

ISSUE  
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ART-LOVING  
DEVELOPER  
IAN GILLESPIE:  
NO TIME FOR  
HATERS

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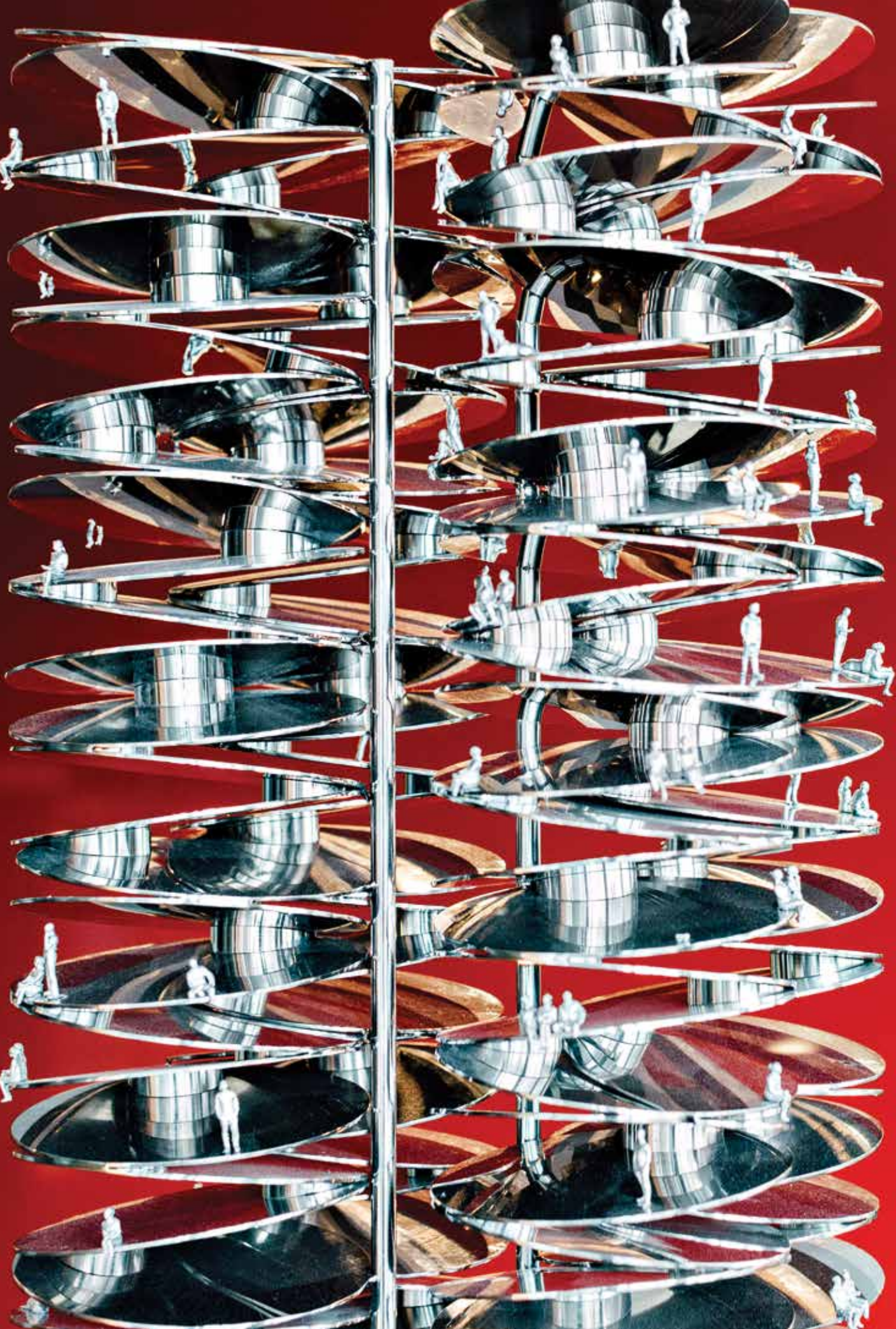
# UNFILTERED

*A candid look at design world influencers, featuring Westbank founder Ian Gillespie's surprisingly genuine interest in the arts. Plus, architecture firms' powerful librarians.*



