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Condo buyer Nancy Stevens, Victoria city councillor Marianne Alto, Anthem Properties sales and marketing director Robert Marchand, Karen Smith of Robert Ciccozzi Architecture, and Victoria city councillor Pam Madoff at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Union development in Chinatown with traditional lion dancers to bring good fortune to the neighbourhood.

Union Breaks Ground

BY BRIAN HARTZ | MAY 15, 2012

Anthem Properties is moving ahead with Union, a 133-unit, 35,000-square-foot condo development between Fisgard Street and Pandora Avenue in the heart of Chinatown that will breathe new life into a long-neglected parcel of land.

Representatives from Anthem Properties and the project's architectural talent were joined by an early buyer of a Union suite and city officials at a groundbreaking on Saturday, May 12. The ceremony featured a performance by traditional lion dancers to bring good fortune to the neighbourhood.

Projected to open in spring 2013, Union rehabilitates and fully incorporates the crumbling façade of the Finlayson building, which dates to 1881, when it was built to house Chinese workers. Two buildings — one on Fisgard, the other on Pandora, joined by a courtyard — comprise the \$30-million development designed by Robert Ciccozzi Architecture Inc. and Merrick Architecture, with interior design by Portico Design Group.

Anthem, founded in 1991, bought the site in 2007 in keeping with its practise of acquiring and developing distressed properties. It also redeveloped — and still owns — Market Square

on Lower Johnson Street. A mixed-use project called Bamboo had been proposed for the lot where Union rises, but the developer got into financial trouble. Anthem refunded buyers' deposits and started from scratch, says sales and marketing manager Robert Marchand.

"We've been sitting on it since 2007, looking at, trying to decide what would be the right project to build," he says. "As the market took its turn in 2008, things got put on hold, and we fortunate enough not to have anything on the books for that land. We moved forward and put together what we feel is a great plan."

Union offers junior one-bedroom, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom suites ranging in size from 491 to 828 square feet, and in price from \$239,000 to \$399,000, with five floor-plan options. A fully furnished junior one-bedroom display suite is set up in Market Square. Anthem has sold some 35 units so far.

"What we're seeing are people who are looking for value," Marchand tells *Douglas*. "It's not necessarily price point, although everybody's driven by that initially. They've got to be able to feel the value in the space and the dollars they're spending, and that's where I think we're a little different."

The marketing of Union is different, to say the least. You could be forgiven for mistaking its brochure for a neighbourhood association publication — such is the emphasis on the history and vibrancy of Chinatown as you flip the pages. You get halfway through before you start to see renderings and floorplans.

Is it a sign of the times? Why load up a building with costly features like gyms, pools, saunas, and the rest when buyers will have all that and more five minutes from their doorstep? Why waste money on a proposal that might generate higher sale prices but runs the risk of alienating neighbours — and getting rejected by city council?

"We're proud of the neighborhood and what it offers," says Marchand. "This isn't your standard condo where you drive into your underground parkade, go home, and just hang out. Here, you go home, you get ready, you head back out. We're talking about the community more than we're talking about the space."

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