

Bricklayers

by Annmarie Adams

The Selkirk Waterfront Community, Victoria, British Columbia
D'Ambrosio Architecture + Urban Design



Franc D'Ambrosio's new firm needs no brochure to advertise its commitment to designing livable cities. The architect's deep interest in "humane urbanism" as he calls it, is literally at his doorstep. D'Ambrosio Architecture + Urban Design moved in July 2004 to a storefront space in the South Circle Building, at the heart of the Selkirk Waterfront Community he helped to create in Victoria. Two cast concrete ornamental lions guard the entry to the office, a tongue-in-cheek gift from the neighbourhood's developers Mohan and Robert Jawl in recognition of the architect's abhorrence of ornament for ornament's sake.

"It's a poster child of how good design sells," says D'Ambrosio of the handsome four-storey concrete, brick and cedar South Circle Building. He's right. All 28 units sold out before completion and he expects the two commercial spaces he owns next to his office to be occupied soon. The crisp, modern block occupies a key location at the heart of the award-winning 25-acre development, on Jutland Road, just before the second traffic circle.

South Circle is a highly articulated brick and cedar configuration perched on a rectangular concrete base. Cedar-clad balconies span vertical sections of brick, which protrude from the main block. The entry to the housing units is from the south, with a discrete address on Waterfront Crescent. The ground floor units, facing Jackladder Lane, feature fenced-in gardens. Nine plan types, ranging from about 1200-1600 ft², offer two-bedroom condos with open living-dining rooms. An especial-

Left: along Jutland Road, this view illustrates the separation of the residential component from the commercial concrete base. Middle: the office space with its Porteous mural beckons at night. Right: screens and bookshelves demarcate space within an exposed concrete shell.

ly appealing feature of every South Circle unit is a balcony, which either wraps around building corners or is accessible from two rooms. D'Ambrosio says they were inspired by his childhood memories of Turin, Italy, where kids could ride their bikes on apartment balconies.

While the residential units emphasize views and nature, South Circle's commercial units embrace the street. Including D'Ambrosio's office, they are marked by massive floor-to-ceiling windows protected by a steel and glass canopy. As a way of establishing cultural activity in the building, D'Ambrosio invited Victoria painter Bill Porteous to share his office. Only a partition topped by a transparent cellular polycarbonate sheet separates the two spaces. And Porteous is far more than a roommate. His dramatic mural, *Wu Li*, meaning "patterns of organic energy," graces the lobby of Selkirk's 1999-2000 Gatehouse Building at the development's entrance.

South Circle's role as a pilot project for LEED-CI (LEED for Commercial Interiors) seems almost incidental to LEED-certified D'Ambrosio, who sees the program mostly as a way of rewarding common-sense design decisions. Still, the 3,000 ft² office interior is a

An architecture office with storefront appeal beneath a series of residential units makes a big splash in this Victoria waterfront community.



showcase for sustainable design. The low-E glass windows are 14 feet from floor to ceiling; nine work stations are made of solid core birch doors discarded by a local law firm; service areas (kitchen, bathroom, photocopying) are tucked behind shelves of recycled plywood and wheatboard, enlivened by a huge mural by Porteous. The artist describes how his work relates to its architectural context: "Seen from a distance, relationships between a large-scale pattern of shifting coloured shapes and gestural marks emerge and provide an architectonic reference to the interior space."

Other energy efficient features include high fly-ash content concrete, low-flow washroom fixtures and indirect, reflected lights on motion sensors. Everything suspended above the dozen or so workers in the open, airy and cavernous office space at D'Ambrosio Architecture + Urbanism is exposed, serving as a handy reference on building systems.

Although D'Ambrosio's interest in energy efficient design comes from lessons learned in environment-conscious British Columbia, his earlier experiences in central Canada and Europe fuel his interest in how buildings perform. Toronto's St. Lawrence village and the Annex are important models for Selkirk, he says. Working for architect Phillip Carter in the late 1970s on Toronto-area libraries taught D'Ambrosio the value of planning. And a close study of piazzas, places, and squares in Italy, France and England as a graduate student in the mid-1980s convinced him that good buildings define the spaces around them.

