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East meets West in new mall

Asian centre in B.C. to be totally rebuilt to attract wider clientele

BY ALBERT WARSON

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.

Rudyard Kipling's observation from the age of empires is still more or less accurate, 66 years after his death. There are exceptions, but the image of a cultural divide is perpetuated in the distinctively Asian malls in Vancouver and Toronto.

Asians love them. Non-Asians rarely patronize them, and may even resent them for the traffic circulation and parking conditions they might create, possibly also because they're so different from conventional shopping centres.

There is a middle ground, at least in Richmond, B.C., a Vancouver suburb, where about 40 per cent of the population of 160,000 is estimated to be Asian. When the Aberdeen Centre opened there in 1990, it was the largest enclosed Asian-themed mall in North America; signage, shops, shoppers, just about everything, was Asian. Or, more precisely, Chinese. The mass market was ignored in favour of an appeal to the cultural tastes of one ethnic group.

Whatever that mall was, or wasn't, it's gone. The original \$20-million, 120,000-square-foot centre was demolished this summer. It had housed about 60 tenants, mainly in 300- to 600-square-foot mom-and-pop Chinatown-style shops, and was anchored by a bowling alley and multiplex cinema.

In its place and under construction is a reincarnated \$100-million, three-storey, glass-enclosed Aberdeen Centre designed by Vancouver architect Bing Thom that will literally glow in the dark, lighting the way to an ethnically broader and less traditional-minded younger generation of shoppers.

The new mall is, objectively speaking, a quantum architectural leap, but it is also an overture to attracting more than Asian shoppers. Of the 400 or so tenants expected to take space in the 380,000-square-foot centre, about 60 per cent will be Asian and about 40 per cent non-Asian in spaces up to a relatively modest 12,000 square feet.

Along with many of the former Asian tenants, including herbal tea shops, could be such quintessentially Western chains as the Gap, Banana Republic, Radio Shack, McDonald's and Vancouver-based Aritzia, all of which are eyeing space in the new mall.

Developer and owner Thomas Fung considered expanding the Aberdeen Centre in 1996, but Mr. Thom persuaded him to build a new shopping centre on virtually all of the six-acre site, with an attached four-level, 1,200-car parking garage. Mr. Fung is chairman and chief executive officer of Vancouver-based Fairchild Group, a Chi-



The central atrium of the new Aberdeen Centre will feature a special-effects light show that is touted to be the first of its kind in Canada.

nese and English language national media enterprise based in Vancouver that has offices in Calgary and Toronto. He says in a news release that he wanted to build a "new type of retail and entertainment experience that looks beyond cultures. One that embraces the best of East and West. A celebration of multiculturalism."

But to do that he had to incorporate the shopping-centre design model and store sizes that attract non-Asian retailers — the look of a typical mall.

'[The food court] will be different, with bar stools and tables, but also more like a café with banquettes, soft and hard seating.'

There was another reason for the change of focus, says Colin Stephens, chairman of Toronto-based Design International, which was responsible for the new centre's merchandising planning and public spaces. The old Aberdeen Centre, he says, was losing market share to nearby mainstream Western malls such as Metrotown and the regional Richmond Centre, and to other new retailing developments.

But even an ethnically mixed shopping centre can't stray too far

from the strong preferences of its core shoppers. Kulli Millar, Design International's research director, says a telephone survey affirmed that Asian shoppers "place significantly greater importance than non-Asians on food services and variety of eating places." Food and home-related items, therefore, will be the key attractions in the new Aberdeen Centre.

One of the new centre's anchors will be the third-floor food court, with more than 30 vendors, not all of them Asian.

"It will be different, with bar stools and tables, but also more like a café with banquettes, soft and hard seating," Mr. Stephens says.

There will be two other anchors — the parking garage and an outdoor/indoor market much like the one at Vancouver's Granville Island, with food vendors setting up stalls in front of their stores in warm weather. **Illuminating Concepts** of Farmington Hills, Mich., a firm specializing in theatrical lighting, is creating a programmable special-effects light show that will project images and videos on the domed ceiling, the floor and a water feature in a central court. Mr. Stephens says this will be the first installation of its kind in Canada.

What about the former tenants? Will they be back when the new centre opens in November, 2003? Danny Leung, Fairchild Group's senior vice-president and general manager, says some have relocated to other shopping centres, either

permanently or until space in the new Aberdeen Centre is available. Some went out of business or into other businesses, he adds.

"Mr. Thom's timing was right. We needed to extend ourselves more into the market and with a much better design to attract better retailers," he says.

"Much better" design is an understatement. Mr. Thom has designed an organically shaped shopping centre dramatically different from any other mall in Canada, clad entirely in clear, translucent and opaque glass of varying tints. It visually turns Aberdeen Centre inside out and into a kind of lantern at night.

However, the glass won't be entirely transparent. If tenants on the perimeter want some privacy, Design International has developed a system that allows parts of the glass cladding to be more opaque. When asked why other shopping centre developers don't ask their architects for that kind of exposure to the street, Mr. Stephens says: "Because they spend their money on the inside of the mall."

Fairchild Group is spending, lavishly, on the cladding and the curved interior terraces and amphitheatre-style court, all under a ceiling of randomly sized skylights.

Meanwhile, in the Greater Toronto Area, where large Chinese communities have sprung up in Markham, Scarborough and Richmond Hill, Market Village (350,000 square feet) and the adjacent Pa-

cific Mall (300,000 square feet), both in Markham, together constitute the largest Asian-themed shopping centre on the continent, according to Info Ontario.

Market Village was developed in a singularly Asian style by **Cedarland Properties Ltd.** of Toronto, whose proprietors, Rudy Bratty and Stan Leibel, parted a few years ago. Mr. Bratty, chairman and CEO of Vaughan, Ont.-based **Remington Group Inc.**, a major residential, commercial and industrial developer, brought Market Mall into Remington's portfolio. Mr. Leibel is a home builder in the GTA. Rudy Buczolis, Remington's vice-president of land development, says the company doesn't plan to expand the mall or incorporate mainstream retailers.

Wayne Chan, Remington's real estate and income property portfolio comptroller, says Market Village opened about 15 years ago as a general mall. About 10 years ago, the company transformed it into an Asian mall with about 250 tenants in stores ranging from 800 square feet to a 30,000-square-foot anchor. A huge Chinese community has grown up around it, and Mr. Chan figures the mall's customers are about 98 per cent Chinese. None of the other Asian malls in the GTA, notably in Scarborough and Richmond Hill, are planning to dilute their predominantly Chinese character to attract more non-Asians.

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