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BOSA DEVELOPMENT CORP.

III ARCHITECTURE

Exporting the 'Vancouver style'



TREVOR BODDY
DWELLING

A San Diego housing project designed and developed by Vancouverites demonstrates both this city's place in the world, and the place of the world in this city. Let me explain.

Nat Bosa of Bosa Development Corp. was amongst the first to take Vancouver-generated housing ideas and build them in other cities. Bosa's export of what American city planners now call "Vancouverism" started long before the massive Dubai Marina project, where a version of False Creek ringed by a seawall was built on the Persian Gulf in the United Arab Emirates, then dozens of Vancouver-style condo towers on townhouse bases were built around this simulation of our most famous bay.

After 20 years of experience developing increasingly large Vancouver-area housing projects, Bosa Development looked to the United States in the early 1990s for new opportunities to apply their expertise.

They first tried Washington State as a new home for Vancouver-style tower/townhouse combos, but their breakthrough was in San Diego, where the company has since become a key player in the transformation of the city's downtown and marina districts.

It all began with a late 1990s call from San Diego's Center City Development Corp. for proposals on nine different sites in the city's underdeveloped core. Twelve years previously, a Japanese company had built downtown San Diego's first high rise residential tower there, but it did not do well.

Charged to revitalize downtown with new residents, quasi-public American development authorities like CCDC have powers that can only be dreamed of in Canada, including what is called "eminent domain" — the power to expropriate private properties to consolidate a larger project benefiting the public interest. For their San Diego project designer, Bosa picked one of Vancouver's most locally-unknown but internationally-respected architects, Hossein Amanat. Mr. Amanat was one of the most promising architects of his generation in his native Iran, as a 24-year-old winning the 1966 competition to design the Shahyad Monument.

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ABOVE: The Shahyad Monument, designed by Hossein Amanat, and one of Tehran's most-loved monuments. It was in part Mr. Amanat's international reputation and skill with competitions that drew Bosa to him and made him a natural for the San Diego project.

TOP: The Horizon project in downtown San Diego, designed by Vancouver-based Bosa Development Corp. Project architect Mr. Amanat says, 'The Americans were very impressed with what was happening in Vancouver — they told us: 'This is what we want.' The project is very similar to some in Yaletown and Downtown South, but with richer, more developed and colourful design.

LEFT: One of the towers at the Horizon project.

A mirror in which to judge Vancouver's design reflection

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The Shahyad is a tower and garden whose design refers to both Islamic and Persian design traditions, and despite the many changes that came with Iran's revolution (including a new name, the Azadi Tower) today it remains one of Tehran's most-loved monuments, the equivalent to Tehranis of the CN Tower to Torontonians, or the Eiffel Tower to Parisians. Like many other members of the Ba'hai faith worried about their future, Mr. Amanat came to Canada soon after the fall of the Shah's regime, but spent his first decade of architectural practice in Vancouver doing almost-solely international projects, many of them Ba'hai houses of worship. In part it was this skill with competitions that drew Bosa Development to Mr. Amanat, as design would be a key factor in the allocation of sites for the California high rises. CCDC officials came up from San Diego to tour Yaletown and Downtown South tower/townhouse combos, and were equally taken by Bosa's Portico project. According to Mr. Amanat, "the Americans were very impressed with what was happening in Vancouver — they told us: 'This is what we want.'" Accordingly, Bosa was awarded one of the first contracts, on a street with another Vancouver connection — the Arthur Erickson-designed San Diego Convention Centre a few blocks away. Opening earlier this decade, what is now called the Horizon was

downtown San Diego's first downtown high rise residential tower in a dozen years, setting the pattern for subsequent development, including two further large projects nearby from Bosa, now under construction.

The architecture of San Diego's Horizon becomes an interesting mirror in which to view Vancouver's reflection. For one thing, it is a much richer, more developed and colourful design than is typical in Downtown South and Yaletown. While the gracious Mr. Amanat is as modest an architect as I have ever met, he says that the more modelled and lively approach to townhouse and tower elevations were his contributions to a project where design was a make-or-break issue.

By contrast, architectural design matters only peripherally here, our city planners and politicians more concerned with conformity to their rigorously-enforced downtown tower/townhouse prototype, and the provision by developers of public benefits in exchange for increased density. Bewilderingly, Vancouver's downtown has become testament to our authorities discounting innovative architecture, finer details and construction materials other than concrete and glass as being potential "public benefits" of another kind.

Another key factor is that downtown Vancouver rarely has architects of Mr. Amanat's internationally-recognized calibre designing its tower/townhouse combos. The in-

novation Mr. Amanat brought with Bosa to San Diego extended to technical innovation, not just lively towers and streetscapes. "It was a kind of revival," says Mr. Amanat of Horizon, "as we Vancouverites knew how to craft residential towers."

They had to work closely with officials and engineers there on technical details as seemingly banal as the venting of bathroom exhaust. In Vancouver, pipes for these vents are cast into the concrete floor slabs, allowing the floor-to-floor heights to be reduced, saving substantially in construction costs. It had not been done in San Diego, but Mr. Amanat and Bosa showed them how it could be done.

Mr. Amanat and Bosa's Horizon is a success story on many levels. For one, it shows how our city's quality of life can attract talent like Hossein Amanat, bringing knowledge and innovation from all corners of the world. Horizon also shows how Vancouver-developed housing ideas can be improved in other places — Dubai's seawall is much livelier than the Vancouver original it imitates, for example.

The real test of Vancouverism will be the degree to which we assimilate lessons like these to improve our own future condo towers and streetscapes, as many of us believe that quality architecture is one of the most important public benefits going.

tboddy@globeandmail.com