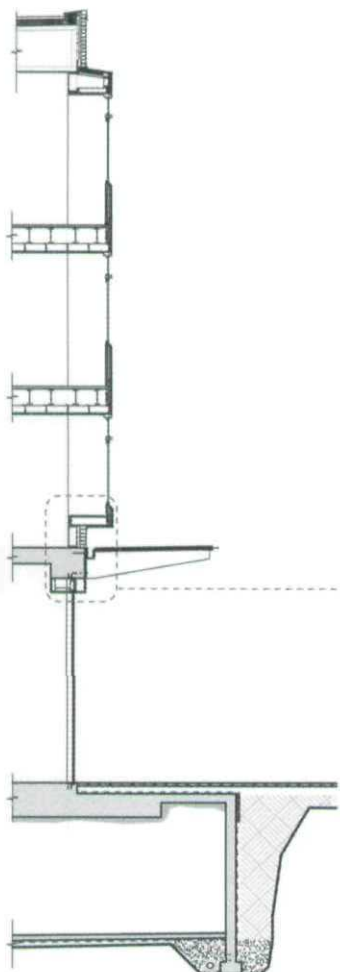
Still, the context of British Columbia is significant at Selkirk, espe-

cially in the choice of materials. The extensive use of brick in many of the development's buildings, according to D'Ambrosio, is a direct reaction to the province's leaky condo fiasco. Fascinated by Louis Kahn's authentic use of materials, D'Ambrosio takes care to express brick as mere cladding, reiterating its role as a non-load-bearing material. In the nearby Jackladder Lane housing project, for example, he used a hopsack pattern of bricks to underline this point. At South Circle, he emphasized the concrete base of the building to avoid any confusion about which material is doing the work. Exposed concrete boldly inscribes the corners facing Jutland Road, framing the expanse of windows like book-ends. "I like to exaggerate things," the architect chuckles.

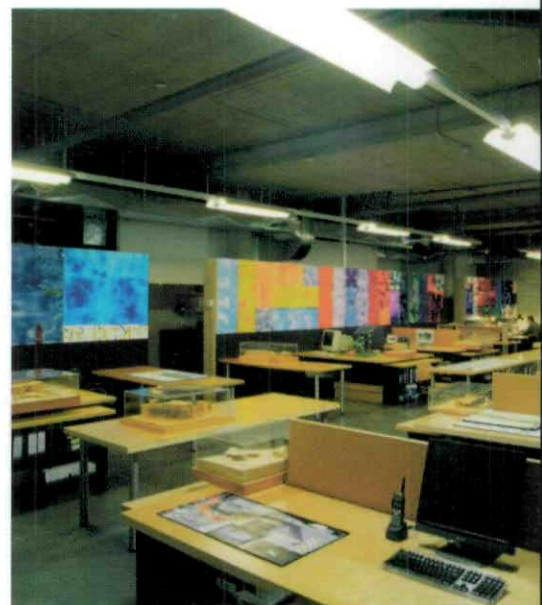
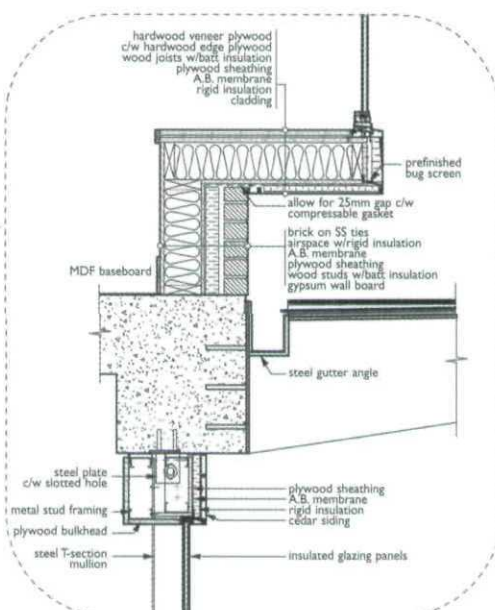
South Circle has a tough, European-inspired edge too. It feels more like Helsinki or Amsterdam than tweedy Victoria. Indeed, nostalgia for the city's Edwardian and Arts-and-Crafts past plays only an abstract role in the project, mostly in the re-use of materials found on the site, which once housed a sawmill and plywood plant. Nowhere is this notion of industrial recycling as evident as at Sawmill Point, where diners at the South Bay Pub and Restaurant watch giant cranes shred, sort and barge old metal at the Budget Steel Recycling plant across the water.

