



BC GLASS SEA SPONGE INSPIRES TRANSFORMATIVE DEVELOPMENT FOR DOWNTOWN VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Proposed project set to deliver housing, hotel, Indigenous led art & community space

VANCOUVER, BC — May 8, 2025 — A transformative mixed-use development that merges architectural innovation, social responsibility and urban revitalization has been submitted to the City of Vancouver by Henriquez Partners Architects (Henriquez) on behalf of the Holborn Group.

At its core, the project is about ambitious city-building — unlocking public benefits on currently underutilized land in a way that supports some of the city’s most urgent needs — while contributing bold architecture to the city skyline, including what would be British Columbia’s tallest tower.

NATURE INSPIRES ARCHITECTURE: Four towers, designed by Henriquez, draw inspiration from rare and ancient glass sea sponge reefs, whose ecological strength and resilience have shaped both form and structure. These living marine organisms — unique to the Pacific Northwest — serve as a metaphor for regeneration and adaptation.

This concept is translated through the architectural language of the towers: silhouettes, sculptural forms, and sustainable performance. The tallest tower — a stand-alone hotel — proposed at 1,033 feet (315 metres), is shaped by an iconic structural diagrid exoskeleton that allows for column-free interiors while maximizing strength and minimizing material use. Developed in collaboration with international engineering leader Arup, the structural system references the skeletal lattice of sea sponges — a concept researched at Harvard for its groundbreaking structural efficiency.

FORM & FUNCTION: Each tower responds differently to the metaphor: the hotel features a steel-and-concrete structure wrapped in a diagrid exoskeleton; the residential towers include sculptural balconies and screens that echo the texture and intricacy of the sponge’s filigree form, creating dynamic, functional facades. The podium and interior design are equally expressive — envisioned as carved, coral-like forms with weathered stone finishes, inspired by BC’s underwater reef landscapes and contextual scale of neighbouring buildings such as the terracotta of the Randall Building and stone of Christ Church Cathedral.

The project spans three sites at 501 + 595 West Georgia and 388 Abbott Street, bridging Vancouver’s business district and the Downtown Eastside. In total, four towers are proposed: three ranging from 783 to 1,033 feet (239 to 315 metres) on West Georgia Street, and a fourth tower at 402 feet (122 metres) on Abbott Street. This fourth tower — fully gifted to the City of Vancouver — will contain 378 social housing units, including three artist-in-residence studios, a childcare centre, and a public Indigenous Art Gallery.

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In total, the development will create 1,939 new homes, a 920-room hotel, 70,130 square feet of much-needed conference space, Indigenous-led reconciliation through art, and introduce significant public amenities across both sites. This project will serve as a major economic catalyst for downtown Vancouver, creating thousands of construction and permanent jobs.

"We are incredibly proud to bring forward this generational project — one rooted in community need, extraordinary architectural innovation and reconciliation," said Joo Kim Tiah, President, Holborn Group. "This project is designed not only to meet today's challenges, but to inspire future generations."

PUBLIC SPACE & RECONCILIATION THROUGH DESIGN: The project redefines public benefit in high-density urban development. At the top of the hotel tower — space typically reserved for private use — a publicly accessible observation deck designed by PFS Studio — envisioned as a "forest in the sky" — offers panoramic views of the city, mountains, and ocean. At grade, a 17,000 square foot public plaza connects West Georgia Street with retail and restaurant pavilions, programmed cultural space, and Indigenous art.

Musqueam artist Susan Point has been invited to incorporate the façade of the 1929 Randall Building into a site of reconciliatory storytelling, reinterpreting its colonial architecture through contemporary Indigenous expression. At Abbott, there is a 5,150-square-foot Indigenous art gallery and community space, along with three artist-in-residence suites for the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh (MST), guided by consultant Gordon Grant.

"The project will showcase a genuine and informative act of Truth and Reconciliation," said Gordon Grant, Cultural Consultant. "It will provide a platform for Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh artists to display a small piece of rich and powerful cultures that all of the Nations can be proud of."

