

It Takes a Village
to Design a Village

The design challenge of delivering a combination of high densities at the prescribed low- and mid-rise scale of building at Millennium Water was daunting, especially with an aggressive project schedule driven by Olympic commitments. Given this time constraint, the City lacked sufficient time to prepare design guidelines that typically inform use, density, form of development and character, and generally facilitate the design development process. The City’s Urban Design Panel was therefore critical in identifying effective, approvable design strategies through their leadership in a series of collegial design workshops. The Urban Design Panel is a group of appointed individuals

representing the City’s design, engineering and development community. The panel gives impartial and professional advice to City staff and Council on any proposal, policy or large development affecting Vancouver’s physical environment.

Early Urban Design Panel sessions for Millennium Water focused on form and scale, including the proposed courtyard formats, which were uncommon in Vancouver’s residential market. Given the village’s “green ethics,” the panel was also able to offer specific technical solutions to building, landscape and engineering challenges. With respect to the question of character and expression, the panel sought design

responses that were “distinctly Vancouver” in character. Their key question, “What is authentic placemaking?”, became the focus of later workshop sessions, noting the challenge of delivering an innovative 21st century green community, in the west coast Canadian context, on a prominent waterfront site with a rich industrial history, under the auspices of a single developer in such a short period of time.

The Urban Design Panel’s advice, and the creative response from Millennium’s architects and landscape architects, was critical

to the invention of a contemporary building expression that was borne out of planning, shared sustainable values and historical identity. The creative results produced distinct buildings, articulated as a series of smaller components (to manage “superblock” scale), expressive of passive green systems and human activity, all contributing to the village’s identity.

Scot Hein
Architect and Senior Urban Designer
City of Vancouver



This axonometric view of Vancouver’s Olympic Village captures the dense mid-rise building typologies, inner courtyards, community centre, active waterway and bustling pedestrian spaces.

The following principles, introduced by Stu Lyon of GBL Architects at a session of the Urban Design Panel, helped delineate non-prescriptive design “constraints.” The principles would guide the group of architects toward a cohesive neighbourhood design.

1) VERTICAL STREETS

- Exposed circulation
- Social opportunity
- Useful stairs
- View down to street
- View into the building
- Green edges to circulation

2) DAYLIGHT INSIDE

- Daylight from two sides of each home, apartment or townhouse
- Daylight to as many rooms as possible
- Daylight to circulation

3) AIR THROUGH

- Corner or through suites wherever possible
- Large or multiple opening windows
- Open corridors where possible

4) HORIZONTAL STREETS ABOVE GRADE

- Corridors with green edges where possible
- Suite entry doors with presence
- Corridors with daylighting where possible

5) RESPONSIVE BUILDING FACE

- Solar screening on south and west sides
- Bigger windows on north sides
- Smaller windows or shading on bright sides
- Acknowledge different types of view
- Differences between bottom and top

6) USEFUL OUTDOOR TERRACES

- Space for table and chairs
- Privacy control
- Integrated with unit layout

7) RESPONSIVE STREET LEVEL UNITS

- Private street/public street response
- East side/west side response

8) INTEGRAL AMENITY SPACES

- Interior amenity spaces that are integrally connected to common outdoor space
- Amenity spaces are creatively designed
- Amenity spaces are integrally associated with circulation and preferably with vertical streets
- Amenity spaces are the “public plazas” of the interior circulation

9) VIEW FROM EVERY FLOOR

- Every floor in every building should have a common outlook over outdoor green space in concert with common access to natural daylight

10) DAYLIGHT TO UNDERGROUND SPACES

- Daylighting via skylights, stairs and light wells should be provided to underground areas wherever possible

PROFILE

Stu Lyon

MAIBC, MRAIC
Principal, GBL Architects Inc.

Stu Lyon and GBL Architects were the first to join Millennium’s team in bidding to develop the Olympic Village. Lyon and his team were instrumental in preparing the development and rezoning proposals and designed three of the eight parcels at Millennium Water.

Lyon says his experience working on this large and complex project, with its demanding timeline, has been “exhilarating.” Working on Millennium Water brought the opportunity to implement forward-thinking design at the neighbourhood scale. Lyon introduced the ten design principles (opposite) during a session of the Urban Design Panel. The principles helped make space for each designer to infuse their distinct individual style, while working within similar constraints.

Lyon is most proud of the passive design features at the village. Through the design process the team has created a place where, according to Lyon, “simply coming and going from your condo will be a wonderful, pleasant experience.”