

MEDIA ADVISORY

BUILDING GREEN CAN RESULT IN SIGNIFICANT COST SAVINGS BOTH IN CONSTRUCTION COSTS AND THROUGH ENERGY REDUCTION

One of the most commonly-cited arguments against constructing ‘green’ buildings is the perception that they cost more. In fact, many are built at almost no premium, and at UniverCity on Burnaby Mountain, Simon Fraser University (SFU) Community Trust is working with developers that have found significant cost savings in building sustainable housing.

UniverCity on Burnaby Mountain is a model sustainable community neighbouring one of Canada’s premier educational institutions, Simon Fraser University. The UniverCity community is designed to be a compact, mixed-use and transit-oriented community founded on SFU Community Trust’s Cornerstones of Sustainability: Environment, Equity, Economy and Education. Currently one in four new-home purchases in Burnaby is at UniverCity, which has 3,000 residents now and will be home to 10,000 people when the build-out is complete.

In July 2010, the City of Burnaby approved new ‘green’ zoning requiring that new buildings at UniverCity be constructed to be at least 30 per cent more energy efficient and 40 per cent more water efficient than a traditional building. The bylaw also requires that the builders reduce their use of toxic substances, and source materials from the local area. This is both progressive and workable for developers. Origin by Porte Development is one of the two new developments being constructed under this new zoning bylaw. This project is moving ahead to meet these requirements, while also being cost competitive with other conventional projects being sold elsewhere in Burnaby.

There are a few of reasons why building green up at UniverCity is economical:

1. SFU Community Trust developed the new zoning in consultation with developers, which was then adopted by the City of Burnaby,.
2. The Trust made sure that the requirements are accessible, and that developers are aware of them before they sign a deal, allowing them to design their project with these in mind.
3. The requirements are performance-based which places the emphasis on the results, allowing developers to find solutions that work best for them.

For Porte this means that they are able to offer a project that meets the goals of the Trust while still offering units that start in the low \$200,000 range. This seems to be working, given that within the first week, 40 per cent of the project’s 75 units were sold.

For UniverCity’s new childcare centre – currently under construction and designed as a Living Building, making it the greenest in Canada – costs will average between \$100 and \$150 per square foot less than other conventional childcare centres built elsewhere in the region. This is due to a design approach that looks to improve the sustainability of the building from the start. HCMA, the architects, and the Trust looked at the whole building from an integrated design point of view,

knowing that in an advanced green building there will be some premium cost items, but there should also be significant cost savings in other areas to offset these. Those include reduced mechanical requirements, simplified building materials, or smarter finishing. Because one of the primary goals is to deliver this project as a Living Building (www.ilbi.org) for significantly less than a conventional childcare building, the Trust worked to find the cost savings inherent in this type of building to balance out the cost premiums.

Another project worth highlighting at UniverCity is the Verdant project – a groundbreaking model of both sustainability and affordability. Developed in partnership with Vancity Enterprises and reSource Rethinking Building and completed in 2007 Verdant is 60-unit wood-frame building that offers family-oriented housing priced at 20 per cent below market. The environmentally-friendly building, designed by Gomberoff Bell Lyon Architects, is one of the most energy-efficient wood-frame buildings in Canada and was constructed at no premium compared to a conventional building. It is comprised of a mix of apartments and stacked two-level townhouses each with its own exterior entry facing a communal interior courtyard.

Currently undergoing LEED Gold certification, innovative green building features for Verdant include energy efficient construction, improved air quality and water conservation measures. The energy efficiency components of the design, which include a geo-exchange heating system, as well as a passive solar hot water system, were financed through a separate mortgage. This financing arrangement sees residents pay the equivalent cost of energy for a traditional building, with the operational savings paying down the mortgage for the energy efficient features.

To ensure the homes remain affordable over time, there is a resale agreement in place requiring that units be resold at the same below-market discount ratio. The Trust was able to provide this affordable housing option by leasing the site to Vancity at below market value.

All these examples demonstrate that building green, particularly when implemented at the design stage of a building, can be less costly both up front and over the life of a building.

SFU Community Trust CEO Gordon Harris is available for interviews about the growing UniverCity development, built as a model sustainable community, and the cost-effectiveness of building green.

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