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Photo: Janis Nicolay Photography.

Versatility in Design

The man behind **John Henshaw Architect Inc.** knows how to use what's just around the corner, from fortuitous zoning laws to bridging a cultural divide

by Kelly O'Brien

IN THE EARLY 1990S, SEVERAL NEIGHBOURHOODS in Vancouver's west side were taking steps to maintain their historical streetscapes by encouraging new home builders to opt for traditional architecture. This was accomplished via a floor-area bonus system—smaller homes could be built in any style, but homes with larger footprints were required by zoning law to conform to specific design guidelines. At the time, John Henshaw Architect had only been in business for a few years. Still, the firm's eponymous principal knew an opportunity when he saw one.

For years leading up to these new zoning laws, architects had been sidelined in the single-family residential market, in favour of home designers who could outbid their architectural counterparts. But the new, more rigorous design requirements meant that Henshaw's skills as a residential architect were suddenly in high demand.

Taking advantage of the opportunity not

At a Glance

Location: Vancouver, BC

Founded: 1989

Employees: 6

Specialty: Custom single-family homes and interior design



Photo: Janis Nicolay Photography.



Photo: Erich Saitte.

"The market is constantly moving ahead. There will always be new trends that we need to respond to."

JOHN HENSHAW, PRINCIPAL

only represents one of the key milestones for Henshaw's firm but also exemplifies his approach to the business as a whole. "The market is constantly moving ahead," Henshaw says, "there will always be new trends that we need to respond to." Being aware of those trends and positioning to cater to them as they arise have become one of the firm's cornerstones to success.

One look at the demographic breakdown for Henshaw's clientele reveals another trend to which the firm has adapted. Upwards of 70–80 percent of the firm's clients are *émigrés* from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China.

Henshaw asserts that the opportunity to go after the Chinese market segment was "in the cards from the beginning." All throughout the 1990s, in addition to the regular influx of Chinese and Taiwanese expatriates, a huge number of wealthy businesspeople moved to Vancouver from Hong Kong, in anticipation of the city returning to China after a century of British rule. "There was a huge market," Henshaw says. "It was just a question of being about to capture it."

From the beginning, Henshaw had a couple of things going for him that helped bring him the success he's found today. For one, his wife and business partner is a real-estate agent, fluent in Mandarin, and is a trained interior designer. Her skill set has become invaluable when reaching out to Chinese clientele.

Another advantage for the firm is the fact that Western-influenced design has become very popular in China in recent years. This has synced perfectly with

Henshaw's experience with traditional local architecture and Western interior design.

Still, it's not all smooth sailing for the firm, as some of the East-West cultural differences have also presented challenges to overcome. Henshaw has had many Chinese clients bring in an extended circle of friends and family to contribute to and critique their designs, which often leads to conflicting opinions that must be reconciled.

Henshaw has also had to incorporate some *feng shui* principles into his design repertoire over the years, since it is a tradition that's important to many of his Chinese clients. In one instance, a grandmother of one of his clients came into the process and insisted that all eight of the toilets be reoriented so they faced north.

Today, Henshaw has rounded his firm out nicely. A solid grasp of both Chinese and Western design, staff members who speak both Mandarin and Cantonese, and a strong reputation in the expatriate community have allowed Henshaw to both serve the Chinese market in Vancouver and garner the firm several projects in mainland China.

Regardless of zoning restrictions, clients' cultural backgrounds, or the continent they're doing the work on, Henshaw's guiding principle is the same: keep it fresh. Henshaw's versatility as a designer has been crucial for his success, and will be for years to come. "We've tried hard over the years not to get ourselves pigeonholed as a designer for a particular style of house," he says. "Every new project is opportunity to explore some new ideas and to push the boundaries in terms of what we can do." **CBQ**

Previous spread: The firm's Kingston Road project features an interior pool equipped with heat-recovery ventilation to reduce energy use.

Opposite: Front view of the Kingston Road project. The house is sited into a hill sculpted to allow daylight access and views for the basement.