



Bob Rennie restores the Wing Sang building as an art gallery and company headquarters, mixing modern architecture with heritage settings.

CHINATOWN RENAISSANCE

► Words by **Larry Wong**
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The date says it all, 1889, above the second-storey doorway of the Wing Sang, the oldest building in Vancouver's Chinatown. In time, the original two-storey structure expanded eastward with additional footage on the street level and topped off by a third floor. At the back, Yip Sang built a six-storey building to house his four wives and twenty-three children. He was a travel agent, an entrepreneur and a benefactor. He passed away in 1927 and various businesses occupied the Wing Sang afterwards, including the B.C. Royal Café, made famous by Denise Chong's novel, *The Concubine's Children*. When the last of the Yip family left, the Wing Sang building stood

empty from the 1970s until its 2006 purchase by Bob Rennie, best known as the condo king. He wanted to consolidate his marketing staff from different locations and besides, he wanted his own private art gallery. Few know that Bob Rennie is an extensive art collector whose works include Mona Hatoum, Amy Bessone and Brian Jungen, to name a few. Some of his collections are on loan to the Tate Modern, the Pompidou in Paris and the Guggenheim.

The renovation was closely monitored by heritage consultant Donald Luxton. Rumour has it that some \$20 million went into restoration. In 2008, 375 descendants of the Yip family came together for a family reunion while the building was still under renovation. There

were so many relatives, the event was held across the street at the Chinese Cultural Centre. All agreed their former family home was in good hands.

The opening was October 17, 2009. The Wing Sang building proudly retained its original façade with a new life as an art gallery and the offices of Rennie Marketing System and Rennie & Associates Realty housing 60 agents and 26 staff.

The art gallery is open to the public once a week. Included in the tour, which averages 60 people, are the rooftop garden with its sculptures and a close-up of Martin Creed's "Everything is going to be alright" neon sign.

"We're really happy to be part of the neighbourhood," says Carey Fouks, the Director of Art Services. "Everything we need is right here in Chinatown. We interact with the folks, new and old, and we're attracting people to come and see us. And right next door, we have this Everything Café run by Sean Heather."

A block west of the Wing Sang is the old Chinese Freemason building built in 1906. This historic building saw the visit of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the assassination of David Lew and the oldest tailor shop in Chinatown, Modernize Tailors. The tailor shop has been there from the 1920s to 1960 when it moved to 511 Carrall Street.

5 West Pender Street was purchased by



Now a boardroom, the Wing Sang schoolroom is restored to its original character.



The old laneway that separated the two buildings has been transformed into a three-storey viewing gallery.

Milton Wong, son of Wong Kung Lai, founder of Modernize. Milton was for almost a decade, among the top ten financial managers in Canada, the chair of HSBC Asset Management Canada, a former Chancellor of Simon Fraser University and the founder of the Laurier Institution, among others. Renovations began in 2005 under the watchful eye of Joe Wai, the architect who worked on landmark projects such as the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden, the Millennium Gate, the Chinatown Plaza and the Chinese Cultural Centre Museum.

Modernize Tailors is now run by Bill and Jack Wong, Master Tailors. Both went to university for their engineering degrees but they couldn't practice because they were Chinese. They learned tailoring from their father. At that time, there were several other tailors in Chinatown dealing with custom-made suits but they are the one remaining in Chinatown. The building was completely redone with eleven suites, a new elevator, and a tenant occupying the main floor, an environmental group, Recollective Consultants. The tailor shop moved back January 5, 2008 with a grand ceremony. The two brothers



are still there with relatives Park and Steven to help.

Elizabeth Wong says the recently-completed Carrall Street Greenway has improved the area by accessing Gastown from Chinatown through a friendly streetscape of wide sidewalks, limited

auto traffic and street furniture. She notes that people want to live in the area as a result of the ongoing changes. Even in her building, her apartments stay empty no more than a month.

In stripping layers of paints on the exterior of the building, the contractor revealed the painted wall sign, Pekin Chop Suey House on Carrall Street. The restaurant was there from 1908 to 1939. Bill Wong remembers when they served dim sum. The ground floor windows are covered with historic panels illustrating the stories of the tailor shop and the history of Chinatown.

Blim opened its doors in May 2010 and already has made an impact on the neighbourhood, says owner Yuriko Iga. Her previous location was Main Street and 17th Avenue. Since moving to Chinatown, her customers are drawn from Strathcona and Gastown. She runs an arts and craft workshop on screen print, Gocco card making, drawing and screen print stickers. Gocco is a tabletop silk-screen unit. She also sells t-shirts, inks, Gocco printing items, and screen printing starter's packages.

Yuriko also organizes a monthly community market at the nearby Chinese Cultural Centre involving over sixty vendors selling hot food, baked goods, art objects and many different items.

Bao Bei is the hottest bistro in town. It opened January 15, 2010 and owner Tannis Ling and her staff have been overwhelmed with their success. Her location was previously a tofu take-out, a popular vegetarian destination. The storefront was vacant for six months when Tannis, a bartender by trade, decided to take out a lease and spent four months renovating the 2,200 sq.-ft. venue into a 50-seat room and 8-seat bar. She hired Joel Watanabe, head chef, to design a menu that is modern Shanghainese and Taiwanese.

The Vancouver Chinatown Night Market, which opens from May to September on weekends, was the source of a steady stream of customers but today the crowds continue on without it. The bistro opens at 5:30 in the afternoon but it's not uncommon for a full crowd just an hour later. In the short time it has been in business, the *Georgia Straight* has named it the Best New Restaurant. *EnRoute Magazine* calls it the Second Best New Restaurant in Canada and the Chinese Restaurant Awards proudly proclaim it the Diner's Choice Best New Modern Chinese Restaurant.

We are witnessing a grand renaissance and Chinatown has a new face. It's a face of a young and eager generation, ready to welcome the world in a heritage setting that's 125 years old. 📸

Larry Wong grew up in Vancouver's Chinatown. He is a director of the Vancouver Historical Society, director and curator of the Chinese Canadian Military Museum, and Past President of the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of BC. He has a lengthy history of community service and membership in many organizations.

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