As the development's most significant public space, the entire waterfront teems with activity. In this regard Selkirk is a compelling argument for mixed-use development. The Gorge Rowing & Paddling Centre was enticed onto the site in 1996. Victoria's jaunty harbour ferries stop at Selkirk, and the historic Selkirk trestle bridge, part of the

Client: Selkirk Waterfront Housing Corporation
Project Design Team: Franc D'Ambrosio, Greg Damant, Terry Kopeck
Structural Engineer: Stantec Consulting Ltd.
Mechanical: Avalon Mechanical Ltd.
Electrical: Applied Engineering Solutions
Landscape: D'Ambrosio Architecture + Urbanism with Claudia Peterson
Interiors: Kimberly Williams Interiors (for residential component)
Lighting: SLS Lighting
Construction Manager: Farmer Construction
Area: 4407 m²
Budget: \$7,556,000 (not including land)
Completion: June 2004
Photography: Ivan Hunter



Section details

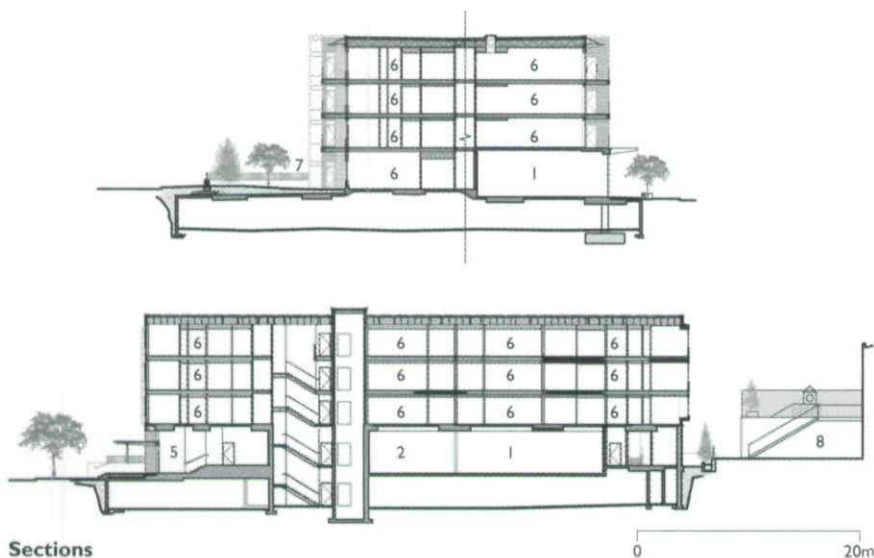


popular Galloping Goose Trail just west of the development, boasts 5,000 crossings per day. The land accommodates plenty of movement too. The Montessori School next to South Circle includes a rooftop playground, while land-lubbing adults "play" in the community's fitness club at Sawmill Point. At times Selkirk seems so idyllic, it feels like a stage set.

Fear of leaking, structural honesty and environmental consciousness add up to a paradigm shift for the Victoria design scene. "D'Ambrosio is onto something quite important architecturally," says University of Victoria architectural historian, Christopher Thomas, an authority on Victoria Modernism, "developing, perhaps for the first time in a generation, a true Vancouver Island vernacular which is nevertheless savvy about New and Super-Modernism globally." Fortunately, there's more to come. Garbally Landing, an office/parking/commercial structure with a dramatic boomerang-like curve is now under construction at the north-eastern edge of Selkirk, and Cecelia Creek Housing is on the drawing boards at D'Ambrosio Architecture + Urbanism. Both projects showcase the firm's ongoing interest in designing for urban population growth, environmental sustainability and well-crafted construction.

