

Trouble on the village green

Tempers flare as city planners and private developers lock horns over Olympic village

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The third-floor room at Vancouver city hall is funeral-quiet while everyone waits for architect Paul Merrick to respond to the critiques of his design ideas for the Olympic village.

One after another, the architects and landscape architect from Vancouver's urban-design panel have told him they can't see how the sketches he's shown them say anything about what is supposed to be this revolutionary new development's defining characteristic -- its green, environmental design.

And more than one comments disparagingly on the idea of making this look like a "fishing village" -- a concept that had been floated by some people from the Millennium team in a recent newspaper article.

Five seconds pass. Ten.

Finally, Merrick, a white-haired icon of the Vancouver architecture world, who has been sitting in his chair at the end of the crowded table, speaks.

"I have never been so insulted so many times in my life. I'm staggered at how destructive and negative and scathing so many of you have been."

Another long silence as everyone in the room sits frozen until James Cheng, a panel member who is one of the city's pre-eminent architects, intervenes gently.

"Paul, don't take this the wrong way. We're trying to be constructive. We're just trying to get some clarity on the principles of where you're going."

Merrick snaps: "Well, it didn't seem that way to me."

In the next 30 minutes, with some tense talk about timelines and an open acknowledgement of the fundamental disagreement between the city and the developer over the look of the project, everything settles down.

In four weeks, the group concurs, the three architectural firms involved will each come in with a detailed design of one of their buildings that will give everyone a close-up look



CREDIT: Stuart Davis, Vancouver Sun

The Waterfall Building in Vancouver is an example of the kind of building the city would like to see in Southeast False Creek.

at what they're planning. And then they'll get down to the hard discussion of whether those buildings meet the city's and the panel's design expectations.

Another day, another exhausting, difficult debate over the Olympic village. And another small step forward.

While the Sept. 13 meeting -- the fourth workshop with the city's urban-design panel -- was more emotional than most, it was also representative of the intense and passionate communal debate that has gone on for the past six months over the eight blocks of southeast False Creek that will become Vancouver's image to the world in 2010.

Ever since the city announced April 5 that Millennium had been chosen as the developer for the 16-acre city parcel that will be the Olympic athletes' village, it's been a roller-coaster ride for city planners, the developer, the architectural teams involved, and people who have taken a long-term interest in what has always been dreamed of as an international model for how to build an entire neighbourhood that's green.

There are huge expectations for this project: It will change Vancouver. It will take the city's design and architecture community to a whole new level. It will be an inspiration for future developers to build green, because they'll see that it's attractive, doable, and marketable.

Southeast False Creek has always faced two contradictory goals. All kinds of advocates, from community activists to mainstream politicians, have wanted it to be a model of sustainability. That doesn't just mean recycling dishwater or putting in rooftop gardens. Sustainability, in the new, broader sense, also means creating a community that includes all income levels, fosters connectedness, is economically viable, and reduces the distance people have to travel to shop or work.

But at the same time, the city has also wanted to get the maximum economic return from the site.

The previous council was willing to take some kind of hit on the economic return in order to achieve the first set of goals. The current council wanted the maximum money and was worried about building something no private developer would be able to duplicate. So, it made some of the sustainability goals more conditional.

So now Millennium and city planners are struggling to deal with both of these realities. Millennium paid beyond top dollar for the land. At \$193 million, that's \$210 per buildable square foot -- a record for Vancouver. Once construction, financing, design, and other costs are added in, no one thinks Millennium will be able to sell what it builds for under \$1,000 a square foot.

That means it needs to sell to the kind of people who are currently the target market for luxury condos in Coal Harbour.

But there are still unstoppable expectations about building a unique, sustainable neighbourhood that will be the city's most visible symbol of its green and West Coast identity.

So for six months, there have been meetings and meetings and meetings, sometimes with up to 90 people thrashing out issues like whether air-conditioning is environmentally acceptable.

No one says it's been easy.

"The first time anyone does a green project, you're going to have brain damage," says Tom Osdoba, the head of the city's sustainability office.

For that reason, the city has constantly pushed Millennium to bring in more people with sustainability expertise so the wheel doesn't have to be reinvented so painfully.

