

CANADIAN[®] BUILDERS QUARTERLY

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010

Portico Design Group

Experienced interior-design firm sees future
in luxury seniors housing, boutique resorts,
and other specialty markets

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The future of design is in specialty sectors



Master bedroom at Cosmo, a designer residential high rise in Vancouver, BC. Photo: Raef Grohne Architectural Photography.



PORTICO DESIGN GROUP LTD.

Experienced interior-design firm sees future in luxury seniors housing, boutique resorts, and other specialty markets.

BY RUSSELL ROBERTS

They're a creative and hard-working bunch—but everyone keeps his or her ego in check. And that's precisely what Tara Wells wants from her interior-design staff.

"We are easy to work with," says Wells, founder and principal of Portico Design Group Ltd. "I hear that time and again from our clients. We listen to the clients' needs and wants, and then we provide the solution in a creative manner while paying close attention to costs. We have no prima donnas on our staff—nobody who tries to force their vision onto a project."

Wells always wanted to be an interior designer, but faced an extremely depressed job market when she graduated from university. Instead, she entered the fields of commercial real estate and multi-family development as a marketer. After the employment climate improved, she was able to find work with an interior design firm. She stayed for three years before deciding to strike out on her own, establishing Portico in 1992.

During the years spent working in commercial real estate and multi-family development, Wells questioned whether the experience could further her interior

AT A GLANCE

LOCATION:
RICHMOND, BC

FOUNDED:
1992

EMPLOYEES:
12

AREAS OF SPECIALTY:
HOSPITALITY
AND RESIDENTIAL
INTERIOR DESIGN

View of the kitchen and family room of a luxury residence in South Surrey, BC. Photo: Kristen McGaughey Photography.





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design ambitions. As it turned out, the perspective was invaluable.

“It laid a great pathway of understanding how the industry works from a client’s perspective, right through conception and the development process,” she explains.

Most new businesses have an uncertain period during the fledgling years. Wells, however, knew there was pent-up demand for interior-design services before she began. She had a number of contacts in the industry through her previous profession, and this advantage led her to work on a large, Canadian-owned resort project in Florida—The Village of Baytowne Wharf, a job that put Portico on the industry map.

The resort, located on the state’s Gulf Coast, was conceived as a “condo hotel,” with a collection of condominium and rental properties surrounding the shore. Portico designed each of the buildings to have a distinct interior feel, drawing from varied influences including a contemporary, Miami-inspired aesthetic.

Portico’s work currently spans both Canada and the United States. In the U.S.—the country composes about 40 percent of the firm’s business—it has worked on resorts in Florida, Nevada, Colorado, and California, as well as on multi-family housing developments in the Pacific Northwest. In Canada, Portico has completed many projects throughout the western provinces—resorts, restaurants, multi-family housing, and corporate offices.

Lower-level lobby of the Walnut Beach Resort in Osoyoos, BC.
Photo: Raef Grohne Architectural Photography.



The green building movement has impacted the interior design field, and Wells says Portico has embraced the concept. The movement's most significant effect has been a major increase in sustainability mandates for projects designed in the past three years. She estimates that 50 percent of the company's projects now require elements of sustainability. More than anything, the interior-design industry has been most affected by the green movement through the flood of new sustainable products.

"We see many [new sustainable] products on the market," Wells says, "but the ones that are most used are low-VOC paint, energy-efficient windows and appliances, recycled carpets, tiles manufactured using recycled water, and woods that are made in a manner so as to not exhaust the primary source." She adds that she has two LEED-accredited designers on her staff.

Portico has won over a dozen awards presented by industry associations, including the Canadian Home Builders Association's Georgie Award and its coveted Grand Sam Award, which recognizes the best marketing and development of a project in Canada.

Portico's Grand Sam Awards were received in conjunction with Concert Properties for two projects: a luxury high-rise project designed for "empty nesters" and a seniors-housing development, both in Vancouver.

Wells characterizes the seniors-housing development as "the equivalent of a boutique hotel for seniors." It is catered toward people who want to leave their luxury homes for more accessible retirement housing without sacrificing high-end amenities or style.

"We designed the living quarters to have a classic, timeless look with contemporary woods and clean lines," Wells says. "It wasn't your typical place with blue and pink flowers."

At the same time, each retirement suite was outfitted with features designed for accessibility and comfort as the resident aged—handrails, a therapeutic bath, a roll-in shower, firm upholstery, and colors more easily seen by aging eyes.

The awards, an extensive online portfolio, and a large number of repeat clients leaves little need for advertising or marketing. "Word-of-mouth [advertising] and referrals bring us new business," Wells says. "We try to meet with clients on a regular basis, so they often come back to us with new work."

Customers don't return only for special treatment; Portico also is known for relentless creativity. To put a unique

spin on a bowling alley at the One Ski Hill Place resort in Breckenridge, Colorado, Wells and her staff designed it like an old mine shaft, evoking the state's history and the rich imagery that accompanies it. "We had a lot of fun with that," she laughs.

Wells plans to continue pursuing larger projects, like One Ski Hill Place resort, in the future. Also planned are more seniors-housing projects, she says, noting that baby boomers want unique environments in which to live out their golden years.

Within an unpredictable but promising future, one thing remains certain: Portico will maintain its blend of down-to-earth service, creativity, and cost-consciousness. For Wells, there's no other way. CBQ



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