

The Onni Group's residential and commercial buildings have long been a part of Vancouver's skyline and in recent years the company's success has propelled it in new directions, including Level, the company's first foray into furnished short-term accommodation.

Transcending HEIGHTS

ONNI HAS A HISTORY OF SETTING THE BAR HIGH – AND THEN TRANSCENDING THESE HEIGHTS

IT'S 9 A.M. AT THE ONNI GROUP'S VANCOUVER headquarters. An 85-member staff is working in a labyrinth of cubicles, and the desk of president Rossano De Cotiis is blanketed with everything from design magazines, weekly sales reports, architectural and structural drawings to *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Globe and Mail* newspapers: a clear reflection that this organization has a lot on its plate. De Cotiis spends more time thinking than he does talking and prefers to have his staff explain what distinguishes his firm from other property developers.



Clues can be found on the Onni website, which reveals that the company is involved in virtually every facet of the real estate sector. Diversity, therefore, is something Onni pursues with vigour and has accomplished in spades. >



Left: Onni reinvents the residential tower with Central, located in Southeast False Creek. Right: Suter Brook Village, a master-planned community in Port Moody, combining west coast flair with urban convenience.

“Rossano will often hire people he’s familiar with through friends or has previously done business with, or people that colleagues recommend – and then he allows them to determine their own path to success within the company.”

–Kevin Carpenter, VP acquisitions

But that’s just one small part of the company’s success. Onni has many distinguishing features: after all, it wholly owns and operates 6.5 million square feet of residential, hospitality, retail, office and industrial real estate. It has expanded in recent years with operations in Toronto, Arizona, California and Mexico, thereby ensuring the company’s continued growth in diversified markets across North America.

Although De Cotiis has a pressing meeting to attend, he wants me to

understand why Onni is unique. So, just as he does with new employees, he tosses out a ball in the hope I’ll run with it. “You’ll notice a lot of youth here,” he says. “It’s a different dynamic from when my dad Inno started the business, and it’s worked out well.”

It takes a few seconds to realize that Onni is Inno spelled backwards and that this is an indication Onni is a strong family-oriented and driven company. Three of Rossano’s brothers help propel the company forward: Giulio and Morris oversee the construction

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Westlake, located in Etobicoke, incorporates the urban village concept used by Onni out west. Situated on the edges of Toronto, it embodies three towers rising between 37 and 48 storeys, a seven-storey podium and retail centre.

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For further information, please contact
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and property management divisions plus ensure budgets and schedules are met and the quality of their product is superior to that of their competitors. Paolo, the youngest brother, spearheads Onni's international expansion plans. Over the years, all four brothers have been integral in making Onni what it is today.

Sensing that an exploration of Onni's head office could be useful, I decide to mingle with staff. "Feel free," De Cotiis says as he disappears to his previous engagement.

Certainly, not many presidents are so willing to let outsiders wander through their back rooms.

OPEN-DOOR POLICY

In Onni's corporate brochure, a considerably more expressive De Cotiis is quoted as saying, "Our strategy has always been relatively simple: to design and build properties that clearly meet the needs of the market... then throw in a little extra. We distinguish ourselves through imagination and innovation and we try and elevate our residential customer's quality of life and maximize our commercial tenant's quality of service."

But who are the "we"? Kevin Carpenter, Onni's vice president overseeing all corporate acquisitions for the company, says, "Rossano will often hire people he's familiar with through friends or has



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previously done business with, or people that colleagues recommend – and then he allows them to determine their own path to success within the company. That could be perceived as letting them sink or swim, but newcomers have access to all the necessary resources and the company really does operate under an open-door policy.”

“This isn’t coincidence. If you’re serious about sports, then you’re extremely goal-oriented, self-motivated and willing to work hard, and this extrapolates directly to our business.”

— Beau Jarvis, VP development

Five years ago, sales manager Nick Belmar was a restaurant industry veteran who decided to switch careers and contacted Onni’s executive vice president Chris Evans. “After a short telephone conversation Chris said, ‘You want to sell real estate? Come in and see us’. So I met Rossano, and before I knew it I had joined the company’s sales and marketing team.”

