

# CUSTOMS HOUSE

by NATALIE BRUCKNER



## LOCATION

888 Government Street, Victoria, B.C.

## OWNER/DEVELOPER

Cielo Properties

## ARCHITECTS

Paul Merrick Consulting Ltd. /  
Studio One Architecture Inc.

## HERITAGE CONSULTANT

Donald Luxton & Associates

## GENERAL CONTRACTOR

Banyan Construction Ltd.

## STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT

RJC Engineers

## MECHANICAL CONSULTANT

Avalon Mechanical Consultants

## ELECTRICAL CONSULTANT

AES Engineering

## LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

Durante Kreuk

## INTERIOR DESIGN

Insight Design Group

## TOTAL SIZE

159,619 square feet

## TOTAL COST

\$100 million

In the past, you would be forgiven for having walked past the Customs House in Victoria, and perhaps not giving it a second glance ... despite the fact it takes up an entire city block. But that's no longer the case.

Today Customs House, with its sensitive restoration and new seven-storey wing addition, has truly earned its place as one of the three grande dames of Victoria's Inner Harbour (the stately Empress Hotel and the BC Legislature being the other two). But undertaking a legacy project with a history that dates back to the 1890s and in such a prominent location is no mean feat and required a team that understood its importance and was committed to it for the long run.

In 2014 Cielo Properties purchased the already vacated Federally-owned Customs House Building from the Government of Canada with a vision to restore the property and offer it the lease of life it truly deserved.

"I grew up in Victoria and love this city, and yet this building has for many years been an unfinished corner in Victoria's Inner Harbour. While there was technically some commercial down in a basement, there was no real street interaction anywhere on the building. When it came up for sale we were extremely excited to be able to bid on it, and so fortunate to have acquired it. We knew from the start we didn't want to cut any corners, and

that we had to go above and beyond," says Johnathon Sipos, president at Cielo Properties.

However, what exactly should become of this significant building would take careful consideration and expertise; the expertise of Stan Sipos, founder of Cielo Properties, his son Johnathon Sipos, renowned heritage architect Paul Merrick together with Jim Wong of Studio One Architecture and the team at Banyan Construction Ltd., all while working closely with the City heritage department.

"As we looked at it, we realized commercial at grade would make the most sense with either offices or residential above. We eventually decided to replace what was the addition [a 1950s addition that many critics complained did not suit the historic context of the Inner Harbour], refurbish the original Customs House that features sandstone walls quarried from Gabriola Island, and place residential above, to bring even more life to the Inner Harbour and offer residents the most spectacular views," says Merrick.

Retaining the heritage fabric of the Customs House that would form the envelope was, as you would imagine, extremely challenging, and as with any refurbishment, came with a few surprises.

"To get down to the three levels of parking we had to blast, as most of it

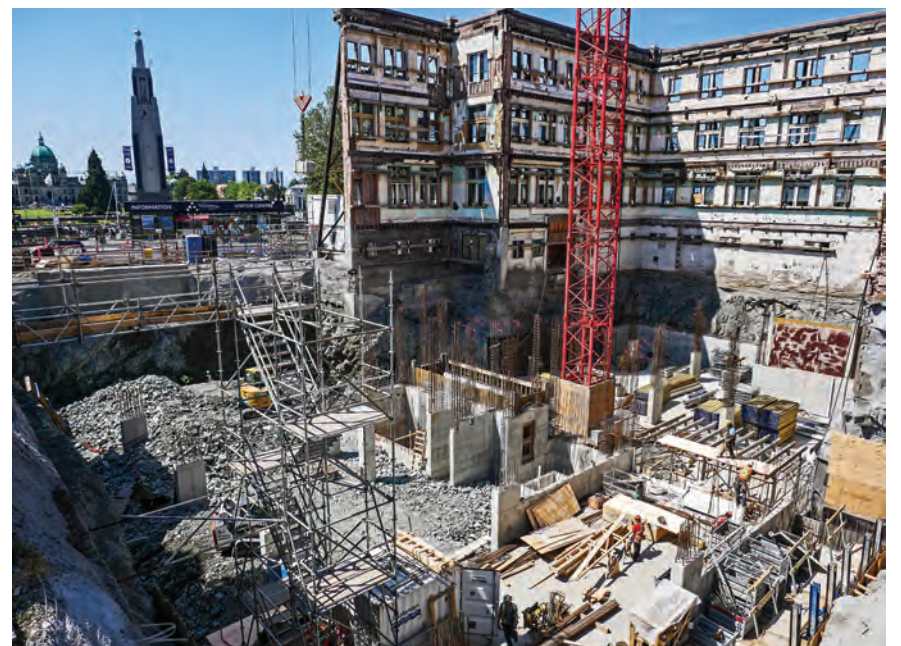
was rock. No-one really knew where the foundations were and we only got a grasp on it as we went down and discovered the footings were much higher than we originally thought. It took a lot of thinking on the fly," explains Dean Steffins from Banyan Construction.

