

Richmond – A City of Cultural Fusion & Change

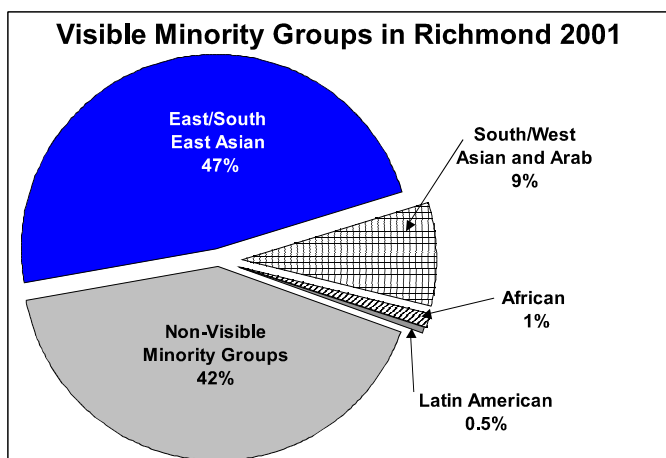
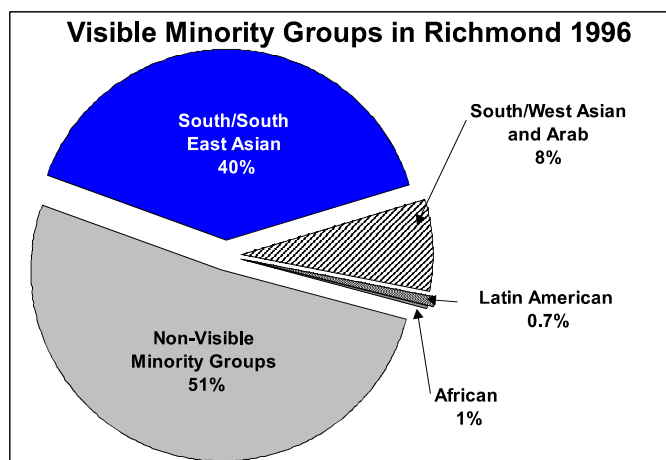
by Kari Huhtala

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Richmond has undergone enormous change over the last several decades, with significant growth in the early 1990's. Richmond's population now exceeds 168,000. This Vancouver suburb leads the nation in three regards: Canada's lowest-altitude community; Canada's flattest municipality; and the city with the highest ratio of visible-minority citizens.

Richmond today comprises a dynamic, multi-ethnic community with much of the recent population growth resulting from South East Asian immigrants, who now represent 50% of Richmond residents. These relative newcomers to Richmond have significantly contributed to the growth of the business and retail sectors, adding to the diversity and vibrancy of the City.

Richmond is evolving from a suburban city to one of the fastest-growing edge communities in North America, with the introduction of Asian-themed malls being the most noticeable example that showcases how the Asian influence has taken hold.



Dr. David Chuenyan Lai, University of Victoria, who undertook “A Study of Asian-themed Malls in the Aberdeen District of the City of Richmond, B.C.” (2001), states that the City of Richmond has 49 shopping areas designated as Asian-themed malls. What are these malls, who do they attract, who is selling in them, and what is being sold was the focus of his study?

According to Dr. Lai, these Asian-themed malls must have at least three characteristics, from the following:

Asian Mall Characteristics

1. All signs and advertising are in both English and Chinese
2. A heavy concentration of Chinese restaurants, grocery stores, bakeries, bookstores or other specialized stores.
3. Is named after a Hong Kong location or popular plaza in Hong Kong such as Aberdeen Centre or Pacific Centre.
4. The majority of restaurants are named after popular restaurants or stores in Hong Kong, Taiwan or China.
5. It's usually crowded with overwhelming number of Asian customers and English may or may not be spoken.
6. Developed by Hong Kong or Taiwanese entrepreneurs or investors.
7. Sale of strata titles is usually advertised in Chinese and agents are usually Chinese;
8. Purchasers are generally Chinese investors or merchants.
9. Rarely has an anchor store such as a single large department store.

Generally, the Asian mall has little to no centralized control of the mall's business composition, layout or design, and competition in the mall can be intense.

Twelve years' ago, the Aberdeen Centre in Richmond was the first, and largest, Asian shopping mall in North America. It was designed as an alternative to Vancouver's Chinatown for the influx of well-heeled immigrant Hong Kong shoppers, and was a basic mix of mom-and-pop herbal teashops and knockoff boutiques with a street presence best described as rudimentary. The name “Aberdeen” refers to one of Hong Kong's trendiest neighbourhoods.

Since then, however, not only has “Asian street-style” set the pace for global fashion and design (i.e. everything from graphic art to sneakers), but the community that originally flocked to these malls has also matured. Richmond is now dealing with the second generation of immigrants, children of people came to Canada in the 90s, who are not only more sophisticated, but also have a vast supply of pent-up retail energy.

When Thomas Fung of the Fairchild Group, the Aberdeen Centre's owner, decided to tear down a twelve year old, profitable mall to build another on site, it's likely more than a few eyebrows were raised.

The decision to rethink the concept, and rebuild the structure, comes from the vision that Aberdeen's creative concept could accommodate both Asian and Western cultures. Fung's

vision resulted in a new Aberdeen Centre four times larger than the original, including a hotel. The Centre brings together a fusion of Asian and North American brand-name outlets that will capture customers of East and West. It will also celebrate public holidays such as Christmas, Halloween and Valentine's Day, as well as traditional Asian celebrations, such as Chinese New Year and the mid-Autumn festival, creating more peak shopping periods for its tenants. For two years, Fung travelled the world lining up new-to-North America retailers. Most of the tenants are expected to move in the new premise by the summer of 2004. The commercial tenant legal agreement obliges merchants not to use permanent Chinese-language signs inside or out, and to maintain Aberdeen for English-language use.

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Aberdeen Centre, which opened in December 2003, is Greater Vancouver's most visually dramatic retail operation – but more importantly, it represents the post-fusion culture now emerging. The Aberdeen Centre's architecture has gone beyond the post-Chinatown clichés of scrolled cornices, and mock-temple tile work, to something entirely more original and dynamic presentation.



The design of the building has garnered attention from art critics and philosophers alike. “Pixel” is the curved, organic shape of the building that is clad entirely in transparent, translucent and opaque glass. Glass artist Stephanie Forsythe, in conjunction with Architects Bing Thom and Chris Doray, created the artwork that allows the building to literally glow at night. The artwork is probably the largest artwork integrated into architectural design in Canada.

The Centre's skylights of varying shapes and sizes dot the ceiling, allowing natural light to flood the floors below. The main atrium is designed in amphitheatre style, so that patrons can witness the projected ceiling and musical fountain from whatever floor they are on. Rather than the traditional shopping mall structure of a box-like building surrounded by acres of parking lot, the new Aberdeen Centre will bring an urban look to the area, with the four-level car parking lot covered and behind the Centre, and the glass structure itself at street level.

In Richmond, Asian-themed businesses can no longer be strictly defined by the ethnic make-up of the shoppers, merchants or even the developers. These malls attract Chinese customers, but the traditional city malls (e.g. Richmond Centre) also have many Chinese customers. There is a real fusion and an appreciation of the cross-cultural experiences that are taking place at these centres, whether they are Asian or mainstream.

Much like the Aberdeen Centre itself, this diversity is the future of the City.