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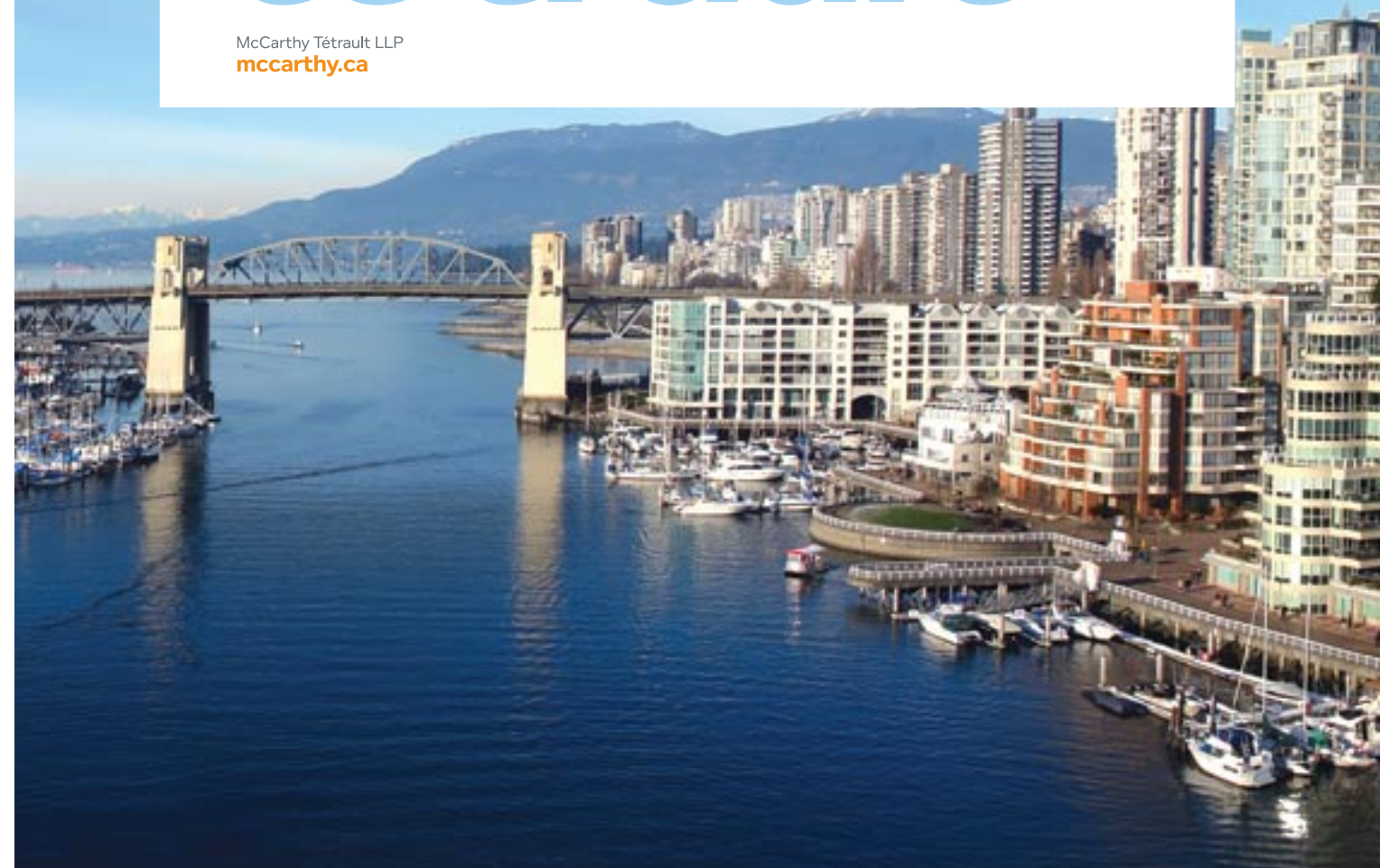
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What followed was a whirlwind initiation. "Apart from being taught the legalities of selling real estate, there was a massive component of figuring things out for myself," Belmar says. "It was daunting. But I made progress and soon I was making decisions on my own."

Development manager Mike Mackay, 25, shares Belmar's sentiments. "The velocity of learning when I joined Onni was tremendous and because there are no closed doors newcomers like me could

attend high-level meetings and other activities that are normally off-limits, so I learned things that would have taken me forever to learn elsewhere."

Two facts are apparent. People here are indeed young, many having joined Onni in their early 20s. Carpenter, an athletic-looking 44-year-old, having spent almost a decade working for Onni is playfully referred to as "the old man."

Secondly, many of them have a sports background. "I used to be a professional skier,

Rossano and his brothers were provincial high school wrestling champions, we have several national-level rugby players, and the list goes on," says VP development Beau Jarvis. "This isn't coincidence. If you're serious about sports, then you're extremely goal-oriented, self-motivated and willing to work hard, and this extrapolates directly to our business."

So: youth, self-motivation and sink-or-swim initiations are some of the elements that define Onni's corporate make-up and culture; but it takes senior leasing manager John

Middleton to explain how they cumulatively influence Onni's business dealings. "When we hire people, we look for initiative," he says. "The more responsibilities a newcomer can take on, the more it facilitates individual and corporate growth."