To tie the heritage side in, Banyan put columns up against the concrete walls and elected to use shotcrete to reduce the hydrostatic pressure and eliminate the risk of blowing out the heritage wall. This method was so effective that Banyan purchased its own shotcrete division.

"We then structurally braced back the walls with supporting structural steel to ensure there wasn't any movement," adds Craig Thomas of Banyan.

For the design of the new seven-storey building, materials were chosen that would pay homage to the heritage element and complement the existing surroundings, while bringing it up-to-date.

"The design of the new building was influenced by the original, with the windows and spacing. We didn't want to repeat it, but do a new derivative of it. We always felt the material should be stone and we wanted something



sympathetic to the sandstone of the Customs House but that would lighten it up and give it more life. We opted for a Portuguese limestone that has a natural variation in colour and gradation. For the windows on the new building, we were able to mimic the original punch windows, but with a good height close to the floor that opens it up inside and allows a natural stream of light,” says Merrick.

The commercial, which is around 16,000 square feet of retail space at ground level, has undergone a radical transformation, as Wong explains: “The previous retail was not animated to the street and almost half buried, like a bunker. Now the full glazing really activates the corner, and being south facing has the potential for a wonderful patio with some of the best views in Victoria.”

Inside, the brick wall on the original building has been left exposed, while subtle variations on the new building offer a more modern yet subtle sense of place. The floor structure in the original building was raised to open up the views, because as Merrick explains, once you sat down, those views were lost.

Wong adds that inside the old building there is a courtyard on the



third floor that brings light deep into the luxury condominiums (of which there are 57 in the old and new building, all entirely unique in design), which is reminiscent of courtyards seen in Europe.

“There is no one type of unit, which of course is challenging from the construction side, but is truly spectacular,”

says Sipos, to which Wong adds, “The building has much larger and longer floor plates than those in normal residential buildings with all units having high, soaring, and sound-proofed ceilings that illuminate the interiors. These are a result of the building going through many iterations, but the result is fantastic.”

Needless to say, the two penthouses on the top of the buildings offer the most amazing views and at 3,531 square feet and 4,422 square feet, with 1,900 square feet of rooftop garden each accessed by a small elevator from the main living area, are above and beyond in their offerings.

While the team will agree this was an extremely complex project requiring an almost design build mentality, it’s obvious that this is one of those projects that will go down in history, and one everyone involved is proud to have been a part of. “I can’t imagine I will ever have the opportunity to work on a project like this again. They don’t come along very often. The significance of this project to Victoria’s Inner Harbour, which in my opinion is one of the most beautiful spots in the world, is immense,” says Sipos, to which Merrick concludes, “The significance of its place and complementing its neighbours, paying respect on the one hand but not repeating the century-old architecture, is extremely exciting.”

It’s fair to say that the Customs House building will once again take its rightful place as an important part of Victoria’s architectural heritage when it opens in early 2021, if indeed it hasn’t done so already. **A**