PROJECT BENEFITS

Architectural & Design Innovation

- Inspired by BC's glass sea sponge reefs, blending sustainability, structure and poetics.
- Hotel tower features a structural diagrid exoskeleton for open interiors and high performance
- Residential towers incorporate sculptural balconies with decorative steel screens evoking marine forms
- Podium and interior spaces sculpted to resemble coral caves, with materials referencing Vancouver's architectural heritage
- Collaboration with Arup for cutting-edge, low-carbon structural design

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Contribution to Vancouver's Housing Needs

- 1,939 new homes including:
 - 1,288 market condominiums
 - 273 rental homes, including family-sized units
 - 378 non-market homes — Vancouver's largest single contribution of stand-alone social housing

A Building Gifted for Community Benefit

- Entire Abbott Street tower donated to the City of Vancouver, including:
 - 378 social housing units, including three artist-in-residence suites for Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh (MST)
 - 37-space childcare facility
 - 5,150 square foot Indigenous art gallery

Hospitality and Tourism Driver

- 920 hotel rooms (640 short stay, 240 long stay)
- 70,130 sq. ft. of conference and ballroom space over three levels
- Public rooftop observation deck with restaurant and lounge
- Thousands of long-term jobs for Vancouver's hospitality and service economy

Economic Stimulus & Downtown Revitalization

- Over 3 million square feet of mixed-use space
- 64,000+ square feet of retail, activated plazas, and pedestrian pathways
- Direct SkyTrain connection, improved transit access
- Replaces surface parking with vibrant, safe, and connected public realm
- Thousands of construction and permanent jobs

Indigenous Art and Cultural Reconciliation

- Guided by cultural consultant Gordon Grant and supported by MST
- Public art program centred on storytelling, memory, and reconciliation
- Randall Building incorporated by Susan Point as a canvas
- 5,150 square foot MST Gallery + community space, and three artist accommodations

Sustainable Urbanism

- Targeting 50% embodied carbon reduction
- Prefabricated systems and sculptural forms reduce material waste
- Net-zero operational emissions
- Public realm landscape architecture by PFS Studio enhances biodiversity and experience

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This project delivers significant public, social, and cultural benefits through design excellence, environmental responsibility, and a deep sense of place — while dramatically enhancing Vancouver’s streetscape and skyline.

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MEDIA CONTACT

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ABOUT HOLBORN GROUP

Holborn is an award-winning Vancouver-based developer with an international background and global vision. Holborn’s diverse portfolio of projects and real estate management services throughout British Columbia include retail, residential, office and hotel properties. Holborn’s mission is to elevate the lifestyle of the people who choose to live, work and stay in what they build. Holborn believes that buildings are living and emotional spaces, which is why they look at how people will move inside them and out. Holborn is built on a foundation of collaboration, integrity and respect – core principles that guide their every decision. Holborn takes pride in building vibrant communities and are invested in creating meaningful connections that have positive impacts on the cities they live in.

Web www.holborn.ca | Instagram @holborngp

ABOUT HENRIQUEZ PARTNERS ARCHITECTS

Henriquez is a Canadian architectural studio, based in Vancouver, BC. Led by Gregory Henriquez and his belief that architecture has the potential to be a poetic expression of social justice, the studio seeks to re-examine the role of ethics, activism, and critical commentary in architectural practice. Henriquez seeks to re-establish the role of the architect as one of leadership in the creation of the collective space that form the fabric of our daily lives and communities. Henriquez is now best known for inclusive zoning within mixed-use projects. The Woodward’s redevelopment, completed in 2011, in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, remains unprecedented in Canada due to its scale, humanitarian aspirations and complexity. The studio’s ethos continues to have a major impact on shaping local communities. Current large-scale mixed-use projects include the 5.0 million ft² Oakridge Redevelopment (Vancouver); three major projects in Toronto: 1.0 million ft² Mirvish Village in Toronto, and 800,000 ft² affordable housing with CreateTO at 5207 Dundas St W - both currently under construction, as well as 1.0 million ft² CreateTO & Co-op Federation of Toronto mixed income project Kennedy Green.

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