



THE ATRIUM

VICTORIA, BC

Client: Jawl Investment Corporation
 Architect: D'Ambrosio Architecture + Urbanism

Located on a busy thoroughfare in Downtown Victoria BC, this mixed-use development received a 2013 Green Building Award from the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (F9.1). Organized around a central day-lit atrium, the project comprises street level retail with six storeys of offices above (F9.2 and 9.3). Incorporating numerous environmental strategies, The Atrium was cited for its attention to energy efficiency and environmentally conscious operations. However, of equal or greater value is the contribution the project makes to the economic and social well-being of the city.

This is achieved in part through detailed attention to the ground floor, that most critical interface between the private and public realms. By handpicking local independent retailers, some with businesses already operating in the Victoria area, the owner was able to distinguish the retail level of the building from other recent developments, more typically populated by international franchises.



In order to improve marketability and contribute to the economic vitality of Downtown, the project also sought a high level of architectural and urban design quality — including aspirations of beauty, longevity and environmental sensitivity (F9.4). These aspirations were pursued in a number of ways.

For what is predominately a corporate and government office complex, the project team identified desirable retail tenants by considering the needs of the primary and secondary users of the building. These primary and secondary users were determined to be those working in the building itself, and those making up the daytime population of the surrounding neighbourhood. This enhanced the attractiveness of the building as a workplace and improved the urban fit of the new development.

In addition, the project team sought out typical and traditional downtown service and product providers to augment and extend the window-shopping and tourist pedestrian routes from the commercial core, in order to revitalize a marginalized and partially derelict city block.

A suitable tenant mix for the project was achieved using a number of incentives, including sub-market lease rates for the retail tenants. Because the resulting quality of the retail environment was deemed to add value to the commercial space above, it was possible to balance the financial pro-forma by marginally increasing the lease rates for the upper floor office space.



F9.5

Given the volume of vehicular traffic on the adjacent street, there was a desire to improve the pedestrian experience by creating a separation between the sidewalk and the roadway. This was achieved by negotiating a right of way exchange with the City of Victoria, enabling the ground floor of the building to be setback from the property line, and a boulevard to be created at the street edge (F9.5).

In legal terms, an easement grants the City use of the setback as part of its sidewalk, while a reciprocal easement grants the building owner an equal area of the sidewalk for the creation of a planted buffer zone. Above the ground floor, the building extends out to the property line as required by the zoning bylaw.



F9.6



F9.7

The project team wanted to further improve the public experience of the sidewalk by eliminating the standard advertising-covered bus shelters typical in Downtown Victoria. Under normal circumstances, the advertising revenue pays for the upkeep of the shelters, but in the case of the Atrium, the design team argued successfully that a fixed canopy and seating along the designated bus pull-out would provide the necessary amenity, while offering increased capacity and improved appearance.

Together these measures have helped to create a vibrant retail environment with an enhanced pedestrian experience, giving The Atrium a unique character and a strong connection to the community (F9.6). This in turn underpins the success of the various community events and performances that take place in the atrium itself (F9.7). Extended opening hours are made possible by a small additional investment in security personnel that translates into just a few more cents per square foot on commercial lease rates.

By considering the community in its pro-forma, the Jawl Investment Corporation has solidified its own bottom line and, at the same time, its reputation as a financier of projects that promise a lasting legacy for the city.