

'Soft skyscraper' brings new perspective to city

KEVIN GRIFFIN kevingriffin@postmedia.com

It creates dialogue between neighbours and the buildings ... it is a building of relationships, not a building of form making.

MARK VAN MANEN



Developer Ian Gillespie and Japanese architect Kengo Kuma display the model for a 43-storey tower at the Japan Unlayered exhibition in Vancouver.

Vancouver's skyline is about to get a unique addition: a "soft skyscraper," clad with shingled panels to create soft, blurred reflections expected to make the building look ephemeral.

The 43-storey tower planned for 1550 Alberni is designed by Japanese architect Kengo Kuma.

Kuma described his tower's shape as organic and unique. On the north and south sides, it will look as if two big scoops have been taken out of the traditional rectangular cuboid form of a tower.

He said that while its shape isn't based on anything particularly western or

Japanese, it is inspired by traditional Japanese buildings that create covered outdoor spaces. He described the tower as an example of a "soft skyscraper" because of the way it takes into account its setting, which includes the street and nearby towers as well as Stanley Park and the North Shore mountains.

"It's creating semi-outdoor space," Kuma said. "It creates dialogue between neighbours and the buildings. In that sense, it is a building of relationships, not a building of form making."

The tower — called Alberni — will have 188 condominiums and a ground-floor Japanese restaurant designed by Kuma's firm. Six levels of underground parking will provide space for 271 cars and 248 bike-parking spots inside and out.

Alberni is being built by Vancouver-based Westbank Projects Corp.

Westbank president Ian Gillespie said that as a tower, Alberni isn't about shouting out "Here I am."

"It's about the building blending into and embracing the natural environment rather than try to push against it," he said.

Gillespie described the building's form as expressing a feminine side of architecture as opposed to a masculine one.

"When I see that building, that's what comes to me," he said. "There is so much testosterone in the real estate business that the last thing it needs is more of that."

Kuma said the scoops out of the building's form bring natural light into suites and give more of a view of Lost Lagoon to the west. As well, for someone standing further east on Alberni and looking west, the scoop on that side will frame the lagoon in Stanley Park.

"We're trying to create a new flow on (Alberni) street," he said.

"In that sense, we're not designing the volume — we're designing the flow. That scoop is creating a natural flow between the buildings."

On a sunny day when Kuma could see that a dusting of snow had fallen overnight on the North Shore mountains, he said Vancouver's proximity to nature makes it unique compared with other cities.

His design for Alberni, he said, is one solution to the challenge of providing an experience of nature to people living in a city.

"In the 21st century, Vancouver can be the model of the environmental city," he said.

Kuma said creating a dialogue with nature has been one of the most important elements in Japanese architecture.

"There is I think a new definition for architecture: it should be a bridge between nature and artifact," he said.

"We should design the bridge — not the wall. In Japan, it is always a bridge."

Kuma, author of the *Anti-Object: The Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture*, is considered one of Japan's hottest architects. His design has been chosen for the Tokyo Stadium for the 2020 Summer Olympics. Kuma is a founding principal of Kengo Kuma & Associates in Tokyo.

Kuma's work is part of an exhibition called *Japan Unlayered*, currently on at the Fairmont Pacific Rim. The exhibition includes pop-up stores by Japanese retailers Muji and Beams Japan. Because of demand, free entry to the Muji popup is by reservation only. *Japan Unlayered* continues to Tuesday, Feb. 28.