

# EARTH

E L E M E N T S

## VANCOUVER ARCHITECTS

TRANSFORM SPACES WITH  
CREATIVE USES OF WOOD


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For John Henshaw and Joy Chao, the husband and wife team co-piloting Vancouver-based [Henshaw Architects Inc.](#), the Canvest Tower was a chance to take concepts fine-tuned over years through a series of award-winning local and international residential builds, and apply those aesthetics to a massive commercial tower project in China.

While the whole project took over two years to complete from inception to completion, Henshaw, Chao, and their small team were simultaneously garnering local accolades for home designs. The firm's South West Marine Residence alone won a Georgie Award for Best Landscape Design, (when?) an Ovation Award for Best Custom Home over \$3 million, and the Illuminating Engineering Society Aileen Page Cutler Memorial Award.







Henshaw, the firm's lead architect, and Chao, the firm's lead designer have achieved professional successes which can be attributed to the Ying and Yang of their respective personalities. A more reserved Henshaw was recruited to work on the original Vancouver Convention Centre, and worked with several firms before starting **Henshaw Architects** in 1989. He and the outgoing, vivacious Chao originally met when her father, a developer with limited English, contracted Henshaw's services, and Chao was translating Mandarin to English for the partners.

Since marrying, the pair has been working together and managing **design construction projects**, predominantly residential, with some commercial design.

One client was so impressed with the results in his home that he asked Henshaw and Chao to design his office space within Canvest Tower located in Dongguan, about 80 kilometres from Hong Kong. The project was to build the corporate headquarters for Canvest Group Investments, headquartered in Hong Kong.

Canvest hired a local architecture firm to do the base building, and asked **Henshaw Architects** to build and design the tower's interior. Of the 28 level tower, they designed the bottom and top five levels - 10 in total.

The team travelled between Vancouver and Dongguan during the construction process. **The focus was the main floor entry, where countless hours were spent redesigning the lobby, transforming it from concrete into an oasis of modern architecture with a stunning focal point- a massive spiraling staircase made of one the Henshaw's signature building materials - wood.**

**Henshaw Architects** are known for their use of layered materials, and for bringing back the wood aesthetic in an architectural era of glass and concrete. Their work demonstrates aptitude for warming up spaces with the creative use of wood.

They used local materials and differential design – also producing a wood and glass ceiling with unique angular lines and design that plays off the Canvest company logo.

They also redesigned the common spaces, lobby, bathrooms and offices spaces, with the top two levels purposed as a private entertainment venue.

## HENSHAW ARCHITECTS

ARE KNOWN FOR BRINGING BACK THE **WOOD AESTHETIC** IN AN ARCHITECTURAL ERA OF **GLASS AND CONCRETE**



“The client loves wood, so wood was a big part of the project- the whole thing focussed around the heightened space as you come around the elevator lobby,” said Henshaw.

The main lobby was completed first- it took eight months alone. A massive wood panel piece with mirror finished glass creates a glistening reflection, and Henshaw said the staircase, to him, resembles a spine.

“It was an opportunity to do something different,” Henshaw said. “The staircase was designed for commercial use, and **no children would be on site**, so the rails didn't have to be child proofed, like they do for many residential projects.”

“They are very dramatic stairs, but we couldn't do a straight line, part of the reason is the feng shui – the front entry cannot face the stairway-also the height was a bit of a limitation. So that shape came out of necessity in terms of design,” Chao explained.

“**The key to the inspiration was the client wanted something special to showcase the resources of the company,**” she said. “The space is not meant to be subtle – we wanted to show that the company is doing very well. We wanted to make guests and clients feel like they are in a very special environment – luxury and exclusive – without being gaudy.”

Looking forward, Henshaw and Chao remain creatively charged, and selective about the projects they take on.

“We are a boutique firm – we are more interested in taking on interesting projects than getting big,” Chao said. “It was an opportunity to do something that we don't get to do locally – and it was fun.”