Roger Bayley, a partner in one of the three architecture firms that will build the 12 residential buildings, says that as recently as a month ago, the city was still pushing them to bring in Peter Busby, the city architect with the strongest track record of green buildings.

But Millennium is determined to stick with its original team of architects: Paul Merrick, who advocated more than two decades ago that the city should consolidate land in southeast False Creek for future development; Robert A.M. Stern of New York; and Stuart Lyon, whose firm designed Millennium's current downtown condo project, L'Hermitage, which combines high-end condos with housing for low-income singles.

Instead, it has chosen to hire sustainability experts from places like Seattle and Victoria to complement the local teams.

On the other side of the table, Millennium has its own frustrations with the city's approach to sustainability.

It has been working hard to create environmental buildings through what's called, in the trade, "passive design." That means trying to eliminate the need for energy-consuming building components by using natural light and air or different construction techniques. That means wider hallways, lightwells, a certain kind of balcony design, thicker and more energy-efficient walls.

But, says Bayley, a partner in Merrick Architecture, it's been hard to convince the city to compensate for the space all of those elements take up by giving the project extra density.

Millennium had asked for an extra four per cent, on top of the 1.1 million sq. ft. now allowed in the official development plan. Planners have agreed to only two per cent.

"If you were passionately committed to passive design, you would be advocating for that space," says Bayley.

He also says it's been Millennium that has had to push for at least some modest-market housing -- housing that's not high end and not social housing, but geared more toward middle-income earners.

Under the previous council, the developer would have been required to build one-third of the project, about 330 units, as modest market.

City staff are preparing to recommend giving Millennium an extra 90,000 sq. ft. in order to build 100-150 modest-market units.

"But that's 30,000 less than we had asked for," said Bayley. "That's a significant loss in the social sustainable goal."

In spite of the frustrations on both sides, the signs of a unique project are starting to emerge.

The entire district will be heated through a system of water pipes that will recover heat from the shower and washing-machine water flushed into sewers. That eliminates the need for boilers and hot-water tanks.

Cooling for the units, something Millennium insisted on, will also be done through water

pipes, where the heat carried away from the units will likely be diffused through the public fountains.

All rainwater will be captured in either cisterns on roofs or in surface channels that will flush it through grassed swales in the park. That eliminates the need for storm sewers and provides water for the planned urban agriculture.

The streets will be narrower than anywhere else in the city and designed primarily for walkers, cyclists and transit.

The architectural teams are angling and designing buildings to take advantage of wind and sun patterns. One of Lyon's social-housing buildings will have live-work townhouse units that wrap around the walls of the grocery store, giving people a chance to operate small businesses from streetfront spaces attached to their homes. He and the city are working on making one of the other social-housing buildings a "net zero" building -- zero net energy consumption.

The biggest challenge yet to come is what those buildings will actually look like.

The emotional debate at last week's meeting was over the design.

The city wants something that looks West Coast and tells people this is a special neighbourhood, designed on environmental principles.

Senior urban designer Scot Hein names buildings like the Watermark restaurant on Kits Beach, the new Killarney pool designed by Roger Hughes, and Arthur Erickson's Waterfall building near Granville Island as buildings that have elements the city would like to see incorporated in the new neighbourhood.

He says the city is not trying to make Millennium build a hippie commune or a fake warehouse district. But they do want something that says Vancouver and 21st century and sustainable.

"It's not about messy-looking buildings, industrial buildings or corrugated metal like Granville Island," says Hein. "We have in mind buildings that are very forward-looking and we think a very marketable kind. We can be clever and demonstrate sustainability in buildings that are quite marketable."

He says Millennium's problem is that it is stuck right now in thinking that can't be done.

Millennium's group is equally adamant that it has to have a product that it can sell to the international market.

"The city's examples are modern with strong expressions of a new architecture," says Bayley. "But we're headed in a more traditional way. What we're proposing is a more international style of architecture that would appeal in the international marketplace."

The neighbourhood's most prominent building, on the waterfront, will be designed by Stern's New York firm, which has made its name by building neoclassical towers with formal gardens.

How that debate is going to be resolved is the next chapter in this drama.

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