

OPINION

And now for something completely different ... in architecture

Proposed waterfront building breaks free of what has gone before, and could be a much-needed bridge to a new city skyline

**PETE
MCMARTIN**
VANCOUVER SUN



From the Granville Bridge, the view of Yaletown and False Creek is the envy of urban North America — shiny glass condominium towers housing a growing downtown population.

It's also uniform. The orientation is overwhelmingly vertical. The colours come from the same muted palette. The towers are either a silvery white as pale as a November sky, or a green glass the shade of saltchuck. The green is called seafoam. There's so much seafoam downtown that the towers seem like a mirror image of the water they front.

In the span of the city's history, those towers are brand new. But in the more ephemeral world of architecture, they're been-there-done-that. Seafoam and glass towers are old hat.

"One of the identifying tenets

of what we call 'Vancouverism,' said architect Bruce Haden, "is the fact that Vancouver has succeeded in doubling its downtown population in 25 years.

"And the 'tower and podium model' (where you have a condominium tower surrounded by a base of town houses and retail outlets) "has been a very successful model in increasing that downtown population.

"But when you have buildings going up so fast, and you're using the same technology and techniques, inevitably, the building design gets a little dull.

"It's a sea of sameness."

He isn't alone in thinking so. Frances Bula, my colleague at *The Globe and Mail*, recently did a piece on the architectural community's growing boredom with glass-clad towers. They're fast and cheap to erect — glass is cheap cladding — but they do little to give the cityscape a memorable texture.

In her piece, Bula wrote that some architects were experimenting with bolder colours and claddings to break up the sameness of those towers.

But Haden, and fellow



GLENN BAGLO/PNG

The proposed design by Bruce Haden and Joost Bakker for a condo and office/retail complex avoids a 'sea of sameness.'

architect Joost Bakker, are trying something different.

They're deconstructing the vertical tower.

"We did some sketches of traditional towers," Haden said, "and I thought, 'This is really boring.'"

The sketches were for a condominium and office tower development on Quebec Street

at the eastern end of False Creek. It's one of the last undeveloped pieces fronting the Creek. To the north are the Bosa Towers, the half-dozen seafoam glass towers across the street from Creekside Park and Science World. With a panoramic view of False Creek in front of them, Haden and Bakker wanted something new.

They came up with a "bridge form" — a tower laid horizontally across two smaller supporting towers. The top tower is aslant to the two supporting towers, which are parallel to each other, and spans a 25,000 sq. ft. central courtyard. The buildings are aligned so that the courtyard gets sun during much of the day.

With a dozen supporting columns rising from its courtyard, the development's design is reminiscent of the Ontario College of Art & Design in Toronto. The OCAD's new addition, built in 2004, is a large four-storey rectangle of offices supported high above street level on coloured steel poles set at different angles. So thin and precariously set are the supporting poles that the building seems to defy gravity.

Haden's and Bakker's design has a more stolid feel than the breathtaking drama of the OCAD's, but there isn't anything like it in Vancouver, either.

"When we took it to city council," Haden said, "there was nothing but extraordinary support for it."

In all, the development will rise 18 or 19 stories, and offer 304 units. The top horizontal tower (with eight storeys, two of them penthouse floors) and one of the bottom supporting towers will be residential.

The other supporting tower will be all retail and office space.

"Unlike conventional condominium towers," Haden said, "it will mean the building won't empty out in the morning and fill up at night. There'll always be activity in and around the building."

Final approval has yet to be granted from the city, though Bakker and Haden expect it in about a month's time.

Completion date: 2013-2014.

Price? Starting in the high \$200,000s for a 525-sq.-ft. junior one-bedroom (read "closet") to the low \$2 million-level for a penthouse.

Which is considered affordable, according to Haden.

Which is to say, that while the design may be unconventional, the price is pure Vancouver.

pmmcartin@vancouversun.com