

DWELLING: DEVELOPMENT

'Arthur was not amused'

Breaking with a theme laid down for Simon Fraser University by master designer Arthur Erickson, Michael Geller has used strategic thinking to get the UniverCity community up and running

TREVOR BODDY / Globe and Mail Nov 24, 2006

Until recently, Burnaby Mountain was home only to a large park and one of Canada's better medium-sized universities. Overlooking Burrard Inlet on one side and the rest of the Lower Mainland on the other three, the flat-topped peak is new home to several thousand condo-owners, with even more to move in over the next few years.

Stepping down next month after seven years of initial planning and construction, architect and development consultant Michael Geller is the key creative force behind laying-out Simon Fraser University's new spaces for living and shopping around its eastern and southern edges.

Following Vancouver's disposition to run together urban naming -- think SkyTrain, TransLink, and most recently, mayor Sullivan's EcoDensity package -- early on Mr. Geller, S.F.U.'s Community Trust president and top planner, picked "UniverCity" as the cleverly compact name for his town-meets-gown community.

Two of the four first neighbourhoods at UniverCity are nearing completion. The most prominent is University Crescent, a range of a dozen or so six to 13-storey stepped concrete condo towers, ringing the mountaintop's edge like a medieval fortress-town. For me, the new SFU constructions recall Monte Cassino, south of Rome. Even those who bought on the lower floors of University Crescent's towers have a guarantee that surprisingly few other Vancouver area high rise residents can bank on --unobstructed views forever, courtesy of their alpine address.

Contained within the Crescent is the second neighbourhood completed to date, University Highlands. Highlands features wood-frame instead of concrete construction: stacked townhouses called "Serenity;" plus the 4-storey "Verdante," innovative for its new-to-B.C. layouts, "green' features, and most of all, the clever financial arrangements that make it affordable (but alas, only for purchase by SFU faculty, staff and students.) Some University Highlands residents have asked why the allocation of housing types was not reversed for Crescent and Highlands neighbourhoods, with the towers concentrated at hilltop in the centre, allowing views for both them and a ring of lower structures around their bases.

In explaining the design choices made by him and his advisory board, Mr. Geller demonstrates the strategic thinking necessary to get so large and groundbreaking a development as UniverCity up and running.

While there were technical reasons associated with the storm-water retention ponds below, a key reason for starting with a ring of concrete towers was the lingering mistrust of wood-frame construction after B.C.'s leaky condo crisis of the late 1990s -- at \$1.5-billion and rising, by far the most expensive design calamity in North American construction history.

By quickly establishing concrete buildings on a prime site, Mr. Geller and team forged an image and momentum for the entire project, pulling along the lower density, wood-frame neighbourhoods that followed.

Mr. Geller takes full responsibility for the "earth tone" palette of materials and colours that bind together UniverCity's otherwise heterogeneous buildings, designed and built under the Community Trust's guidelines by a half-dozen architect-developer teams. A former adviser to the University of British Columbia's Hampton Court private housing project, Mr. Geller wanted to avoid the hodge-podge of materials, colours and forms that characterized U.B.C.'s University Town housing developments --coming out of the ground as UniverCity's planning commenced.

Indeed, UniverCity boasts top-drawer public amenities -- hiking trails, sidewalks, lighting, planting and so on -- even if its earthy tones and fuzzy textures seem as stuck in 1970s suburbia as a mullet and corduroy leisure suit combo.

Mr. Geller also takes full responsibility for breaking with the raw concrete architectural palette favoured for S.F.U.'s first academic buildings from master designer Arthur Erickson and associated firms in the 1960s. In an architectural contradiction of the university's academic buildings, Mr. Geller says, "I am proud to say we have no bare concrete at all in UniverCity."

Mr. Geller also took considerable heat for breaking with Mr. Erickson's competition-winning campus plan, which placed future private housing on its western, not eastern edges. "Arthur was not amused," reflects Mr. Geller on a tour of his team's creations, recalling a similar stir amongst environmentalists when he ordered an early road cut through the second growth forest where UniverCity rises today.

Prior to coming to S.F.U. to plan and build UniverCity, Mr. Geller was co-master planner for the much-lauded Bayshore downtown community developed by Japan's Aoki Corp., plus a large range of other private sector projects. A Montreal native trained as an architect at the University of Toronto, his career started out with a long stint with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., both in Ottawa and Vancouver, where he was involved with the planning of Granville Island, and adjacent to it, False Creek South's mixed-use residential areas.

While the public often thinks of real estate developers as rabid libertarians, the quiet truth is that contemporary urban development is almost entirely the creature of highly political decision-making and complex bureaucratic control. Simply put, urban development is the creative exploitation of land regulations.

Accordingly, the top rank of Vancouver's development industry is dominated by individuals -- like Mr. Geller -- who have split their lives between public and private sectors, welding sensibilities of the humanist with those of the politico. David Podmore of Concert Properties was a city planner in Edmonton for many years before jumping to the union-controlled Vancouver development corporation, while Polygon Homes founder and "Serenity at Highlands" developer Michael Audain studied Marxist theory at the London School of Economics, and is the only chief executive I know who casually uses the word "bourgeoisie" in business discussions.

Mr. Geller is one of Vancouver's most enlightened and articulate developers, and after a year's sabbatical of touring world architecture with his wife, the good news is that he plans to return to private development, while maintaining a S.F.U. link through an adjunct appointment to the campus sustainability centre.

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