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Wal-Mart heeds 'green' critics Store in Vancouver may include sod roof

John Greenwood

Financial Post

Monday, July 07, 2003

VANCOUVER - Wal-Mart Canada Corp., in a bid to mollify critics who accuse the company of not paying enough heed to the environment, has hired Busby + Associates, a leading "green" architecture firm, to design its first Vancouver store, which may even include a sod roof.

"Our job is to ensure that what we propose is the best possible development for the community," said Andrew Pelletier, the

company's director of corporate affairs, adding he believes the store -- if city council gives it the go-ahead -- will be the first of its kind for Wal-Mart.

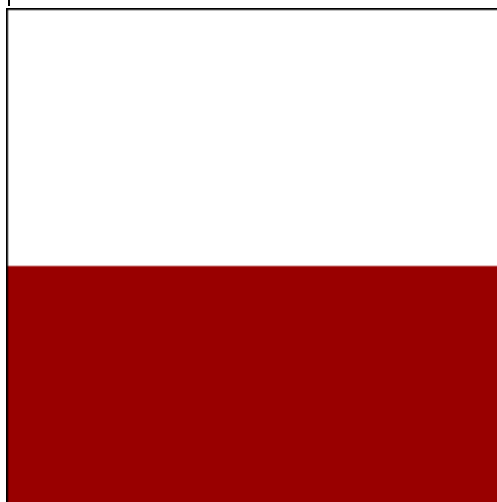
A roof-top lawn is "something we have talked about," Mr. Pelletier said. The finished design is to be unveiled at city hall this month.

Wal-Mart wants to build the 120,000-square-foot store in south Vancouver, on the site of an abandoned car dealership. But despite surveys showing significant community support, the proposal has become the target of noisy protests by local activists, who say the new store will lead to increased traffic congestion and hurt the local environment.

Earlier this year, the city council reversed a decision that would have effectively killed the proposal, handing Wal-Mart another chance to make its case.

Mr. Pelletier said this time around the company hopes to impress at least some of its critics.

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Wal-Mart is considering a range of features not typically found at big-box retail stores, such as energy-efficient heating and lighting systems, the use of natural building materials, and more greenery.

"We have to look at what is practical and actually do-able, but I think we will come up with something that is pleasing to the community," he said.

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Vancouver-based Busby + Associates is known for a raft of high-profile projects, including One Wall Centre, a critically acclaimed hotel and condo complex and a renovation of Telus Corp.'s headquarters, both in the Vancouver's downtown.

The firm specializes in buildings with reduced impact on the environment, and has designed several with grass roofs.

Most of Wal-Mart's 200 Canadian locations are the familiar big-box format, but increasingly the retailer is altering its standard design as part of an industry trend toward more unique layouts.

Partly because of increased competition, many retailers are experimenting with different design concepts, including so-called green architecture, as a way to access new markets.

"If Wal-Mart believes they will be successful by [choosing an environmentally friendly design], then it becomes an economic decision," said Jim Smerdon, a retail consultant at Hudema Consulting Group Ltd. in Vancouver.

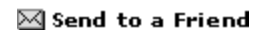
The trend is also being driven by a declining supply of traditional large-format store locations, as the suburban market becomes more saturated. Available space in more central urban areas is typically limited and expensive, so such large-format retailers as Wal-Mart that want to move downtown are being forced to alter their designs in order to fit into a more urban setting.

They are also making changes to increase their appeal to a more urban market. While that strategy risks turning off traditional customers, it usually pays off in the end, said Richard Wozny, vice president and manager of Royal LePage Advisors Inc.

"If you have tens of thousands of potential new customers, you can afford to be less convenient," he said.

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