

# primer

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### HIGH PROFILE

## This old house

Townline's Rick Ilich develops a passion for heritage

Falling in love with your work can be an occupational hazard if you're a real estate developer. Just ask Rich Ilich, president of the Townline Group of Companies. "As a builder, I do tend to get excited about some of the things we build and end up moving," he admits with a laugh. "But I promised [my wife] Lauren we won't do that too much more."

For Ilich, who made headlines this spring with the announcement of plans to develop the Fantasy Gardens site in Richmond, a passion for development obviously goes beyond simply squeezing the most dollars out of a parcel of land. The quiet 50-year-old is reticent to talk about himself but comes to life when he describes a unique design element or an especially beautiful piece of remote waterfront property at another.

Ilich has a particular penchant for heritage buildings, as witnessed by Townline's purchase in 2004 of the iconic Hudson's Bay building in Victoria. He has also converted a couple of Yaletown heritage buildings to loft-style condos. "It's just a passion," Ilich says of heritage restorations. "There's a real

texture – tactile stuff you can experience at the pedestrian level. There are wonderful monuments all over the city to architects, but they often don't speak to the street. As a layman, I appreciate the 20-foot-down perspective of the city, and I think most of the heritage buildings have a lot to offer at that level."

Opportunities for heritage restoration, however, are limited in the Lower Mainland. Indeed, only about 25 per cent of Townline's work involves restoration; the bigger chunk involves townhomes, low-rise condos and single-family developments in suburbs such as Richmond, Burnaby, Surrey and Langley. That's not to say Ilich is averse to high-rise urban living. In fact, he

becomes animated when describing the open-floor plans slated for a new condo tower at the corner of Seymour and Nelson streets in Vancouver – and seems positively eager to fire up the barbecue as he describes the 200-square-foot decks. "Just because people live in a small space," he says, "it doesn't mean they want to go out every night. They do want to have friends over."

Ilich comes from a prominent Richmond family; his father, Milan, got his start in the paving business and has been a prominent member of the community, largely through the philanthropic work of the Milan and Maureen Ilich Foundation. Milan was at one time owner of the Vancouver 86ers soccer team and a part

owner of the Vancouver Giants hockey team. (No, former MLA Olga Ilich is neither Rick's mother nor sister; he laughs at the number of times he's had to correct that particular misunderstanding. She was formerly married to his dad's brother and remains a good friend of Rick's.)

Today Ilich lives in a new house in Richmond with his wife Lauren and three sons – two toddlers and a teen. However, when he starts describing a development underway just outside of Nanaimo, it's easy to imagine that this suburban idyll may be but one more stopover. Says Ilich wistfully: "It's one of the most fabulous little pieces of earth I've seen in a long time." □