COURTESY WESTBANK

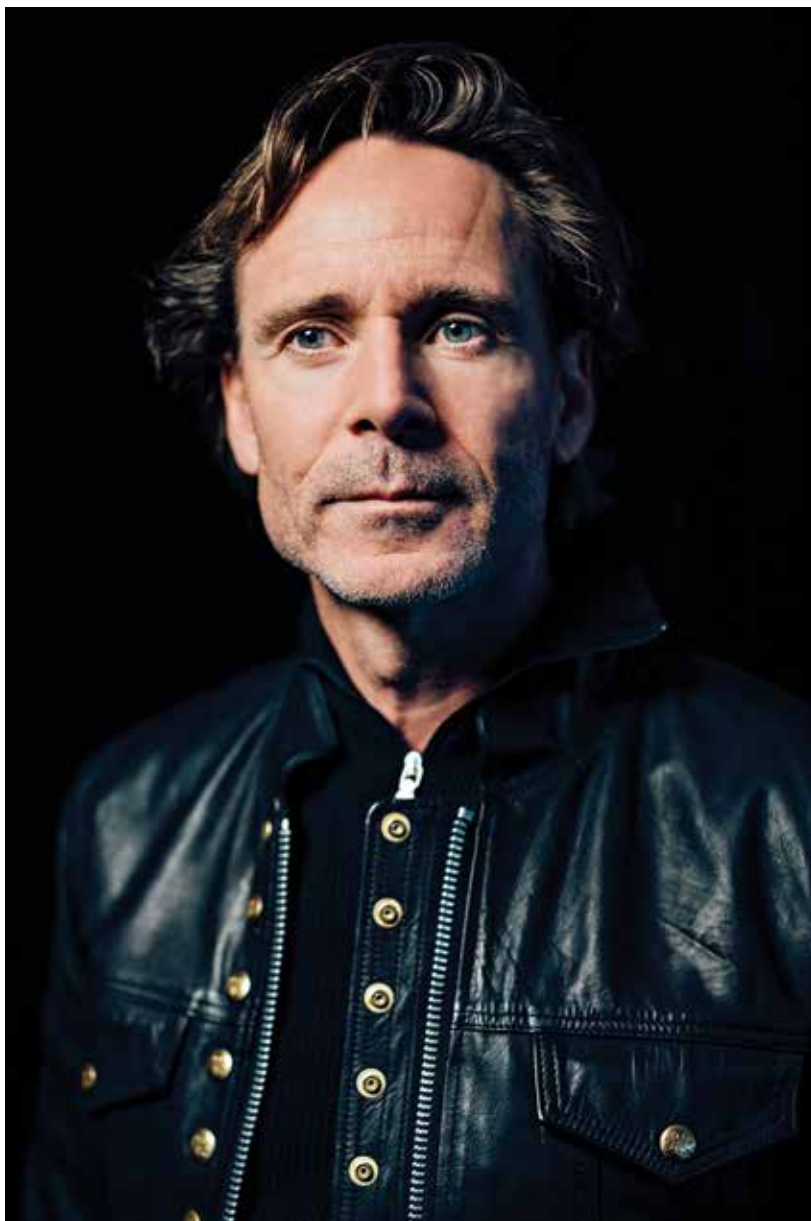






Ian Gillespie in  
Vancouver, BC.

**OPPOSITE:** An artistic  
interpretation of The  
Butterfly building,  
designed by Bing  
Thom, located in  
downtown Vancouver.



## A MODERN MEDICI

Real estate developer Ian Gillespie is a popular target in debates over the changing social and cultural landscape of Vancouver. While his buildings come with high price tags, they're also bringing world-class art to cities around the globe.

Written by RACHEL GALLAHER  
Photographed by TANYA GOEHRING

**"YOU CAN USE ART AND ARCHITECTURE TO  
FEELS ABOUT ITSELF, BUT ALSO HOW THE**

**CHANGE NOT ONLY THE WAY A COMMUNITY  
WORLD FEELS ABOUT THAT COMMUNITY.”**

**—IAN GILLESPIE, FOUNDER, WESTBANK**

# IAN GILLESPIE

## IS ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL FIGURES IN VANCOUVER.

Perhaps he's not as reviled as the notorious Sahota brothers (known for raking in millions as slumlords running decrepit single-room-occupancy hotels on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside), or as controversial as three-term mayor Gregor Robertson (a man with big goals for tackling homelessness and affordable housing—still unsolved issues today), but mention Gillespie's name in a group of Vancouverites and you're likely to get a strong response, or at the very least an eyeroll.

