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## Vancouver architect Gregory Henriquez's new book encourages young designers to change the world

Citizen City highlights potential benefits of partnerships with nonprofit organizations

by Charlie Smith on June 16th, 2016 at 8:00 AM

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Gregory Henriquez is working with Westbank Corp. on Mirvish Village, which is an 1,100-unit community being built in Toronto.

Vancouver architect Gregory Henriquez has been associated with some of the city's grandest development projects.

He was the lead designer of the Woodward's complex by Westbank Corp., which included 200 units of social housing, a new SFU school for contemporary arts, a childcare centre, and a public plaza featuring a massive [Stan Douglas mural](#).

Not only that, Woodward's brought the first grocery store, major pharmacy, and bank to the Downtown Eastside in a generation.

Henriquez Partners Architects also worked with Westbank on [Telus Garden](#), which posted the highest LEED rating of any office building in Canada, according to Canada's Green Building Council.

In addition, Henriquez Partners has been commissioned by Ivanhoé Cambridge and Westbank to [re-imagine Oakridge Centre](#) as a high-density, transit-oriented development with a childcare centre, rooftop park, new library, community centre, social housing, and rental housing.

"It's a model for urban renewal of suburban malls across the United States and Canada," Henriquez told the *Georgia Straight* in an interview in his office in Telus Garden.

Henriquez is working with Westbank founder Ian Gillespie on the 1,100-unit [Mirvish Village](#) project in Toronto. Created as a tribute to legendary retailer "Honest" Ed Mirvish, it's entirely rental and will include a village market, shops, and galleries in a LEED-platinum-rated neighbourhood.

"The thing that makes Ian so special is his desire to push the boundaries of development practice is so significant," Henriquez said.

As an example Henriquez cited Westbank's willingness to purchase a district-heating company, Creative Energy, and convert it to using renewable energy.

Then there was Gillespie's decision to commission an internationally celebrated artist, [Martin Boyce](#), to create a lantern display in an alley between Robson and Georgia streets as part of the Telus Garden project.

"These are things that he [Gillespie] is doing voluntarily that are unique in the Canadian context," Henriquez said.

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Toronto's Mirvish Village is aiming for LEED platinum.

## Architect thinks about big picture

During the interview, Henriquez became quite animated as he discussed his efforts to solve homelessness before the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver. His firm devised a plan called "Stop Gap Housing", which would provide temporary housing over five-year periods in self-contained communities.

It involved building modular-housing encampments of 116 units—each one 140 square feet with its own bathroom.

In the middle of the complex would be a communal eating area, laundry facilities, and support services.

“We figured out we could almost end homelessness for \$60 to \$70 million dollars,” Henriquez said. “It was not very expensive.”

According to Henriquez, Gillespie, was willing to provide financing for these communities, which could have been placed under bridges and other areas where homeless people congregate. But the idea never caught on.

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Gregory Henriquez believes Stop Gap Housing could solve the city's homelessness crisis.

HENRIQUEZ PARTNERS

Looking back, Henriquez admitted that he miscalculated the spirit of the times. Some housing advocates wanted to end homelessness with permanent housing, not temporary structures. And he pointed out that many residents didn't want modular housing in their neighbourhoods.

“The average citizen just doesn't care enough,” Henriquez said. “Until the average person has the empathy and votes that way, our provincial government won't fund it. It's a sad statement about people's self-interest. It's just what it is.”

## Partnerships bring about changes

Stop Gap Housing is one of 10 case studies featured in a new book, *Citizen City: Vancouver's Henriquez Partners Challenges Architects to Engage in Partnerships that Advance Cultural Sustainability*.

Cowritten by Henriquez, Marya Cotten Gould, and Robert Enright, the book focuses on some of the firm's projects to show how partnerships between developers, nonprofit groups, and cities can yield impressive results.

Henriquez explained that developers aren't always trusted and city governments don't always connect with the grassroots. Nonprofit groups can fill this gap, but they might not have sufficient expertise to put together a deal on their own.

“The architect's role as a hinge between all the players is really essential,” Henriquez said. “That's one of the big messages of the book.”

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In person, Henriquez comes across as a scholar and intellectual who thinks about some of the biggest challenges facing society. As a young man, he considered becoming a professor and even taught for a while at UBC before joining his father Richard's architectural practice.

*Citizen City* is Henriquez's fourth book.

"The books themselves come out of my desire to clarify our philosophical mandate and the reason we do what we do," Henriquez said. "This is not a business. This is a vocation and a passion. It's about trying to make the world a little bit of a better place."

His mother is [Arts Umbrella](#) cofounder Carol Henriquez. And Henriquez began his career building community centres and social-housing projects. In fact, the second building he ever designed was an Arts Umbrella building.

## Vancouver projects featured

*Citizen City* includes a section on the redevelopment of [Central Presbyterian Church](#) on Thurlow Street. There Henriquez Partners is working with Bosa Properties to build 42 units of social housing and a new church.

"It's very rare that you can pay for social housing and a new church with market rental," Henriquez said. "It's a really magical project from that perspective."

The book also tells the story of the revival of the [York Theatre](#) on Commercial Drive. This was made possible when the city awarded a large density bonus to Wall Financial Corp.

The project came to fruition after Henriquez met with a community group, former councillor Jim Green, and Heather Redfern, the executive director of the Cultch.

"We saved this old vaudeville theatre," Henriquez said. "We put a lot of love in that."

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Henriquez Partners designed the new York Theatre on Commercial Drive.

*Citizen City* also delves into a [controversial 22-storey rental project](#) called the Lauren at 1051 Broughton Street, which generated significant opposition in the West End. It was one of the first rental projects built under the city's short-term incentives for rental housing (STIR) program.

"I lost a little hair on that," Henriquez quipped.

In addition, *Citizen City* includes a section on a condo project at West 6th Avenue and Fir Street in Vancouver. Anyone who takes the Fir Street off-ramp from the Granville Bridge can't miss it on the left side. It includes artist's studios that were given to the city as a community-amenity contribution.

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6th and Fir can't be missed by anyone who travels on the Fir Street off-ramp.

Henriquez cited McGill University architecture professor and author Alberto Pérez-Gómez and, in

particular, his book *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, as one of his major influences.

That's because Pérez-Gómez imbued him with the idea that ethics and aesthetics cannot be separated—a concept that Henriquez said goes back to Ancient Greece.

"In our modern world, aesthetics is deemed as some subjective discipline where you can get a very beautiful shirt with a name on it," Henriquez stated. "Ethics is sort of relegated to another form of relativism based on your political leanings. I believe architecture's role is really the synthesis of these two things to make sure that our society remains something that's inclusive and meaningful in terms of the daily lives of the citizens who live there."

He added that one of the purposes of his new book is to convince architectural students and young architects that they can be so much more than simply tools of larger forces in society.

"If you're a young architect who feels disenfranchised and you're powerless, I would encourage you to go out into the world, volunteer, and get more involved in grassroots organizations," he advised. "Because there's lots that can be done if democracy is nurtured and your skills are used to hone authentic investigations of substance to make the world a better place."

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Telus Garden has nearly 300 solar panels on the roof.

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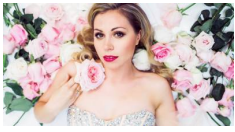
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