

High density that works on the Sunshine Coast

At Wakefield Beach, everyone gets to see the waves, smell the flowers and gain a sense of community

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Coastal roads in southwestern British Columbia are now almost completely lined with houses. You know the pattern: one house on the water, the other across the road, one after the other about 30 metres apart, little tufts of trees in the gaps. These linear beads of recreation and retirement residences, if they could be strung into something resembling a town, would qualify as B.C.'s most rapidly expanding urban area.

Unfortunately, this form of housing development is also extraordinarily wasteful of precious seafront land. It also makes public access to tidal flats difficult or impossible, and it is expensive to provide with sewer, garbage and other services. These house-lined rural roads can also be, frankly, boring eyesores. Such waterfront strips as Seaside Drive west of Sooke, or Redroofs Road west of Sechelt, are neither bustling town nor verdant nature, and lack even the predictable pleasures and cheap repetitive construction of suburbia. Stringing houses all along our ocean-fronting roads is a losing proposition, any way you cut it.

The preponderance of "rec-retirement" sprawl amplifies the accomplishments at Wakefield Beach, on the main highway west of Sechelt, on the Sunshine Coast. The last of 46 homes along a 210-metre stretch of south-facing waterfront there will soon be complete. Had the site been developed in B.C.'s typical manner, it would have yielded perhaps 12 houses - and a lot more ennui.

Increasing housing densities by almost four times is a hard-to-achieve goal, and at sister sites outside Sechelt under development one sees the continuing disfigurement of ocean-edge splendour with 1970s driveway-and-bungalow conventionality. At Wakefield Beach, everyone gets a view of the waves, everyone gets a yard or a grassy green roof and deck, and everyone gets something missing in our linear coastal non-towns: a sense of community.

How did they do it?

Wakefield Beach came about because of a thoughtful dialogue between developer and designers, set against the sheer inspirational power of a blessed patch of earth. Developer Lance Sparling was new to the game, his West Vancouver family having built a fortune with "Spar-Pack" bubble-packed sets of nails and screws for hardware stores. He got to know the community while living part-time on a nearby island, and picked up a raunchy roadhouse, the Wakefield Inn, for his first stab at housing development.

With personal fortunes on the line, first-time developers tend to produce even more conventional layouts and designs than their seasoned colleagues, but not Mr. Sparling. He gathered advice from architect-neighbour Peter Busby, former staffers at InterWest Developments, local historians and planners. Then he engaged Kim Smith and Bo Helliwell of West Vancouver's Blue Sky Architecture as project designers, with local Teryl Mullock serving as architect of record overseeing construction and documentation. The whole team met with local residents and officials countless times.

This pre-design forethought paid off through early decisions that set Wakefield Beach's groundbreaking character. First, the densest constructed portions would line the highway, providing an acoustic barrier for the community sloping down to the shore below. Second, the old Wakefield Inn building would not be preserved, but salvaged portions would be integrated into all-new construction, ending up as fireplace lintels and other embellishments. Salvaged wood from the demolition went to the Sunshine Coast chapter of Habitat for Humanity. Third, green features would run throughout, with grass-planted roofs, geothermal heating and energy-conserving design features and appliance choices whenever possible.

Earmarking the Wakefield Inn site as a kind of test plot for increased coastal densities, local planners had asked for 12 units an acre, achieved on the second phase now starting construction, though phase one averaged nine residences an acre. The reason for this slight diminution was to ensure each house would stay coastal, not suburban in character. In the words of co-designer Ms. Smith, laying out the march of clustered housing from road to shore was a "real juggling act ... because we wanted to ensure that every single unit had a clear view to the sea."

Another crucial decision in arranging these housing clusters was their use of flat roofs planted in variegated grasses as well as other roofs above them with gently curving forms. With an inverted roof putting insulation on top outside, and inside marked by Douglas fir ceiling planking, rafters and columns, every residence has at least one slightly curving interior ceiling. Asked whether the added expense

really made a difference to daily living, Ms. Smith replies that the detail subtly softens, even feminizes what would otherwise be angular living spaces.

The curving roofs have a dramatic visual impact. With dozens of residences in three rows marching up from shore to roadway, the glinting curved roofs seem like so many rollers coming in off the Pacific, waves of houses in harmony without being in perfect alignment. Streetscapes within the development are similarly staggered, combined with minimal paving and drought-proof landscaping (it seldom rains in coastal B.C. in August and September). One of the finest plan details is the alignment of the centre two houses in clusters of four contiguous units with the gaps left between sister clusters below. This artful staggering means everyone gets a view.

Wakefield Developments manager John Gillespie (brother of Shangri-La Vancouver and Toronto mega-developer Ian Gillespie) says his company is looking at another site with natural drama to match Wakefield's, but in the interim is keeping busy with high-design, ecologically conscious smaller projects.

As for Blue Sky Architecture, this firm born of hippie log-building on Hornby Island now has a dozen projects going along the B.C. shore, many of them inspired by the unpretentious West-Coast-ism of Wakefield Beach.

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