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S&P/TSX
12,673.31 (+97.67)

DOW
11,096.08 (+75.68)

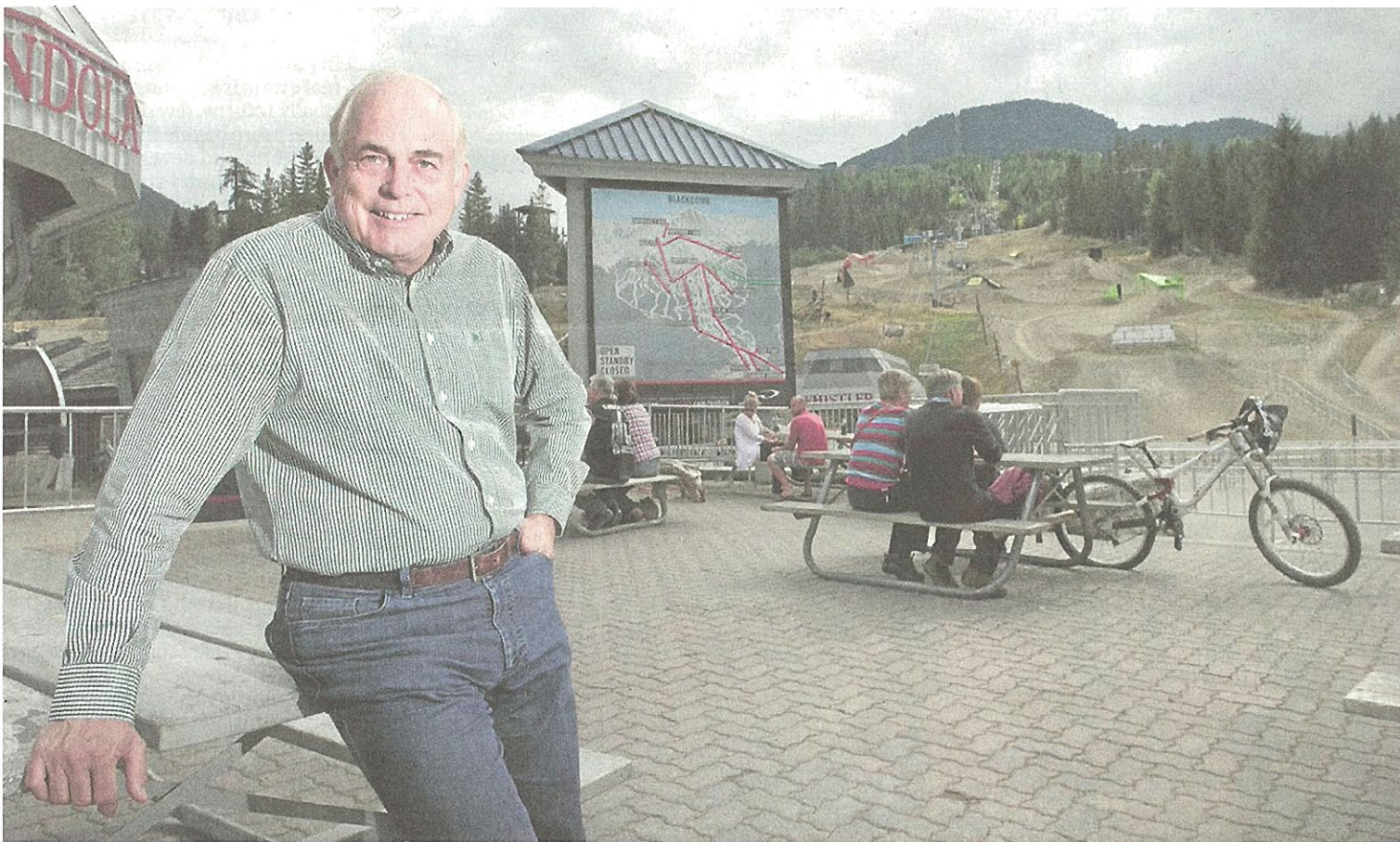
S&P 500
1,178.10 (+8.33)

DOLLAR
99.52 (+0.57)

GOLD
1,370.50 (+23.80)

OIL
83.01 (+1.34)

GCAN 10-YR
2.722% (+0.01)



From a base in Whistler, B.C., Paul Mathews' Ecosign has designed more than 300 resorts in three dozen countries. BONNY MAKAREWICZ FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

RECREATION

International man of mountains

Ski hills used to be built on gut instincts and gravity. Paul Mathews has spent 35 years changing that

DAVID EBNER WHISTLER, B.C.

Courchevel is the peak of luxury in the French Alps, a sprawling ski resort at the heart of the country's famed Three Valleys. But when the resort's owner, the local municipality, wanted to bring order to decades of uncoordinated development, it bypassed the fiercely nationalistic French ski industry and called on Paul Mathews.