Middleton adds that Onni's youthful professionals "have a vigorous and innovative way of tackling projects. We don't merely pick conventional projects, we're willing to venture into new areas (Level being a prime example), push the design envelope (which we did at The Mark and Central), and take on complex and difficult mixed-use developments such as Fremont Village."

A quick inspection of Onni's 188-suite Level Furnished Living development in downtown Vancouver reveals it to be a unique full-service rental residence with professional front-desk concierge and

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— Mike Mackay, development manager

housekeeping. It's Onni's first venture into the hospitality sector and Vancouver's newest purpose-built extended-stay property. With its early success, Onni is already identifying expansion opportunities.

The Mark is a soaring, 47-storey high-end condominium tower in Yaletown that will be an iconic landmark in the city skyline. Central, located in Southeast False Creek, is a complete reinvention of the standard residential tower, with a horizontal eight-storey "skybridge" building sitting diagonally atop two 11-storey towers. Both The Mark and Central exhibit Onni's dedication to innovative design.

In Port Coquitlam, a vast swath of acreage is being transformed into one of Metro Vancouver's largest retail/residential developments. When Fremont Village is completed several years from now, it will consist of over 650,000 square feet of commercial space and over 400,000 square feet of residential space. Walmart, the first tenant to open its doors at the centre, features a 113,000 square foot green roof—the first of its kind in Canada for the super-store giant.



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Overseeing Fremont Village is Mackay. "It was a leap of faith for Rossano to bestow a \$350-million project on a 25-year-old, but that's what happened, and it's one of six projects I've got on the go," he says with a grin.

Because of the autonomy and faith they're given, Onni staff relish rather than dread their workload. Senior interior designer Rachel Martinuk, who was hired by De Cotiis nine years ago at age 21, now presides over 18 projects. In between phone calls, she reveals her approach to design: "We listen to our buyers, and we try to build the best possible product for them. This means paying attention to the smallest of details."

To which project manager Bob Bremner adds, "We take a long-term approach in construction. Quality is always number one. I may not be living in the homes that we build but I live with them for a number of years overseeing their construction and they will conceivably outlive me, so I can't stand the idea of doing anything less than our best work."

STRIKING A BALANCE

De Cotiis and his crew are hardly desk-bound. If they're not on the road visiting one



Left: The Grove at Victoria Hill in New Westminister. Top left: Meadowtown Centre in Pitt Meadows; Top right: Suter Brook Village, Port Moody.

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of their 30 local projects, they're flying to and from their international offices. Onni is expanding geographically and nurturing its investments in Mexico and the U.S. Indeed, Carpenter remarks, "We're constantly looking for new opportunities and acting upon changing paradigms wherever they may occur."

These elements, combined with De Cotiis's gut instincts and impeccable timing, have invariably put Onni ahead of the competition. "We entered the Toronto market in 2007 and today we are one of the top builders of highrise condominiums by sales in the city," says Carpenter. Onni's recent acquisition of the Evelyn development in West Vancouver, which will be brought to life with both sales and construction this fall, will likely prove to be another fortuitously timed project for the company.

Onni staff is part of a family that counterbalances its intense workload with an equally enthusiastic capacity for play. Recreational activities take the form of sport days, barbecues and various other social events including the odd bottle of Italian wine at lunch. Informality also manifests itself in Onni's daily workplace. "I'm not one to have people punch time clocks," says De Cotiis. "My people are dedicated and know what they're doing, so if they want to

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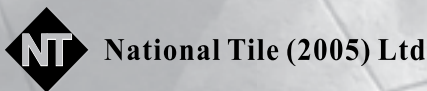
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take a break and work out, have a coffee or meet with friends, they're free to do so."

When De Cotiis is pressed to explain why he has such a casual management style, he replies, "As far as I'm concerned you have to enjoy work, because there's plenty of it around here."

Just as with everything else developed by De Cotiis, the informality has an added advantage. The lack of stringent corporate structure enables decisions to be made very quickly – another element that makes a company of Onni's size and scope unique.

Although he hardly wears his heart on his sleeve, De Cotiis reveals his true feelings for Onni in print. Again from the corporate brochure, and by way of conclusion: "Our company's growth to date has been driven by a team whose dedication and talent have been major factors in the achievements and credibility of our company. To all of them I offer sincere thanks for their tremendous efforts . . . plus a friendly forewarning: we've only just begun." ■

This promotional feature was prepared for Onni Group by BC Business magazine's Special Advertising Features Dept. Writer: Robin Brunet. For information, contact VP of corporate features John Cochran at 604-299-7311. Email: jcochrane@canadawide.com

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