

2008 NATIONAL PLANNING EXCELLENCE AWARD FOR INNOVATION IN GREEN COMMUNITY PLANNING

UniverCity — A Model Sustainable Community
Burnaby, British Columbia

Taking Green Higher

By Sam Lowry

As the recipient of APA's inaugural National Planning Excellence Award for Innovation in Green Community Planning, UniverCity deserves special recognition among the many excellent projects joining the growing revolution in green planning and architecture.



Others may have as many green roofs, neighborhood amenities, and smart economic incentives — but UniverCity (the accent is on the fourth syllable) combines them in an exciting and accessible way, with an eye firmly set on the future.

"I would like to think we were chosen because we set out to build a model green community," says Gordon Harris, president and CEO of Simon Fraser University's SFU Community Trust, which created the development in concert with the city of Burnaby (pop. 202,799), part of the greater Vancouver area. "We are constantly challenging ourselves to do the best job. We are very mindful of UniverCity's purpose."

New buyers at UniverCity live in a compact community comprised entirely of multifamily buildings, eventually to include a mixture of mid- and high-rise buildings, town houses, and condominiums, along with retail and office space. When complete — within 20 years, developers say — UniverCity will number 4,500 units and 10,000 residents on a mere 170 acres atop Burnaby Mountain.

The development adjoins Simon Fraser University, which serves as its cultural hub, and is surrounded by 1,400 acres of open space. UniverCity is partially complete, with about 2,000 residents moved in, two sites under construction, and one fifth of the planned 200,000 square feet of retail and office space built.

UniverCity residents have access to extensive walking and bicycle paths and will walk — rather than drive, developers hope — on permeably paved streets lined with bioswales returning 97 percent of runoff to the hilltop watershed. They can access greater Burnaby and Vancouver (its center is about eight miles away) by transit or in cooperatively owned vehicles provided by the project's individual developers, who have bid for 99-year leases from the university on their parcels of land. So far, five developers — including Millennium, builder of Vancouver's 2010 Olympic Village — have successfully bid to develop within UniverCity.

"This is not just another suburb," Harris says. "It is a community that minimizes the need to get in the car. That is what makes it possible to have 10,000 people on 170 acres of land."

Some buyers live in what may be the most energy-efficient multifamily building ever constructed in Canada, according to Heather Tremain of Vancouver's reSource Rethinking Building. She served as a green consultant to the architect, Stu Lyon of the local GBL Group. Called the Verdant, and opened in August 2007, the building is a UniverCity showpiece, with solar-boosted hot water and 20 300-foot-deep, liquid-filled geo-exchange wells that draw heat from the earth, accounting for energy efficiency 65 percent better than local code, according to Tremain.

Verdant's features will save 375 tons of greenhouse gas per year, she says. "That's the same as getting 75 cars off the road."

Common goals



All developers at UniverCity can receive density bonuses according to their level of adherence to its green building guidelines, which Tremain developed at the project's outset in 1996. This year, those green guidelines are expected to become green requirements, written into Burnaby's zoning code for the land under UniverCity — with additional density bonuses still available for developers who go even further.

"From a planning perspective," says Basil Luksun, Burnaby's planning director, "it happened because Simon Fraser University, from the president on down, was supportive of sustainable measures, and also our city council was willing to embrace them."

The unusual physical and community geography that made such a project even possible — 170 greenfield acres are rare in the middle of a dense city — resulted from early exchanges between the city and the university. "The city is very aggressive about open space," Luksun explains, noting that open space totals about 25 percent of all land within the city limits. "Before Simon Fraser came to Burnaby [in 1963], the city made 1,000 acres available to the university ... then later established the conservation lands program, and wanted to get some of the land back."

A deal was finally sealed in 1995, transferring 760 acres of open land back to the city in exchange for rights to develop elsewhere — including the 170 prime mountaintop acres. A frank development goal was to generate long-term revenues for university endowment funds.

University leaders consider sustainability to have four cornerstones: environment, equity, economy, and education. This compelled them to make UniverCity not an exclusive development, but an affordable and accessible one. Verdant incorporated a covenant that units would be sold at 20 percent below market, so long as owners agreed to resell them at the same discount.

Keeping costs down demanded creativity. At the Verdant, Tremain put a lid on costs through energy savings. UniverCity made the building's greenness and energy efficiency cost-neutral to the developer, taking out a \$400,000 loan that it then transferred to the home owners association for repayment. "We did it through the bank to prove it could be done by others," Tremain says. "We invented it."

Part of the whole

Luksun appreciates the way UniverCity fits within the city's overall planning scheme: four quadrants with a town center in each, all connected by transit. Each quadrant contains a range of densities, including denser neighborhoods or "urban villages." UniverCity is considered one such village. "It is a service to the community: People don't have to travel long distances — these are complete communities," he says. The SFU Trust incorporated green local businesses along the main thoroughfare, University High Street, from the outset.

Helping UniverCity evolve into a stable social community is nearly as great a concern for its creators as is its environmental sustainability. "We have good rapport with the city and the development community," Gordon Harris says. "They allow this to be a model. But in the end, this has to be a place where people want to live."

Meanwhile, Tremain hopes that green building — which she perceives to have blossomed following the release of the film *An Inconvenient Truth* — will not become so mainstream that it loses its edge. "We risk stopping being innovative, with less active thinking at the forefront," she says. "We have to keep pushing at the edges."

Sam Lowry is a freelance writer in Portland, Oregon.

Images: Top — Looking north along a residential street in UniverCity. Bottom — An extensive pathway system helps UniverCity residents to navigate the area without having to drive. Photos courtesy Simon

Fraser University and the city of Burnaby.

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