In the 27 years since Gillespie founded Westbank, one of Canada's leading real estate development companies, the firm has grown to include offices in eight cities around the world, including Toronto, Seattle, Tokyo, and Beijing, and it has built more than 35 international projects that range from high-end luxury residences and office towers to multiple five-star hotels. He gallivants (and often collaborates) with some of the world's most powerful creatives: his much-anticipated Vancouver House project was designed by Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, and Gillespie recently met with Frank Stella at the octogenarian artist's studio.

His is the kind of dizzying wealth and glamour that most people can only dream of, and no doubt it's a cause of great jealousy: Who wouldn't want to hop on a private jet and fly to Europe to explore museums and meet with art-world elite? The press, and scores of internet commenters, has not been kind to Gillespie. He's been accused of "artwashing" (a term coined to describe the use of art and artists to rejuvenate derelict, often low-income neighborhoods, eventually leading to displacement of the original population) and building expensive residences aimed at attracting wealthy, mostly Asian buyers. His 2017 *Fight for Beauty* exhibition, erected at the Fairmont Pacific Rim (a hotel partially owned by Westbank), was slammed by the media—one critic described it as no more than a "PR campaign, propaganda,

[and a] marketing bonanza." In a scathing backlash, the parody website "The Real Fight for Beauty" proclaims, "Westbank is not a cultural practice. Period. It's simply a real estate development company that thinks way too much of itself."

But then there's the flip side: the Gillespie who has a passion for art and the means to share it with the public. The man who, in 2015, opened up 12 fully furnished apartments in one of his downtown Vancouver residential developments as transitional accommodation for Syrian refugees, and who, in 2017, donated \$2.5 million to Vancouver's Emily Carr University. Like every other human being, Gillespie is complex, full of contradictions, and sometimes judged without really being known.

I'll admit I was nervous as I walked across the courtyard between the Fairmont Pacific Rim and Shaw Tower, a 2005 Westbank project that sits at the edge of Vancouver's Coal Harbour. Along with 24 stories of condominiums, the tower, among the city's tallest buildings, houses Westbank's offices. I wasn't sure what to expect as, accompanied by Gillespie's PR representative, I waited in the reception area, which holds a 3D portfolio of the company's various development projects in the form of detailed architectural models set atop waist-high podiums. A 15-foot model of downtown Vancouver includes future and in-progress Westbank buildings, including the Butterfly, a sculptural concrete-and-glass residential tower in Vancouver designed by the late Bing Thom.

Despite the company's distinction, the office atmosphere was relaxed. Two dogs (Hunter, a golden retriever, and Mia, a French bulldog) seemed to have the run of the place. When Gillespie finally appeared, he looked more like someone sitting front row at New York Fashion Week than a powerful businessman. Of course, the two aren't mutually exclusive, but Gillespie's shaggy blond hair, quiet demeanor, and black sweatshirt emblazoned with scattered neon green words projected an air of disarming normalcy. »

Pieces from Gillespie's  
couture collection at  
Shaw Tower, Westbank's  
global headquarters.







Diana Thater's light art installation at Shaw Tower, commissioned by Westbank and unveiled in 2005. **OPPOSITE:** A mirrored sculpture of 400 W Georgia, a Westbank project designed by architects Michael Sypkens and Esteban Ochogavia. »



