AGGV downtown: will it fly?

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The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria is on a space mission: desiring to launch a 25,000-square-foot satellite into downtown’s orbit, its dream is fuelled by a developer’s rocket, which could fly – or, depending on economic forecast and/or political weather, crash in council chambers.

Westbank Projects, with architect James Cheng, propose redeveloping the Crystal Court Motel on Belleville (between Douglas and Blanshard Streets) as a residential condo tower and new Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (AGGV). Cheng’s Victoria projects to date include Parc Residences and Shutters (both in Vic West), and The Falls (across from Nootka Court on Douglas).

The Crystal Court Motel sits on a triangle-shaped spit that licks the borders of Downtown, Fairfield, and James Bay. Technically, its tongue-like wedge belongs to James Bay, but its distance from the neighbourhood’s residential torso (yet concurrent proximity to major hotels, museums, and attractions) clearly signals that it speaks to the Tourist District.

AGGV would get its satellite, and Victoria gains an architectural landmark. The new gallery space provides 15,000 square feet of exhibition space, in addition to 10,000 square feet of “multi-purpose” space.

Shirley Madill, director of AGGV, explained that the multi-purpose space would serve different cultural functions (concerts, lectures, special events). These would expand the gallery’s range, allowing it to penetrate more deeply into the community, even as the community at last is drawn more readily into the art gallery.

Currently, AGGV’s tucked-away Rockland location makes drawing visitors difficult, but the satellite wouldn’t spell the old site’s demise. Satellite expansions have worked successfully in many cities, including Seattle, Los Angeles, and New York – anywhere land is prohibitively expensive for new all-in-one projects. AGGV’s current facility provides up-to-date vault space; a satellite allows the gallery to expand that critical space. New vaults, in contrast, are five times as expensive to build.

In addition, freeing up space in the old building lets AGGV create a study centre that permits access to vault materials: archives, prints, drawings. The Emily Carr room could expand, and the Asian collection would unfold to its best potential. In effect, Madill points out, the satellite would expand two buildings, not just one.

But of course Westbank is proposing more than a satellite gallery for this site. AGGV’s expansion is “fuelled” by Westbank’s residential tower. As Cheng explained, AGGV and Victoria benefit most if, instead of building a view-blocking slab along the entire block, he tips what would be a horizontal obstruction to a space-freeing vertical position.

This makes room for AGGV’s sculpture park, and creates a virtuoso amenity at street level.

It also allows the QV Hotel to retain harbour views. As to building a tower on this site, Cheng notes that while a mix of traditional-style houses, infill development, and some high-rises defines James Bay, all the high-rises are on its edge, for example along Beacon Hill.

In April, Cheng outlined the project to the three immediately affected neighbourhoods: James Bay, Fairfield, and Downtown. Westbank was gauging community interest in a proposal that’s still very much in conceptual stages. While differences of opinion emerged, it was fairly clear that most stakeholders want to see AGGV expand into downtown.

Other matters are less clear: Will council define Westbank’s gift to AGGV as an amenity to the City? Are Victorians ready to welcome a modern – and taller – architectural landmark into the family of buildings that currently characterizes the touristic façade? Will a model of innovative partnership between private development and public art gallery be acceptable in Victoria?

In exchange for deeding AGGV with a new 2-storey building and constructing its outdoor sculpture park, which at a stroke would immensely beautify a currently banal stretch of downtown road, Westbank wants to put a slender 19 or 21-storey residential condominium tower on the eastern-most tip of the property (at Blanshard). Currently underzoned at 1.2:1 density, the site would be transformed into an exciting cultural and residential destination with a 3.8:1 density (which compares to the density of both the Queen Victoria Hotel as well as the art deco-inspired condo to the QV’s south).
Park. Putting this project on James Bay’s perimeter therefore reiterates existing precedent. Furthermore, the site is part of the corridor to downtown, appropriately defined by higher density and already existing taller buildings.

By proposing to tilt what could be yet another horizontal “fat scraper” to the vertical position to create an elegant tower, Cheng faces an uphill battle in height-phobic Victoria. But Victorians should understand that a first-class tower will let the architect deliver a first-class enhanced streetscape. It will also let him face the challenge of designing an art gallery, which, together with designing highrises, is one of the most high-profile challenges today’s architects face, as even a cursory glance at recent gallery projects world-wide proves. Cheng’s projects show that he can design exemplary highrises; he won’t want to achieve less with an art gallery.

As envisioned by Cheng, AGGV’s new space will be luminous, with a clever play of glassy transparency and opacity. From the street, even passers-by will feel able to enter the gallery visually. The condo tower’s lobby is imagined as a study in light that also stresses transparency (glass) and surrounding water features, which in turn allows it to maintain a rapport with gallery and sculpture park. Since the tower would have to be tall and modern (and therefore thoroughly transgressive, in the eyes of Victoria’s traditionalists), it raises both the question of height and “character.”

Some think Victoria’s character is entirely due to a handful of late 19th and early 20th century buildings, but here’s a different thought. It’s true that the standout character of Victoria’s architecture is defined by buildings like the Empress, Parliament, St. Ann’s and large-scale houses of worship; Old Town and Chinatown. Yet there are many utterly unremarkable buildings lining our downtown streets, which frankly tend to overwhelm the powerful form-language of Victoria’s “heroic” era, when visionaries built ambitiously on the frontier’s outer limit.

If downtown grows, why build new structures that shrink into the background? This only increases the stock of boring boxes already nibbling at the fabric of confidence embodied by our heritage structures. We should demand daring, equally remarkable new additions that will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our carefully tended crop of historical buildings. Those buildings would continue what Rattenbury and others started. His were daringly grandiose structures that today would be labelled “too massive,” “huge,” and “out of character.” That they were built testifies to the fact that Victoria once thought it deserved the best.

It took imagination to think like that. Shirley Madill has that kind of imagination, and she’s confident in James Cheng and Westbank to rise to the challenge, too. As she puts it, “Think of the possibilities!” Victoria would be forward thinking, showing the rest of Canada how to re-invigorate public cultural building projects through leveraging private development.

And we’d finally have a downtown gallery, too. If executed, this project will rekindle the imagination downtown. It won’t do it by emulating heritage style through historicist pastiche. As envisioned by James Cheng, it dares to imagine an architecture that stands proudly by Rattenbury. That’s something the tourists would appreciate, too.

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