

# Local condominium pioneer moves into a different market

Andre Molnar still active, but south of the border



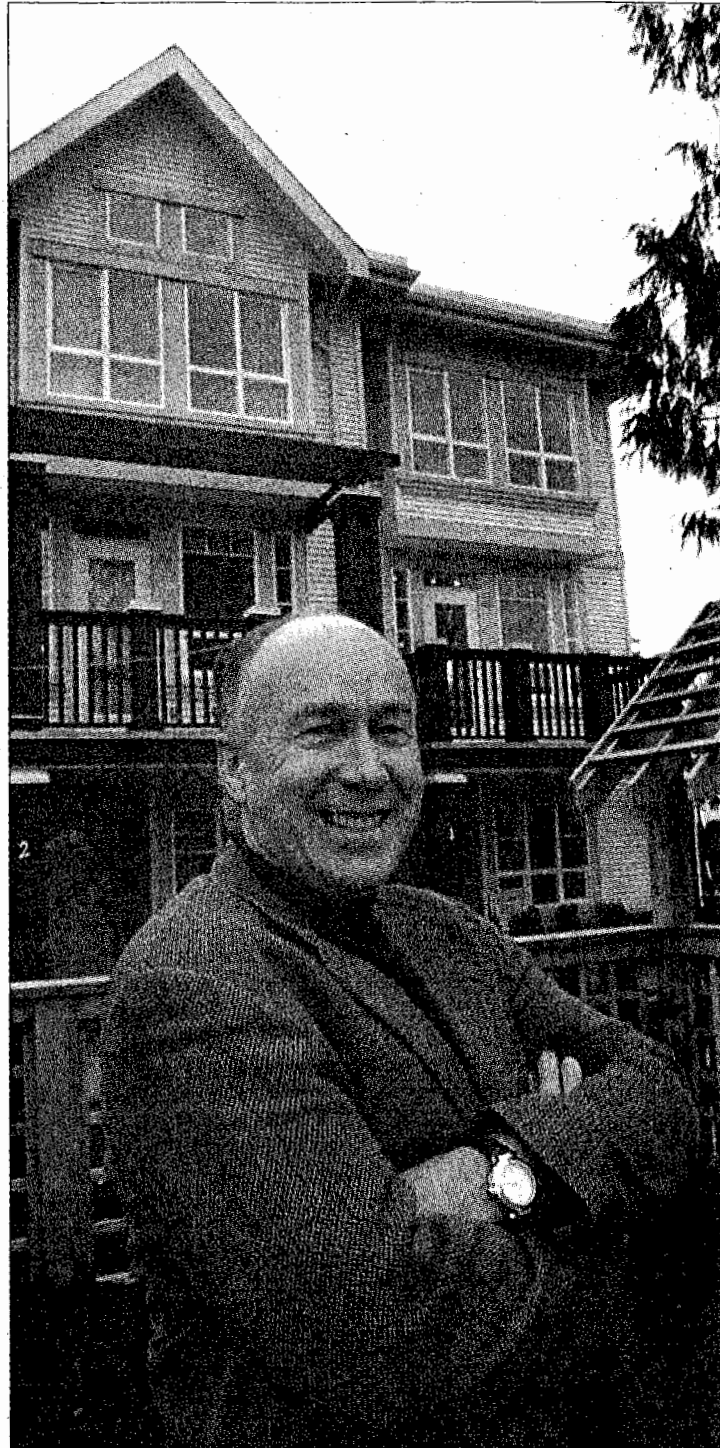
**BOB RANSFORD**  
SPECIAL TO WESTCOAST HOMES  
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**L**ong before condominiums became a local commodity, one Vancouver developer-builder was a leader in the multi-family housing business, constantly breaking new ground and launching new trends with landmark locations, innovative homes designs and memorable marketing campaigns.

Andre Molnar was the first to be dubbed Vancouver's "condo king" in the late 1980s. Today, Molnar is still a real estate pioneer, only in a different market south of the border.