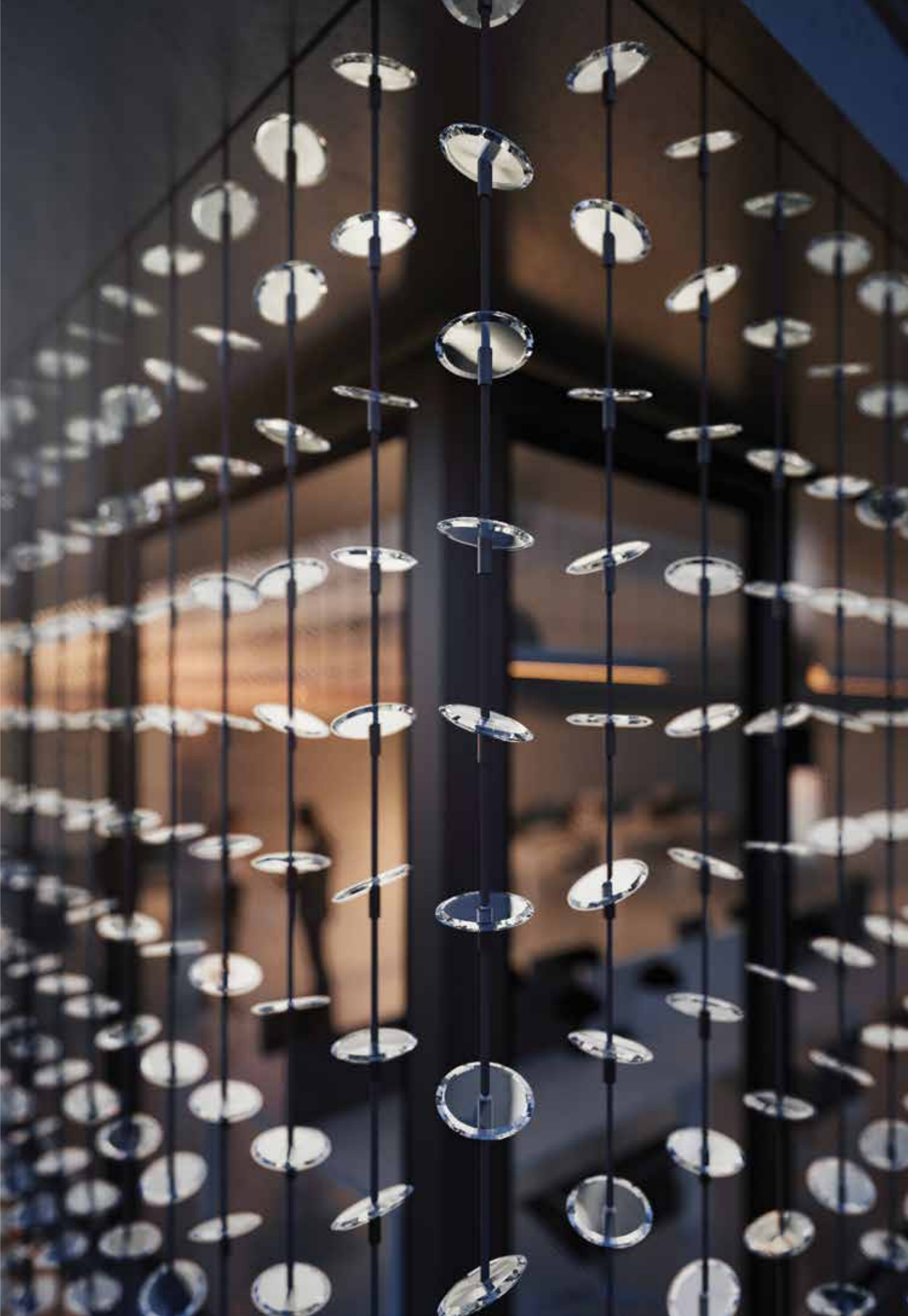






Installation view of  
"Japan Unlayered," an  
exhibition mounted at  
the Fairmont Pacific  
Rim in 2017. **OPPOSITE:**  
John Hogan's "Light as  
a Common Thread," a  
glass veil that will be  
incorporated throughout  
Westbank's First Light  
project in Seattle. »





As soon as we sat down and started talking about art, Gillespie became animated. His excitement was palpable as he ticked through various artists he's worked with over the years: Martin Boyce, Diana Thater, Douglas Copeland, Jeff Wall, Omer Arbel. He's made sure to include a public art element in nearly every one of his projects. And while some would argue that he's just following development regulations in Vancouver (more on that later), Gillespie never stops at the bar of requirement, often bringing in the best talent, regardless of cost, to help build a lasting cultural landscape.

