

Rise of the concrete campus

Unprecedented construction at UBC and SFU has galvanized critics around all the changes

BY DAVID SPANNER

Can you build a "U District" a century after you've built a university? That's a contentious issue at the University of B.C. these days, where a new, activist student movement is rising up to protest multibillion-dollar development plans. More than 40 years after Simon Fraser University was established, 100 years after the founding of UBC, massive residential/commercial developments are under way that will change the faces of both campuses. The two universities were constructed in isolated areas of the Lower Mainland, so they evolved into purely academic locales with little sense of neighbourhood or community.

Now, developments -- UBC's University Town and SFU's UniverCity -- may be about to change that. But UBC's development, in particular, has stirred considerable controversy, with students and faculty voicing their concerns: How do you build a university district after the fact, and will these developments really be university communities or will they be upscale communities developed on university land?

The notion of "U District" inspires images of the bustling communities that flourish alongside campuses from Cambridge, England, to Berkeley, Calif. Just a couple hours' drive down the coast, for instance, old houses and storefronts adjacent to Seattle's University of Washington have been around as long as the university itself. And they're an organic part of the university experience -- students sharing rent for an old clapboard house or working in pizza joints, record stores and other shops tailored to the district.

Whenever passing through one of these lively university districts, I couldn't help but think it was something lacking in Vancouver. And I wasn't alone. UBC planners have been pining for a U District since

the university was conceived. "The original plan for UBC was to do that," says Matthew Carter, vice-president of UBC Properties Trust.

Much of the grand design to transform the university into something more than a commuter campus was established in the UBC Greater Vancouver Regional District official community plan in the 1990s. Conceived by staff at the GVRD and UBC, it divided the university into eight neighbourhoods, including two commercial areas.

One of the commercial areas, Westbrook Place, under construction near West 16th and Westbrook Avenues, will have 65,000 square feet of commercial space, half of which will be a Save-On supermarket. It will also contain 2,300 townhouses and condos. UBC is slated to grow from its current 12,500 residents to some 28,000 when University Town is completed in 2020.

"The reason for doing this is to be a sustainable university campus," says Nancy Knight, vice-president of UBC's Campus and Community Planning. "We're a very big working and study site with very little opportunity to live close by."

Not everyone associated with UBC is supportive of all this.

"We're seeing the mallification of the campus," says UBC history Prof. Paul Krause.

"I don't know that real communities grow out of malls and Save-On Foods." Krause's concerns are shared by others at UBC who feel the leasing of university lands to construct high-priced residences is shortsighted and will result in an on-campus Yaletown-style community way beyond the financial reach of students and most faculty.

He says the University Town development comes at a time when UBC's educational resources have been shrivelling, with fewer professors and larger classes.

"This is a university where students are not thought about," he says. "We may be creating a U District in terms of buildings but we need to create a place where students come first. University is suppose to be about students. It's not supposed to be about buildings -- condominiums. It's unfathomable to me and many of my colleagues."

Knight says profits from the project go to UBC's \$1 billion-strong endowment, which is spent on research and students (bursaries, etc.). "After we pay for the infrastructure, the net revenues are deposited in our endowment," she says.

"Our needs are new," says UBC public affairs director Scott Macrae. "We've undergone huge student growth."

There are now 50,000 people who work or study at UBC. University Town's proponents stress the project includes student housing, particularly secondary suites. The official community plan regulates that 50 per cent of housing is reserved for those who work or study at UBC and 20 per cent is rental.

Rob Brown, a vice-president of UBC Properties Trust, says all of UBC is not being turned into condos and malls. "Eighty per cent of construction is institutional."

Joe Stott, director of planning for Campus and Community Planning, says the university has made ongoing efforts to involve students, faculty, alumni and neighbours in the planning process. "There were plenty of opportunities for people to participate. We consult on the plan project by project."

He says plans have yet to be finalized for the University Square commercial area, along University Boulevard, but that a widely representative working group was formed after students presented a 4,000-name petition. The original plans, which Stott says were approved in 2003 after consultations, involve an underground bus loop and campus square.

Student Brian Gehring says the consultation process is just for show. "They don't have meaningful consultations. They don't give you the option of saying no. They give you a few options, and they're all bad," says Gehring of Students for a Democratic Society, one of several campus groups critical of the development.

It's ironic that the development at SFU, known for its activism in the 1960s, has prompted little opposition, while UBC's plans has sparked a student movement unlike any seen in these parts since the 1970s -- ranging from petitions to a people's park (organized by a coalition of student groups to show the alternative to commercializing the campus) to the vandalizing of two buildings (spray paint and broken windows claimed by a group called the Wreath Underground).

"The problem is not necessarily building a university district," says Margaret Orłowski, a student representative on the University Square working group. "It's important to have community. But the sort of development the university wants to build will not foster that."

Gehring takes a glass-half-empty attitude to the 50-per-cent work-or-study residency requirements, saying that means half of UBC's community will have nothing to do with the university. "That is a new phenomenon here. There hasn't been private development at UBC for long," he says. "All the residential is too expensive for students."

These students say the bus loop/town square at the heart of the University Square -- which will change the campus core, including the removal of the popular swimming pool -- is a done deal despite widespread opposition. (A survey indicated students favoured a development with student-controlled areas, affordable housing and plenty of green space and study space.)

"It comes down to the issue of power and accountability," says student Jasmine Ramze. "A university is about students. But students are left out of this concept. I'd like to see the underground bus loop stopped."

SDSer Michael Richardson says he isn't necessarily against the notion of transit facilities but was upset by the process. "They've just decided what they want and they're doing it. The big question is, whose interest is this serving?"

SFU's new commercial hub looks like it's been there longer than the university, its retro stone-and-cement edifice rising on the eastern edge of the original campus. Now just a handful of shops and restaurants and a town square, it will soon house

a Nesters Market and other enterprises. And the nearby condos and townhouses, ranging from the pricey to the affordable, are selling at a brisk pace, with other amenities in the works.

Gordon Harris, CEO of the SFU Community Trust, which oversees UniverCity, says a self-sustained campus community was part of the founding vision. "[Architects] Arthur Erickson and Geoffrey Massey imagined there would be a university community. UniverCity is our interpretation of that."

While not as expensive as the UBC development, it's still out of reach for students and many faculty, although one development sold below market to faculty and staff.

Residents such as Mary Lumby, a retired Burnaby schoolteacher, receive a Campus Card that provides 30-per-cent discounts at retailers and SFU facilities. "I had watched this community and I thought when I retire this looks like where I'd like to be," Lumby says.

"It's very peaceful, tranquil. When you drive up the hill it's almost like you're going to paradise."

Harris says SFU, with its 20,000 students, and UBC, with 45,000, have taken "slightly different approaches." The higher-density UniverCity has a more "urban feel," explains Dale Mikkelsen of SFU Community Trust.

But the UBC and SFU developments have things in common, too. They're both relatively isolated with plentiful surplus land, and net proceeds are supposed to go back to universities as endowments.

"We certainly talk to each other," Harris says. "We keep in touch."

Is this purely a Lower Mainland phenomenon?

"We've had a number of universities come to talk to us," says Knight. "The University of Michigan said they've done research and they consider UBC to be a leader."

So, while SFU and UBC developments are the pioneers with these on-campus communities, others are starting to explore the notion.

"I think we're going to see more and more of it," says Mikkelsen, "as universities divest some of their land."