The condominium and townhouse projects Molnar built over 30 years in the business are home today to many Lower Mainland residents from Vancouver's West End to Tsawwassen's town centre and from Coquitlam to Shaughnessy. But Molnar is no longer the condo king in these parts. Instead, the crown has been passed to a marketing whiz, Bob Rennie, rather than an actual developer-builder.

Through a good part of the 1990s, I worked with Molnar managing a number of his projects. During the heady days of that upward swing in the housing market cycle, Molnar tried to do what few other Vancouver developers ever did. He took his development business public



Andre Molnar, shown here 10 years ago in front of his Village Green condo project in Ladner, was once a leader in the building of multi-family homes in the Vancouver area. In recent years, he's turned his attention to building and operating rental apartments and mixed-use real estate in Bellingham. Molnar's latest venture — and his pride and joy — is a 66-room boutique hotel on Bellingham's waterfront.

# Hotel Bellwether is his pride and joy

**BOB RANSFORD**

**From K4**

with the launch of Molnar Capital Corporation.

Unfortunately, the public markets didn't understand the feast-and-famine-like, project-to-project revenue streams that are the reality of the real estate development business. The stock market likes predictable revenues that come from manufacturing widgets or delivering a service. Manufacturing homes simply takes too long with the long lag times involved with seeking land use and city approvals. It is also too risky because of its boom and bust market swings.

Molnar's experiment with the public markets began to fail at the same time the market cycle began to slide and the leaky condo crisis began to emerge. These two forces were enough to almost put Molnar out of business. Certainly, they caused him to rethink his business and look to other markets.

Molnar looked south, but just over the border. He also looked at adopting a new business approach in real estate. Instead

of building homes to be sold as condos, moving from one completed project to another, he decided to build a portfolio of residential and commercial properties he could hold and rent to produce a long-term revenue stream.

The Molnar name is probably better known today in a place most Vancouverites zoom past on I-5 as they head south to sexier destinations. Molnar decided to execute his new business plan in Bellingham while still living in Vancouver. For the past eight years or so, he has been building and operating rental apartments and other mixed-use real estate in the college town just over the border.

Molnar's only condominium project in Bellingham is a real gem of a building that anchored a redevelopment trend in the historic Fairhaven District. Three years ago, he completed Harris Square, a 145,000-square-foot building with retail on the ground floor and 88 condos in three stories above along Fairhaven's main street. It was the largest project of its kind in Bellingham at the time and was so successful that Molnar went on to build a 60-unit four-storey rental building right next door.

He was the first residential developer to buy land from the Talbot family, developers of the 250-acre master-planned suburban village in the northeast corner of Bellingham. By introducing residential development to an emerging compact business and commercial district in suburban Bellingham, Molnar's Barkley Park and Barkley Trails rental home developments demonstrated the true potential of Barkley Village as one of the best

examples of the new urbanism in a suburban setting in North America.

But Molnar's latest venture is his pride and joy — the Hotel Bellwether — a 66-room boutique hotel on Bellingham's waterfront, which he is trying to position as a premium destination for those wanting to escape either Vancouver or Seattle for a relaxing few days.

Owning the hotel he bought a year ago takes him back to his beginnings as a Hungarian-immigrant student at the Swiss hotel school where he learned about the hospitality industry. That was his stepping stone to a career as an inflight steward with Canadian Pacific Airlines and his eventual immigration to Canada in 1966.

A few years later, after literally landing here, he ended up in the development business beginning with the renovation of a couple of old houses. His first condo project followed a few years later in the early 1970s.

The Bellwether Hotel has really put Molnar on the map in Bellingham.

The Bellwether is managed by Molnar's long-time friend, Michael Herzog, whom he met at the Swiss hotel school. Herzog has 35 years of hotel experience in 27 countries around the world.

Molnar describes the transformation of his business, with his focus in Bellingham's real estate market, as a move from being a "retail merchant builder" to a real estate investor. Vancouver will always remember him as the original condo king.

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