

School of Higher Living

BY HADANI DITMARS

Compared to urban universities such as McGill or the University of Toronto, Vancouver's UBC is decidedly land rich. At more than four square kilometres, the campus is one of the biggest in Canada, and that's not counting the endowment lands - about 14 square kilometres - half of which is made up of Pacific Spirit Park.

Vast swaths of its forested endowment lands remain preserved for the future, but a recent wave of residential development on campus is rivalling the Olympic village for Vancouver's construction hot spot.

The Chancellor area on the north end of campus was the first to develop, followed by Hawthorn Place. Now, the South Campus neighbourhood is positively booming. In the past two years, a whole new community adjacent to 16th Avenue has been carved out of forest. Eventually the South end's Wesbrook Place will be the largest neighbourhood on UBC's campus, housing more than 5,000 people in a mix of townhouses and apartments.

A recent visit offered a dizzying array of projects: a brand new Save-On-Foods with rental housing above it, a senior's residence under construction, a new Henriquez Partners- designed high-rise project called Sage at the edge of the TRIUMF research centre, and a new high school in the planning stages.

The campus residential areas have been highly planned by the UBC Properties Trust, unlike the public academic buildings, which can seem like a mishmash (especially compared to the more singular vision of the Arthur Erickson-designed Simon Fraser University campus).

And a sense of community is growing, particularly at Wesbrook Place, with mixed-use residential/commercial zoning, market/student housing, attention to infrastructure and sensitivity to and engagement with the natural environment. The

area features a network of "green streets" - aesthetically pleasing corridors of unpaved walkways and bicycle trails, as well as increased public transit, all of which adds up to dramatically reduced car use.

"The whole experience of UBC is about entry into forest," says Norm Couttie, an architect and the president of Adera Group - one of the biggest developers of residential property on campus. With several established projects and two new ones almost complete, the firm has demonstrated a West Coast contemporary design vision that embraces its surroundings.

Consider their 2005 project called Legacy in Hawthorn Place. In the midst of a pastiche of styles that range from pseudo arts and crafts to Cape Cod, Legacy offers the comfort of real West Coast cedar, landscaping with native species, and a true indoor/outdoor aesthetic.

"West Coast contemporary architecture," explains Couttie, "pioneered by Arthur Erickson, Ron Thom and others, is what we do best. Why should we try and imitate other styles?"

Why indeed. Across the street from Rhododendron Forest, Legacy echoes the greenery with its cedar elements and landscaping. With the use of a bridged entranceway that straddles a gully below that subtly suggests a creek bed, the eye is drawn inside what feels like a residential extension of the forest opposite. Large balconies offer residents lush views of towering fir trees, while brick offers a textural interplay with the cedar siding and references more traditional academic architecture.

An earlier building down the way, called Journey, reads like a riff on Erickson's Museum of Anthropology. The entranceway - a grand cedar post-and-beam structure with terraced steps - leads up to a lobby featuring an indoor stream. A First Nations killer whale emblem stands guard on a stone wall above it. The course of the water, the sloped site and the extensive glazing at the lobby entrance

and exit conspire to create a sense of continual flow. The balconies here are huge - 300 square feet - and take in the considerable view.

Then, after a few lovely feet, the green street ends, simply melting into the surrounding forest.

A walk around the building reveals a UBC Properties Trust-built take on a village green - with a storm drain/waterway that provides visual pleasure and resource recycling, a playground and a grassy, landscaped area surrounded by three other residential developments. Killdeers cry and frolic in the foliage, while a nearby community centre called "the barn" - built on the bones of an original, actual barn - speaks to the rural history of this area. The UBC teaching farm is nearby, and local legend has it that sheep are often taken to the UBC hospital for ultrasounds. It's that kind of community.

Teaching farm sheep excepted, wildlife abounds here, with local coyotes the scourge of worried cat owners. But if a coyote were to emerge from the woods that surround the new South Campus neighbourhood, a kilometre from Hawthorn Place, he might well be in for a surprise.

The café at the new Save on Foods has an almost urban, Yaletown feel to it, and the new medical offices mean that many residents can exist for days without a journey downtown.

And yet, what one notices at Adera's new Pathways development, is its celebration of forest. The glass entranceway acts both as a natural segue between the two buildings it comprises and at the same time as a repository for needles from nearby towering firs, mimicking the forest canopy. A long, cylindrical fountain stretches across the length of the first building, softening its façade and creating both a sense of intimacy and procession as one enters Pathways under the elongated glass canopy.

Once inside the first lobby, a Brent Comber fir bench beckons, flanked by one of his cedar installation pieces on the wall.

The tall fir trees - a few select ones saved for their age and height - that stand on the other side of the building - read like installation pieces themselves. They lead the way down yet another green street that intersects surprisingly chic, terraced storm drain/fountain that vaguely suggests the water elements at Erickson's Robson Square.