Working from an office in an old residential neighbourhood in Whistler, B.C., Mr. Mathews has

spent 35 years reinventing how mountain resorts are designed. His firm, Ecosign Mountain Resort Planners Ltd., has designed more than 300 resorts in three dozen countries around the world, including the from-scratch plan for the home mountain of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

Ecosign secured the deal to redesign the ski-lift network at Courchevel just last month, cementing Mr. Mathews' status as the world's top winter resort planner. The win shows how

technology and commerce have changed an industry that once relied on gut feel and intuition to build ski lifts, cut runs and locate lodges.

Resort designers, led by Mr. Mathews, are the unseen force behind the rise of the modern ski resort, where the mountain experience is closely entwined with a broader offering of luxury, from fine dining in alpine refuges to upscale condominiums and brand-name shopping at the base of the ski lifts.

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We design the whole village, the ski hill, the unity, the experience.

Paul Mathews
President and founder of Ecosign

FROM PAGE 1

Ecosign brought scientific method to a business run largely by instinct

“It's detailed work, everything from the precise elevation of front steps, the height of the buildings, the commercial space, before the architects come in. We design the whole village, the ski hill, the unity, the experience,” says Mr. Mathews, 63, founder and president of Ecosign.

Ecosign served as the go-to planner for Intrawest Corp., helping the Vancouver resort operator grow from its foothold at Blackcomb Mountain, adjacent to Whistler, into a multibillion-dollar company. Intrawest and Ecosign married the mountain with a village, carefully calculating each element of the design everything from how much sun hits a patio to making sure skiers don't have to hike up stairs in ski boots.

Despite winning design contracts from Japan to Switzerland, Ecosign has only now cracked the top tier of French resorts. It took two years to convince Courchevel its future was in Whistler.

Roger McCarthy, a former executive at Vail Resorts Inc. and Intrawest, remembered wanting to bring Mr. Mathews in for a small deal he was doing with a French company a decade ago. “The French think they invented skiing,” says Mr. McCarthy. “I got the classic French feedback: ‘Our guys have forgotten more about being in the mountains than you guys in Canada will ever know.’”

At Courchevel, like most European resorts, the lifts were built haphazardly over decades, never orchestrated by an overall vision. With more than 100 lifts – many of them surface lifts such as T-bars – the resort moves an average of 15,000 skiers per lift each winter. At Whistler-Blackcomb, the figure is 85,000 skiers per lift – almost six times more efficient. Mr. Mathews aims to more than halve the number of lifts in his plan for Courchevel.

Mr. Mathews grew up near the Rocky Mountains in Colorado,

skiing since he was 5. When his family moved to Seattle, he discovered Whistler Mountain the winter it opened in 1966. “I just loved the place, the powder, the beer, and the Canadian girls, not necessarily in that order,” Mr. Mathews says.

After four years in Vietnam, Mr. Mathews studied forestry and landscape architecture at the University of Washington in Seattle, getting up to Whistler as often as possible. In 1975, he started Ecosign, bringing a scientific instinct to something that had, until then, been largely conducted by instinct. Ski lifts and runs were often conceived on summertime hikes by ski instructors who knew the mountains.

Ecosign uses technology to help design resorts. Among its latest tools is a software program that pinpoints the best snow on the mountain or the warmest sunshine for a restaurant patio.

The software, written by a Slo-

vak professor, uses a series of algorithms originally developed for the forestry business. With it, Ecosign can paint a picture of a mountain that calculates the sun's energy – in calories per square metre – on a specific spot.

On a recent warm April day, Mr. Mathews was part of a group that included Swiss ski legend Bernhard Russi on his home mountain south of Zurich. Guided by an Ecosign-made map, Mr. Mathews brought the skiers to a secret stash of perfect powder. “Russi just laughed: ‘All the locals boys know this and you found it from Whistler,’” says Mr. Mathews.

Ecosign remains a small shop, at 25 people, the heavyweight in a niche business. Competitors include SE Group in the United States and Dianeige in France. Revenue peaked in 2009 at \$3.3-million. The recession has pushed sales back below \$3-million.

Mountain-resort design is about convenience for skiers, and mon-

ey for operators. In an industry where profit can evaporate in a winter when snow doesn't fall – and is ever-more reliant on drawing summer visitors, too – delivering the full experience is crucial.

“Our goal was always to make it as simple as we can for guests,” says Reto Gurtner, the main shareholder of the Laax ski resort in the Swiss Alps, Ecosign's first European client in 1989.

Laax uses an integrated model, similar to Intrawest, where the resort owns everything from the lifts to hotels to the ski school. In the past three years, sales have increased 20 per cent to about \$90-million and operating profit 50 per cent to \$30-million.

“Paul has helped us a lot,” Mr. Gurtner says. “He knows what works. And for him a good solution is more important than just saying, ‘Okay.’ This is what I really like about Paul. Normally, you have advisers who try to please you.”