Brochure? They're too busy designing buildings. **ca**

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Sections



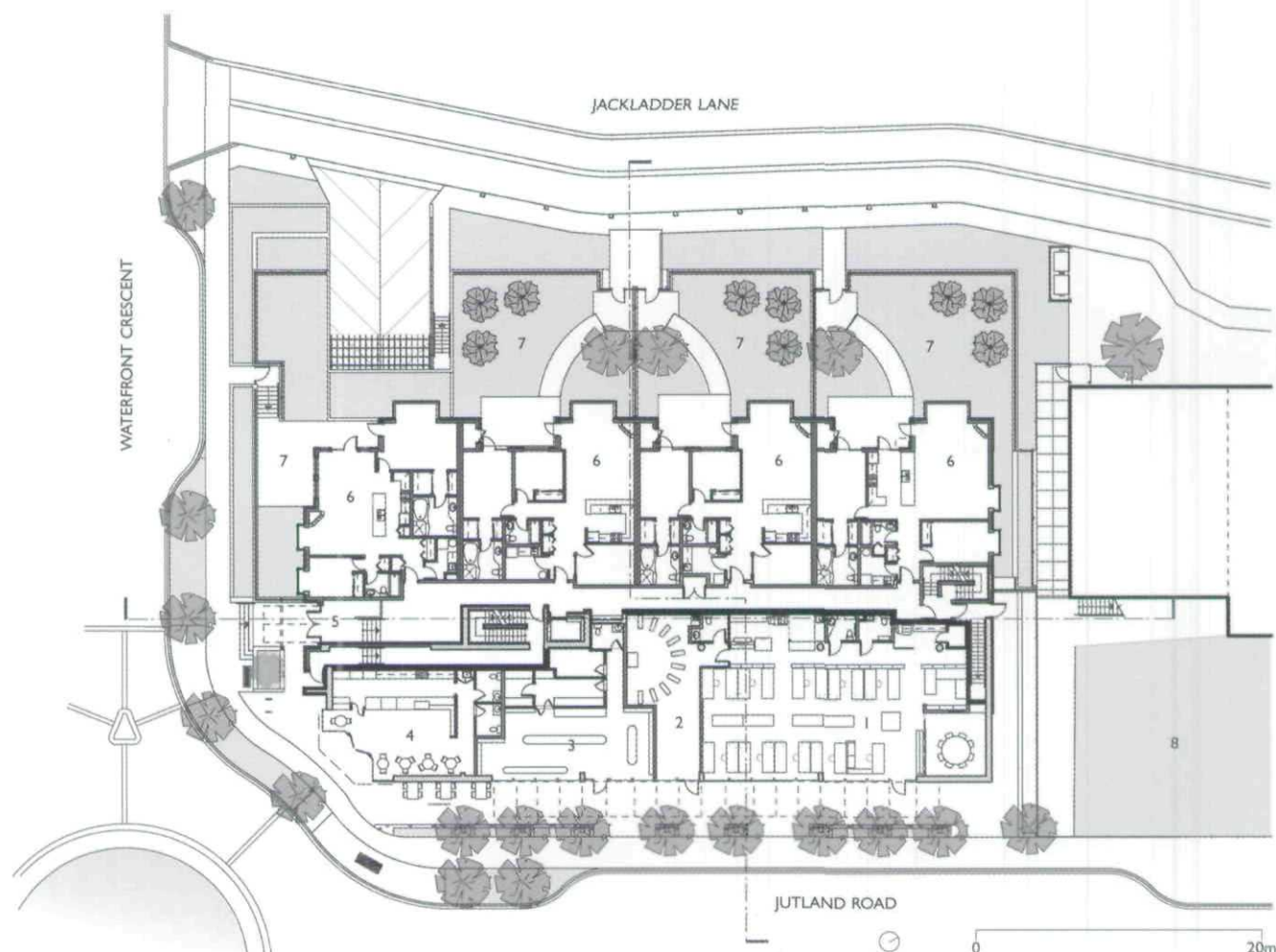
Site plan



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200m

Left: inside the architecture office. Right: a view along Waterfront Crescent with a separate entrance to the condominiums barely visible.



Ground floor

- 1. architecture studio
- 2. art studio
- 3. shop
- 4. café
- 5. residential entry
- 6. residential unit
- 7. private garden + patio
- 8. school playground

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