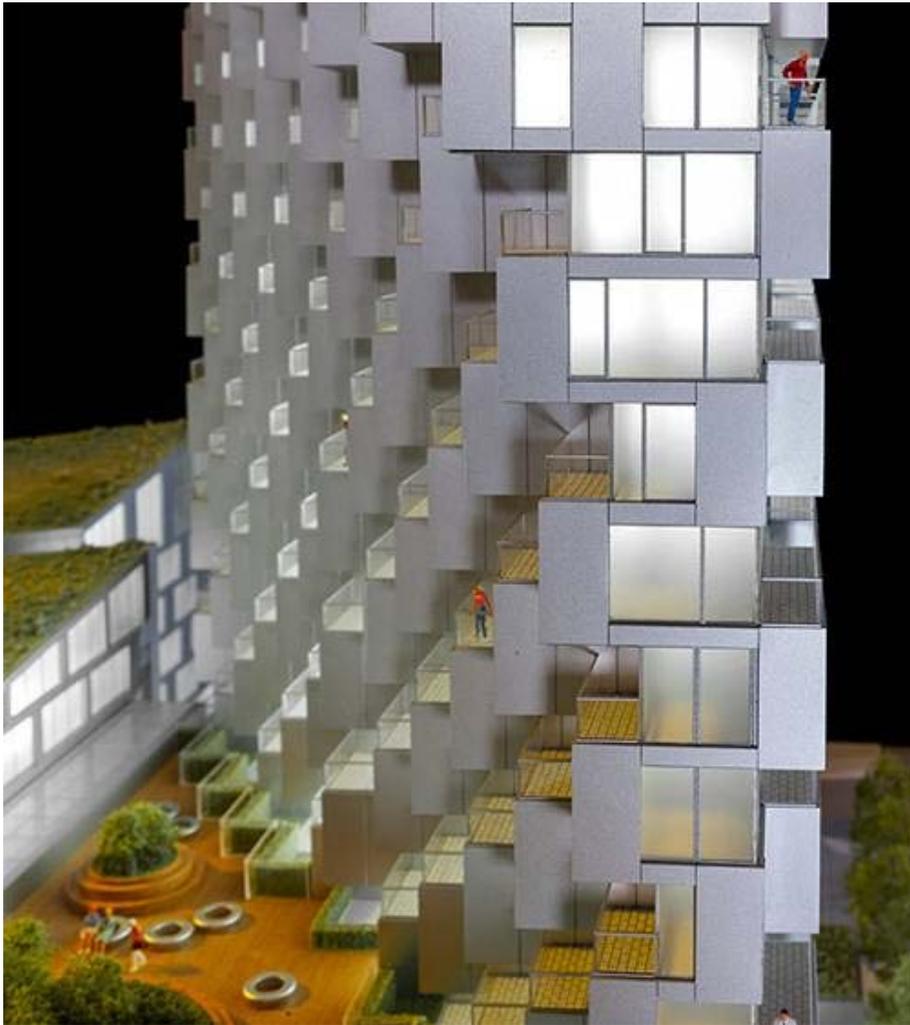
features in the architecture repeat in the interior design," says Bjarke Ingels Group partner Thomas Christoffersen, who met with Mr. Gillespie in Vancouver this week. "We are doing a lot of customized items, such as built-in furniture."

Like most major projects, it hasn't been without its controversy. Eyebrows have been raised about marketing to global purchasers. An influx of foreign money, mostly from China, has helped push Vancouver home prices so high as to make affordability an ongoing issue for a city where the average household income is among the lowest for a major North American metropolis. Locals are tired of competing with offshore money for a share of the real estate pie. It's typical for marketers to target overseas buyers, but for locals, it's a sensitive topic.

Westbank began its official marketing launch with real estate agent events in Vancouver in April. The company, which has offices in Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong, then marketed the tower in Asia in June. It also marketed the project in New York, London and Beverly Hills.

When asked what he thinks of the unease with foreign ownership, Mr. Gillespie is forthright. "I think it is a very provincial attitude," he says. "And Vancouver is one of only four cities in the world where 40 per cent of the population is born outside of Canada. The second thing I would say is that the foreign buyer is buying a unit that creates hundreds of construction jobs. That buyer closes on the unit, and then pays thousands and thousands of dollars a year in property taxes, and doesn't use infrastructure that those property taxes pay for. If that's the worst-case scenario, then maybe we have bigger problems."

Of the units already sold at Vancouver House, 60 per cent are local buyers, according to Mr. Dolker. Of those, about half are end-users, or people who intend on living in the units as opposed to holding them as investments.



Mr. Gillespie says we also need to define the meaning of "foreign owner."

"The majority [of units] will sell to local residents of Vancouver," he says. "And I don't know where the numbers will shake out, but 35 to 40 per cent will sell overseas. And at the end of the day, most of those people already are Canadian citizens. About 90 per cent of the buyers in Hong Kong already have Canadian citizenship. Is it foreign because they don't carry a passport? What does foreign even mean? In today's world, what do those concepts mean?"

As for the potential empty condo issue, Mr. Gillespie says that the number of empty condos typically shrinks as the residents settle in. Wealthy global purchasers are often transient.

"These buildings mature and as they mature, the ownership of the units gravitates to people who are owner/occupiers," he says. "I could point out building after building that has been through the same pattern. Because what happens is, you are a buyer from Singapore, and you buy a unit in Vancouver, and why do you buy that unit? They never, ever buy just on speculation. They don't buy to flip it. Those days are gone 10 or 20 years ago. Our market doesn't go cyclical up and down. It's a very steady market. They buy because they think it's going to be a second home or because they have a child who will go to UBC, or because they are thinking of leaving Hong Kong because they are worried about air pollution. And the

ones who don't end up coming, it's because their kid who they thought was going to UBC decides to be a rock star.

Instead, they end up renting the unit out.

"But in those years they are paying property taxes, and supporting the City of Vancouver. So in the whole scheme of things in a city that will continue to blossom over the next century, why worry about something like a building not being occupied in next three or four years?"