

## **South Waterfront "River Blocks" condos get hyped in a glossy "Discovery Center"**

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We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we  
started  
And know the place for the first time.

Not every real estate development markets itself with a poem by T.S. Eliot. But Eliot's "Little Gidding," the last of his "Four Quartets," is only the beginning of the marketing fantasy being conjured for the largest development project in Portland history: the \$1.9 billion South Waterfront "River Blocks."

The developers -- Gerding/Edlen and Williams & Dame -- dropped \$2 million on what they're calling the "Discovery Center," the sales and meeting center for their development, designed by Ziba, an international industrial design and branding firm based in Portland.

Ziba has designed everything from ergonomic keyboards to female-friendly power tools to whole-cloth new identities for companies as diverse as Microsoft, Black & Decker and FedEx. Locally, it's best known for the prototype Umpqua Bank in the Pearl District, where Ziba reinvented banking as an "experience" complete with a concierge, art openings, custom chocolates and even a dog bowl for the neighborhood's pet of choice.

Now, Ziba wants to turn buying a condo into what lead designer Steve McCallion calls "civics, not sales."

"People will want to come here just to see what's going on down here," McCallion says. "But more importantly, the center will tell the story and build the district's mythology."

The story is how 30 acres of mud in what once was known as North Macadam District will be transformed into the "River Blocks, a hyper-ecologically-minded riverfront development connected to the rest of the city by streetcar and aerial tram."

The "mythology" is what it will be like to live there for a target market Ziba has identified as "New Urban Immigrants," downsizing boomers looking to reinvent themselves as city dwellers.

The \$5,000 to \$10,000 visitors will be enticed to plunk down to reserve a piece of what now is only mud and heavy cranes is framed as a "venture," the word literally spelled out in 15-foot-high letters molded into the Discovery Center's front facade. The Discovery Center woos them with every detail: the roaring hearth (real logs, not gas), carefully selected literary references (a la Eliot) and even aroma (indoor planters with sprigs of rosemary).

McCallion sees the center as part Apple Store, part Museum of Modern Art. A huge model of the entire district fully built, for instance, is surrounded by explanations of key ingredients -- the streetcar, Oregon Health & Science University's Wellness Center and the eco-friendly waterfront treatment -- illustrated beneath rounded magnifying glasses, each looking like a snow globe on a sunny day.

"We're trying to be, in a sense, archeologists of the future," McCallion says. "We're trying to discover what will exist, what will be authentic, what will be right."

The Discovery Center's imagery is a heady brew of futurism and nostalgia. Between the models of 21st-century, high-performance high-rises and photographic evocations of culture meeting nature on the waterfront are plenty of assurances South Waterfront will be like other areas Portland -- or at least like all the good parts.

It will have a streetcar, shown in the Discovery Center's 10-foot-high video projection, its screeching wheels carefully mixed like an accompanying violin into the soundtrack. It will have restaurants as stylish as Pascal Sauton's Carafe and homespun shops such as Lam Quang's exquisitely funky Hi-iH handmade lamp store on Northeast Alberta Street. Both are portrayed in photographs mounted on matte board and leaned on long wood mantels like freshly purchased artworks.

(Reality check: Quang, when not posing for photographs, pays about \$9 a square foot annually for his little shop. Retail leases in the River Blocks will start, says Gerding/Edlen's Kelly Saito, "in the low teens," eventually stair-stepping to the Pearl District's "low 30s." But, Quang notes, he did get paid \$50 to model for the photos.)

Even before this week's opening of Ziba's richly detailed seduction, the buy-in to the fantasy has been robust for the first two towers -- 159 of the 245 units sold in a complex named The Meriwether, the \$400-plus-square-foot prices setting local records.

Indeed, developers and architects are also sometimes on view in the Discovery Center, standing around the model and talking about the shapes, sizes and locations of the next buildings as though they were as easily built and moved as Legos.

Later this month, the Portland Planning Commission will take up the issue of whether the developers should be allowed to build their buildings even bigger. The proposed revision will allow buildings such as the sleek, 325-foot-tall John Ross (named for the namesake of Ross Island), being designed by Robert Thompson. Current code permits only buildings of the same square footage to be shaped into blocky "slab" towers like OHSU's first building.

Discovery Center visitors can compare for themselves: Both buildings are in the big model.

The long-planned pedestrian bridge for the adjacent neighborhood, however, isn't. It is supposed to span Interstate 5 to connect the high-rise village of South Waterfront to the low-rise Victorian-era Lair Hill. Designed to be both urban design connection and salve to the wounds of residents upset about the aerial tram that will run overhead, it is missing from the model.

An accident, a blanching McCallion says, noting to an assistant to make sure it gets added.

No other details, however, have been left to chance. Even the glass doors of the meeting rooms, rather than being frosted for privacy, are screened by text: biographies of the one-time governors for whom some of South Waterfront's streets are named.

Overall, the Discovery Center more closely recalls information centers for big urban redevelopments in cities such as Barcelona, Spain, and Berlin. But in the hands of Gerding/Edlen, Williams & Dame and Ziba, this one's more fun and inspired -- and far more manipulative.

The best salesmanship, however, is a contract: Offer a fantasy and you'd better deliver more than buildings.

A detail worth noting are the large vases by the Discovery Center's front door: Instead of the bouquets of flowers that often garnish high-end restaurants and showrooms, McCallion had them filled with freshly cut sticks.

"They're sticks," McCallion says. "But they have the potential to be flowers."

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