

Old Soul: Developer Robert Fung



On a bright September morning, developer Robert Fung steps out of the temporary Water Street entrance to the Salient Group's Gastown offices. A cement mixer parked flush against the heritage storefront grinds noisily. Fung strides past the lone tourist pointing her cellphone at Gassy Jack, past the police officer in white latex gloves and surgical mask investigating an overnight break-in, and crosses Carrall Street to enter another heritage building. This one is in the final stages of conversion to a coffee bar called the Salty Tongue. Traversing the length of the narrow room is a single table, a scarred wooden beam salvaged during the building's restoration.

Seated with his back to the exposed-brick wall, Fung spells out his vision for Gastown, Vancouver's long-neglected birthplace. "Vancouver is a little sterile," Fung says. "But this city does have character." He gestures to the buildings outside the window. "These are the areas where our sins are exposed." He points to the Alhambra building across Carrall, which rose from the ashes of the former Granville Hotel. "The fire of 1886 was still smouldering when the Alhambra began construction," Fung notes.

The Alhambra, current home of his Salient Group's offices, is one in a string of four Water Street heritage buildings Fung is developing. As the 42-year-old father of three (girls, all under the age of seven) describes the buildings' origins, it's clear that, as is often the case, the developer has fallen in love with his project. Fung

describes the Nagle Brothers garage, the first car park in Vancouver; the Canada Cordage building, former supplier of rope to Vancouver's once-bustling maritime industry; and the former Terminus building and the Grand hotel. The restored buildings, most of which have stood vacant and in disrepair for years, will bring 46 homes and 34 live/work studios to the neighbourhood, as well as retail and office space.

Old-time Vancouverites tend to roll their eyes when they hear yet another story of Gastown's revitalization. After an initial push in the 1970s, when cobblestone streets and faux-antique lampposts were installed, the neighbourhood has remained a ghetto of souvenir shops and crumbling facades. Stories surface every few years about how the smart money is investing now and this gem sandwiched between the waterfront and the downtown core won't remain neglected for long. Yet decade after decade, Gastown's streets died when the sun went down and the tourists went home.

But now there's a real vibrancy in the air. Fung credits pioneers such as restaurateur Sean Heather, who had the courage to open Salt Tasting Room, a bistro whose only entrance is on an alley facing a social housing project. Salt and nearby Shebeen Whiskey House, another Heather enterprise with equally obscure access, have attracted a loyal following of locals who have actually made Gastown an after-hours destination. Fung also points to the upscale clothing and design outlets lining Water Street – including Obakki clothing, Inform Interiors, Koolhaus Design and John Fluevog Boots & Shoes – as helping to lead the charge.

And of course, looming above it all is the Woodward's megalith, a hulking concrete shell rising on the site of the long-shuttered department store. The addition of 700 housing units, 100,000 square feet of office and retail space, an SFU campus and community amenities will inject even more life into the neighbourhood.

Coffee in hand, Fung leads me outside, resuming our tour of his restoration projects. "Hey, Rob," a yellow-helmeted construction worker calls as we walk down Gaolers Mews to the back entrance of Fung's Terminus project. "Hi, Art," Fung replies with a wave. We pause at the construction office to put on our own hard hats, then Fung leads me down corridors lit by strings of caged light bulbs, our footsteps ringing on loose sheets of plywood flooring.

Even with wires protruding from walls and appliances still covered in dust-coated protective sheeting, the suites are spectacular. Shaped by the building's original design, each is a long corridor extending from a street-front bay window deep into the building's interior. Innovative lighting and open-space floor plans make brilliant use of the limited space. The suites average around 750 square feet, and Fung assures me they were priced well within the range of Vancouver condos. All were sold before construction began.

Which raises the question: who will live here? Certainly not the starving artists and welfare recipients who have long called the area home. I ask Fung how he responds to accusations of gentrification. "What do you think?" he asks. He looks at me quizzically, genuinely interested in how someone could see a downside to his restorations. I shrug and he continues. "There's no notion of kicking out the poor people who live in these neighbourhoods," he says. "We're talking about adding balance to one of our existing neighbourhoods."

It's clear that a deep understanding of sustainability informs Fung's work. Sustainable development, he says, requires an equal balance of social, economic and environmental priorities. Pile all the weight on one leg of the sustainability stool, he says, and it collapses. Fung points to the example of Southeast False Creek's Athletes' Village. With all the attention focused on green features, first the social component had to be scaled back and now the project's economic viability is in question.

While the heritage buildings that Fung restores don't necessarily have the super-efficient plumbing and heat exchange systems of buildings built to LEED standards, they fulfill their environmental mandate simply by saving one more building from going to the landfill. And, in Vancouver, the economic footing of his restoration projects is solid thanks largely to municipal incentives, such as a density bonus that Salient can sell to other developers.

As sincere as Fung appears in explaining how condo developments will revitalize Vancouver's distressed neighbourhoods, I seek confirmation from an outside source, and there's no one more qualified than Jim Green, former city councillor, one-time mayoral candidate and longtime advocate for Downtown Eastside residents. "He's a straight shooter, a decent guy," Green says of Fung via cellphone from his current residence on the Queen Charlotte Islands. "I think he's creative, and I think he's trying to do the right thing."

Green points to the example of the Flack Block building on West Hastings Street at Cambie, which Fung restored. "It had lost all of its commercial tenants and was falling apart," Green recalls. "Robert has come in and done a magnificent job. He has really followed the proper approach to heritage, and it's going to be a real value to the neighbourhood." Green explains that the building brings the first new office space to the neighbourhood in decades, and points out that the building's restaurant will employ local residents, while attracting visitors with money to spend.

Leaving Fung behind with his blueprints and construction crews, I head back onto Water Street. The fall sunlight catches wisps of mist between the iron beams propping up the facade of the Terminus building. The beams were installed about a dozen years ago to support the vacant building while a handful of developers came and went with plans that went nowhere. As it happens, the beams are scheduled to be removed the following day; the Terminus will be ready for occupancy within weeks. It's an apt metaphor: much like the newly self-supporting Terminus building, Gastown and the Downtown Eastside may just be starting to show signs of becoming the vibrant, sustainable communities that Fung envisions.

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