

## **CRITIQUE OF BEACH TOWERS REZONING PROPOSAL** **(by Beach Towers Neighbours, July 2011)**

### **Rezoning Application under the Short Term Incentives for Rental Housing 1600 Beach Ave and 1651 Harwood St.**

**BACKGROUND:** IBI/HB Architects, on behalf of Beach Towers Investments Inc., has applied to rezone 1600 Beach Avenue and 1651 Harwood Street from RM-5A (Multiple Residential) District to Comprehensive Development (CD-1) District to add a total of 137 apartments. Current density allowed 1.0. Conditional maximum 2.2. Actual current 3.42. Proposal 4.36.

**HERITAGE VALUE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:** Because Beach Towers was designed by Vancouver's foremost mid-century architect C.B.K. Van Norman and is considered by the project architect, Ojars Kalns, to be his finest achievement, the City of Vancouver has deemed Beach Towers the finest example of its type, worthy of an A category heritage designation. As such, the developer was required to provide a Statement of Significance identifying those features which define the essence of the complex.

- Beach Towers is on 'a prominent site overlooking English Bay'. Projecting onto a promontory at the edge of English Bay and at the gate of False Creek, it sits on an immensely important, much photographed, iconic Vancouver site. With these important and valuable views, Beach Towers was built in Corbusier's 'tower in the park' style. They act as sculptures as well as residences, enhancing the transition between city and English Bay with such features as rhythmic, concave, wave-like balconies, bay windows sculptures, fountains, multiple cantilevered viewing plazas, and extensive planting.
- They sit on one of a series of triangular blocks created where the water and beaches intersect with the West End street grid. The other triangles have all been designated city parkland, and as a group they soften the relationship between the beach and the city. The architects created a park-like setting as a base on which the towers sit. The buildings themselves are raised on stilts above ground level, allowing street level English Bay views directly through the bases of the towers. It is a sublime experience to view ships and water shimmering through the towers while walking on Harwood and Cardero Streets. The buildings appear weightless and almost float.
- The Heritage Statement of Significance identified as important the 'plazas, landscaping and perimeter planting'. The proposal would remove both existing cantilevered tiered plazas completely. The Beach Avenue apartment block would remove the lower plaza. The access road encircling Macdonald House in mid-block would separate the three towers with street traffic and parking. An eight storey apartment block on the remaining land would remove all vestiges of the current plazas. What was cantilevered viewing platforms would become private apartments sitting on a podium. The current plazas are an important part of the West End's cultural landscape, with exceptional public outlooks to English Bay. They are popular viewing platforms for English Bay events including fireworks, parades and walkathons.
- Open perimeters surrounding the massive towers are an integral part of Le Corbusier inspired design. Enhanced landscaping, particularly on Beach Avenue, would celebrate the cantilevered viewing platforms of this unique architecture. The original design included gardens on what is currently above-ground parking at the Harwood-Cardero corner. As this parking is now surplus to City requirements, it is time to remove it and green the rest of the block, completing what was originally intended by C.B.K. Van Norman.
- The townhouses attached to Columbus House would create a podium, blocking views from Burnaby Street to the north and removing all sense that the building is a 'tower in a park'. Instead, a wall would stretch across the entire Harwood Street property.
- The Heritage Statement of Significance points out that the 'arrangement of towers take advantage of views between structures'. The eight storey apartment block would sit in the face of all neighbouring

buildings, as well as in existing views of 120 Beach Towers apartments that face that open space. Existing views between the towers and open views through the base of the towers that pedestrians have enjoyed since the 1960's would be eradicated. Views so carefully preserved by the original placement of the towers would be gone.

- The current building form is very simple: all four buildings are large circular towers. The addition of new rectangular forms expressed in townhouses and apartment blocks would destroy the cohesion and integrity of C.B.K. Van Norman's design. This is a fully developed, planned site, with 'three towers built on a city block'. Removing the plazas and separating the buildings with street traffic would severely compromise the integrity of the design.

**WEST END GUIDELINES:** Each existing tower is raised on two-storey stilts, allowing pedestrians to see English Bay through the base. This gives the already massive buildings the appearance of weightlessness. Individually the buildings are massive, and as a group they create the West End's second most dense block. The towers would become oppressive and intimidating if you couldn't see English Bay through these open spaces.