"We believe we're here to serve the community [in a way that delivers the] maximum positive impact," he says. "It's interesting to see what can happen when you take things out of the gallery and into a public context. Art is powerful, and I think everyone should have access to experiencing it."

Gillespie does not come from money. Born in Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, he was one of five children raised in a 700-square-foot house heated by a wood stove. Growing up, he wasn't heavily exposed to visual art ("Music was my thing," he says), and in high school and college, his focus was athletics—specifically, middle distance running. Training under former Olympic track

**"The vast majority of public art out there is just ornamentation, and unfortunately the vast majority of architecture is terrible. All I can do is try to do it better, set the bar higher, and hope that, over time, we'll have a positive impact."**

—IAN GILLESPIE, FOUNDER, WESTBANK

and field athletes Doug and Diane Clement, Gillespie improved his 800-meter race time enough to try out for the 1984 Canadian Olympic team. Despite his efforts, he finished third at the trials and didn't make the cut.

After that disappointing outcome, Gillespie took the dedication and determination of race training and funneled them first into completing school (he graduated from the University of British Columbia with a business degree in 1985, followed by an MBA at the University of Toronto in 1986), and then into real estate.

The story of Gillespie's entree into the development industry has been told many times and in many publications: He was inspired by his older cousin Rod Schroeder, who pulled up to the Gillespie home one day in a red

1972 Jaguar E-Type convertible. The young Gillespie was so dazzled that he vowed to own one himself someday. And he does—the cherry-colored beauty sits permanently outside the Fairmont Pacific Rim, greeting guests with sporty aplomb. "Seeing that particular car was the first time design had a profound impact on my life," Gillespie recalls. There's a reason that New York's Museum of Modern Art not only acquired a 1970 Jaguar E-Type Roadster for its permanent collection, but also dedicated a four-month exhibition to the E-Type in 1996. "It's one of the finest pieces of industrial design of the past century," Gillespie says. "I have wondered where I would be now if my cousin hadn't pulled up in that particular car."

Gillespie first worked for Vancouver real estate development company Schroeder Properties but soon grew disillusioned with his projects, which were mainly strip mall developments. In his early 30s and still filled with ambition, he decided it was time to strike out on his own. He founded Westbank in 1992, and the company's first mixed-use project, London Plaza, opened two years later in Richmond, BC. Soon afterward, Gillespie tapped Vancouver architect James Cheng (who studied under Richard Meier and apprenticed with Arthur Erickson) to design his next project, dubbed the Palisades—a high-end residential development that nabbed the 1998 Lieutenant-Governor Award of Excellence in Architecture. It was the start of a decades-long partnership that continues to this day: Cheng designed Westbank's First Light project in Seattle, which is slated to open in early fall 2022. And while Cheng always will be known as the father of the architectural typology known as Vancouverism, which joins high-density residential construction and an emphasis on public amenities, he also can be credited as one of the first to expose Gillespie to the world of visual art.

"The two people who really opened that door for me are Cheng and Bob Rennie," the developer recalls. Rennie made his fortune in real estate marketing, and *ArtNews* has nominated him four times (most recently in 2018) as one of the world's top 200 art collectors. He's on the board of London's Tate Modern and has an eponymous art museum in Vancouver's Chinatown neighborhood. In the past, Westbank has worked with Rennie to market some of its projects and Rennie and Gillespie forged a relationship in which Gillespie's inquisitive nature and appreciation for beauty was stoked by Rennie's knowledge of and access to the global contemporary art scene. At the same time, Cheng was advocating for the inclusion of art as a critical element of the architectural process.

"James and Bob held my hand and brought me into the art world," Gillespie says. "Once you're pulled down that rabbit hole, you realize that your own personal growth is dependent on your ever-growing introduction

into the arts. It's that moment when, for example, you meet [English artist] Liam Gillick, and you're growing every minute you're in his presence. Once you're in it, [art] becomes this drug that you just don't want to give up."

