



Five questions with SvN Architects' Kai Hotson

Partner talks recent merger and designing efficient, yet beautiful, buildings

by **Laura Hanrahan**

After years of collaborating on individual projects, Vancouver-based boutique firm Hotson Architecture and SvN Architects + Planners of Toronto decided to make their union official.

Kai Hotson, founder of Hotson Architecture and now a partner at SvN, spoke with Green Street News to discuss the merger, the group's mission to create beautiful buildings and what it's like designing in today's market, where efficiency is often the top priority for developers.

How did the merger with SvN come together?

Drew Sinclair, who's one of my partners at SvN now, we are very close friends from architecture school and worked together in certain offices over the years and have always wanted to try to work together on something. So we started a few years ago, maybe 2019, pursuing some strategic projects together here in Vancouver.

They do a lot of master-planning of large sites, and we've done a little bit of that, but we do a lot of housing in a variety of sizes. So we pursued some master-planning projects here, for example the Jericho lands.

We started chatting about how do we make this strategic — our pursuing projects. What does that look like?

We quickly realized that although [SvN was] bigger than we were, we clearly understood that we have a lot of shared goals

for projects. We both prioritize design in architecture, and we both have a really strong interest in community and urban design.

We saw the benefits of having a larger practice that we can integrate with and afford us to go after bigger projects.

When taking on new projects, have you seen any recent shifts in the types of buildings you're being asked to design?

I think we're definitely noticing a swing to a lot more affordable-housing projects coming out. I'm on the City of Vancouver advisory panel, so we see a lot of projects in the industry going through the approvals process.

There's been a real swing to rental housing because there's been zoning changes trying to unlock more affordable housing, unlock more rental housing. So we're seeing a lot of that out there.

When designing those rental projects, how different is that process versus designing condominiums? It seems that most new rental buildings now look more like condos in terms of the finishings and amenities.

I think it depends on the type of rental. There's of course market rental, there's affordable housing and then there are things like student housing, which are quite different.

See **QUESTIONS** on Page 2



Questions ... From Page 1

We did a big project at [the University of British Columbia] about a year and a half ago for the university's student housing. That was a lot of studio apartments, which are very efficient layouts, but the emphasis was on the common spaces and study spaces.

I see that happening with strata and market rental as well, where there's a real emphasis on amenity spaces.

We're working on a project right now that's strata housing, and there's quite a lot of amenity space being offered in a kind of typology that you didn't see a lot of before and suddenly it's mandated. Even in more affordable housing, some municipalities have a ratio of X sq ft of amenities per unit you have to provide, both indoors and outdoors.

We often hear from developers that building affordable housing isn't financially feasible, so how does working on an affordable rental project or a project that includes affordable rentals change the way you design?

We always try to make a great community within the project, whatever it is. I think for more affordable projects, one obvious thing you might see is maybe the form of the building is simpler, which helps with constructability. It also helps with energy efficiency.

Early on in the project, we see how we can optimize the design to be as efficient as we can. Of course, developer clients like efficiency, so we try to make things as repetitive as we can

in terms of having a functional layout, and then really explore what does that mean for the design ... to make, hopefully, a beautiful building.

How would you describe the tradeoff between designing a typical boxy glass building that might be super efficient versus something that's a bit more aesthetically interesting but might require a less efficient layout?

I think a lot of our projects are in either that affordable or that kind of middle ground. For us, that's a real challenge as designers to unlock some beauty and some design opportunities while trying to be efficient and mindful of whatever the budget is.

For example, our project at UBC, it was five buildings with almost 1,000 students, so highly efficient buildings. Student housing is quite repetitive, as you can imagine — the same kinds of units, there's no balconies.

We explored different ways that we could design facades to kind of embrace that repetitiveness, if you will, but also have a system that can be repeated in a variety of ways to bring what I think is a really delightful sort of simple, but effective way of creating a nice, elegant building design.

In the housing space, there's a lot of repetition. It's about finding ways to mediate the scale or the height of buildings and to play with facades, the exterior design, in different ways to create interesting buildings so that things don't all start to look the same ... and really thinking about the experience for the people passing by the building.