- Neighbourhood and Street Character: Open, airy, waterfront views would all be destroyed. Four three-storey walk-ups and one modernist (1957) co-op now face the Harwood-Cardero corner. The proposed Cardero Street building is larger by far than any of its neighbours, dwarfing the walk-ups by six stories and obliterating their views. The local streets are characterized by open English Bay views, which would be lost to 100,000 square feet of infill. The views for cyclists using the Cardero Street bicycle lane would be gone.
- Building Character: Noted architecture critic Robin Ward describes Beach Towers as Vancouver's premier example of Le Corbusier's 'tower in the park' architecture. Recognized by the City of Vancouver as a Class A example of its type, Beach Towers are C.B.K. Van Norman's and project architect Ojars Kalns most recognized and loved work. Their integrity and value would be ruined by the addition of townhouses and apartment blocks.
- Orientation: The developer suggests that "a new street wall would complete the corner of Harwood and Cardero." This proposed building has a larger footprint than any building on the entire length of Harwood Street including any of the Beach Towers themselves.
- Views: The spectacular prospect of English Bay would be lost for neighbours, pedestrians, cyclists and existing Beach Towers' residents.
- Safety and Security: The proposed development would create a back alley through the middle of the block, reducing the 'eyes on the block' that the current neighbourhood depends upon.
- Parking: It is proposed that only one parking entrance on Cardero Street replace the current four. This would result in traffic congestion, a considerable increase in carbon pollution, and traffic risks to cyclists on the Cardero Street city-dedicated bicycle lane. One hundred and thirty nine more apartments on what is currently the West End second most dense site would create a parking nightmare in this confined neighbourhood, which is already surrounded on three sides by tourist, commercial and commuter traffic on Beach Avenue and Davie Street.

**DESIGN RATIONALE:** The current surface parking space encompasses the first five feet at ground level. Above is open air, public space, and light, the 'negative space' that is designed to offset the massive size of the existing towers. Originally, the City acknowledged this rationale by requiring that the parking lot be lowered to ensure protection of public views of English Bay from Harwood and Cardero Streets. Subsequently, in 1985, the City refused to allow a roofed parking structure for the same reason. The original intention was to plant gardens on this entire portion of the property. As the underground parking at Beach Towers already exceeds zoning requirements, a more fitting proposal would enhance the landscaping on the above-ground parking lot, in keeping with the City's own environmental goals. This would provide a true amenity for the neighbourhood.

**BUILDING SIZE:** The proposed buildings are described as 'infill'. They are in fact much larger than would be suggested by the term 'infill'. They are larger than all neighbouring buildings combined. The eight-storey apartment building would have a footprint larger than any of the existing towers, and would have a footprint larger than any building on the entire length of Harwood Street. Indeed, the total proposed footprint is as large as all four existing towers. By any measure, the size of these buildings would exceed the notion of 'infill'.

The proposal understates the elevation of the eight storey apartment block at Cardero and Harwood Streets. Its height is described as eight stories. Including the above-grade parkade entrance on Cardero Street, the building would be nine storeys tall not including roof access structures. It would sit squarely on the open space that was required as a condition to mitigate the exceptionally dense and confined Columbus House at 1651 Harwood.

The apartment building facing Beach Avenue is described as being two floors below the plaza level and three above. In fact it would have one floor below the Beach Avenue plaza and four above, plus access structures to the roof decks. This creates a six story building on Beach Avenue. Contrary to the developer's description, there would be no Harwood Street pedestrian view corridors of English Bay.

Recreation facilities described as recessed are in fact above grade and block water views for Cardero Street pedestrians, cyclists, and residents in low-rise buildings on Cardero Street.

**STIR:** This rezoning is proposed under City's STIR programme (Short Term Incentives for Rental Housing). Far from encouraging affordable housing, this proposal would provide tax-payers subsidies to the developer by waiving regulatory development levies and would build English Bay waterfront luxury housing. Moreover, the subsequent rise in property value would cause increased rental rates throughout the neighbourhood.

**FOR MORE DETAILS, PLEASE VISIT <http://www.beachtowers.ca/>**