Not much is known about Gillespie's private art collection (assuming he has one), but he can be credited with bolstering the presence of public art in any city his buildings grace. Westbank has become known—and also scrutinized—for its increasingly complex and audacious art installations. A Rodney Graham piece, *Spinning Chandelier*, set for installation later this year near Westbank's Vancouver House, is a physical manifestation of the artist's 2005 film *Torqued Chandelier Release*. The 14-by-21-foot 18th-century-style chandelier will hang under the Granville Street Bridge and slowly rotate as it ascends over the course of each day, then return to its starting point. To add to the already ambitious nature of the project, Westbank had to get specially drafted permitting for the placement of the piece, and a new type of mechanism was engineered specifically for the project by Washington's Walla Walla Foundry in collaboration with Arup. Few developers would have the time—the piece is now six years out from ideation—the patience, or the willingness to sink as much money into the public art component of a building. But Gillespie sees it as an investment in the neighborhood. "This is the kind of piece that will become a must-see for those visiting Vancouver," he says. "It's going to have a big impact."

Critics often lambast Westbank's projects as mere appeasements or distractions from the fact that a majority of the firm's condos are aimed at the ultrawealthy (a 413-square-foot one-bedroom unit at Vancouver House is listed for \$719,900 on Westbank's website). And in a city where bylaws require the inclusion of public art in any new building over 100,000 square feet (if the project is seeking rezoning), many developers regard it as just another element to check off their to-do list. According to Reid Shier, executive director of the Polygon Gallery in North Vancouver and Westbank's public art consultant, city bylaws require that, in order for a building to receive its occupancy permits, a project must spend \$1.98 per square foot on publicly accessible art (again, this is for projects that require rezoning). One of the ways the selection process runs, and the one Westbank most often employs, involves a jury made up of the architect, developer, and three independent arts professionals who together make a list of prospective artists, two to three of whom will be invited to submit proposals. All selection processes are proposed and approved by the City of Vancouver's Public Art Committee.

Shier first met Gillespie more than a decade ago while sitting on the jury that would eventually commission a 2009 text-based Liam Gillick artwork for the Fairmont

Pacific Rim. He's served as Westbank's public art consultant since 2012. "Ian has a real eye for art," he says. "That's not something you can necessarily teach. I think it comes from a place of true curiosity and openness to the creative process and to being challenged by the conversations of good artists. Ian is really eager to work with very ambitious artists, hear about their processes, and help them realize their visions."

One thing that can be unequivocally said about Gillespie is that he is willing to push the boundaries of both art and architecture. In cities full of buildings that often look the same, a visionary tapping the talents of creatives unafraid to take risks can only be a good thing. Even if a building's design brings ire from the public for being "too modern" or "too strange," it's a relief that people are actually discussing the thing rather than passing it by without notice. Any emotion elicited, it can be argued, is better than no emotion at all.

For all the focus on his wealth and status, it should be noted that, in addition to commissioning public art projects, Gillespie has his hand in a series of ventures aimed at helping communities in need. In 2009, Westbank completed the redevelopment of the historic early-1900s Woodward's Building in Vancouver's neglected Downtown Eastside neighborhood. Working with Vancouver-based frequent collaborator Henriquez Partners Architects, Westbank made a play to revitalize the downtrodden surrounding area as well, and in addition to market-rate apartments, the site now includes community housing, a new home for Simon Fraser University's Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, and an open court with a basketball hoop where Westbank hosts community breakfasts several times a year.

In late 2017, working independently from Westbank, Gillespie launched the Creative Housing Society, a Toronto-based nonprofit that is collaborating with the Canadian government to build 50,000 units of affordable housing, primarily in Toronto and Vancouver. Some call these efforts a move for publicity, but both cities currently are experiencing a staggering rise in homelessness, exacerbated by a lack of affordable housing. Isn't any form of help better than none?

Although he balks at comparison to the Medici family, one can't help but draw parallels between the contemporary Canadian developer and the famed Florentine clan who served as patrons to some of the most notable architects and artists of the Renaissance, including Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Like the Medici, a banking family and political dynasty, Gillespie's reach extends far beyond his daily work. In addition to his patronage in the art world, he also owns a large and growing vintage couture collection, comprising more than 200 pieces that range from runway pieces by »







Zhang Huan's "Rising" (2012),  
commissioned by Westbank for the  
facade of its Shangri-La Toronto  
hotel. **OPPOSITE:** Detail of Reena  
Saini Kallat's "Woven Chronicle"  
(2015), a site-specific installation  
at Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite. »



British fashion designer Alexander McQueen (Gillespie's favorite couturier) to early works by Yves Saint Laurent, including one of his infamous Mondrian dresses. Among the collection is an original Chanel dress once worn by Amal Clooney. A series of belted, fringed, and bright Versace garments is displayed in glass cases in the lobby of the Fairmont Pacific Rim. "People are way more interested in the couture pieces than the [Guido] Molinari paintings," Gillespie says of the large paintings that hang throughout the hotel's lobby. One is a square of solid blue, the other a series of vertical stripes in orange, green, purple, yellow, and blue. "It doesn't matter to me, though. I bought these paintings because I really like them."

**"Beauty is a process leading to an outcome, and that outcome is making a community, or the world, a better place. There's beauty in so many things—mathematics, nature, the arts, architecture. . . It's one of those things you know when you see it."**

—IAN GILLESPIE, FOUNDER, WESTBANK

Gillespie admitted that he's not quite sure what to do with his couture collection, which began when his daughter Lauren suggested purchasing a vintage McQueen dress for her graduation. He's fascinated by the evolution of style from runway to consumer, and as with the Molinari paintings, Gillespie really just appreciates their beauty. "Couture fashion isn't widely considered an art form on the same level as, say, painting or sculpture," he said, standing in front of an open closet packed with gowns, "but it absolutely should be."

In every endeavor, Gillespie goes big, as expressed by his recent foray into the literary arts. He's written two books, one of them the 622-page tome *Fight for Beauty* (published by Westbank Projects Corp.), his manifesto about the meaning and purpose of beauty in life. "The [goal] of my writing this book wasn't for you to read it," he says. "The purpose was for me to write the book." It's a very Gillespian thing to say, and it encompasses his seemingly deep and genuine curiosity about the world.

During our photo shoot, we chatted about a handful of his other creative ventures. While posing at a conference table on an upper floor of the Westbank offices, he mentioned Siegel Entertainment, a curation firm that provides live entertainment for luxury hotels and corporate and private events. Westbank is an equal partner in Siegel, and the company is in the process of expanding its services beyond Canadian borders. Gillespie also has an interest in the performing arts, and has invested heavily in the Vancouver-based Goh Ballet Academy, which he plans to expand to Toronto, Shanghai, and eventually Seattle. The Vancouver Art Gallery's outdoor exhibition space, located just west of the Shangri-La Hotel (another Westbank project), was built by Westbank and Peterson Investment Group, and Gillespie (among others) is given special recognition at the bottom of the museum's Offsite webpage. Since its opening in 2009, the space has hosted a round-robin of pieces by international artists working in a range of materials, from film and light to mixed-media sculptures. And the list goes on and on.

As the saying goes, you have to take the good with the bad. Not that there is anything "bad" about Gillespie in the wicked sense of the word, but his force on Vancouver's real estate market—a dominance that has a major impact on everything from home prices to the urban landscape—does deserve a critical eye. But criticism has never been enough to really ruffle Gillespie's feathers. He's on a mission to bring as much beautiful, complicated, and emotion-stirring art to the world as possible, and he really doesn't care what others think about it. Last October, the creative arts publisher Phaidon released a book called *Destination Art: 500 Artworks Worth the Trip*. Of the 15 works cited throughout Canada, three of the pieces—Diana Thater's *Light Art*, the aforementioned Liam Gillick poem encircling the Fairmont Pacific Rim, and Stan Douglas's 26-by-42-foot photograph *Abbott & Cordova*—were commissioned by Westbank.

"Sometimes I look at people's personal art collections and think, 'Oh, man, I wish I had done that, or bought that,'" Gillespie says, glancing out the window toward seaplanes taking off. "But at the end of the day, the amount of people who actually get to see personal art collections is so limited. Oftentimes, the work is just stored in a warehouse. I compare that to the millions of people a year who are seeing the art we've created. At the end of the day, I'm really proud of what we've done." ✱





**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Rachel Gallaher and Gillespie at Westbank's global headquarters; a model for Westbank's forthcoming First Light mixed-use tower in Seattle; Gillespie's book, *Fight for Beauty*.