

EDRS Bicycle tour of Vancouver Area Green Projects: June 16, 2001

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On Saturday June 16, 2001, EDRS hosted a bicycle tour of four central Vancouver green projects. As luck would have it, the weather cooperated beautifully (except for a freak rain shower at the first stop). Over 30 people, including people as far away as Seattle, attended. The presenters were very informative, and the bike portion was an enjoyable ride along bike routes and the False Creek sea wall without so much as a flat tire.

Our first stop was Arden Craig, a renovated character home near City Hall. Robert Brown of Chesterman Property Group and Heather Tremain, a member of the design team, conducted the tour. The house had been divided into three apartments and a coach house infill replaced a demolished garage. Arden Craig has a diversity of green building features including drought resistant landscaping and on-site storm water management, reused framing material from the previous buildings, job site recycling, and many building materials containing recycled content. The building also incorporates many energy and water efficient features such as high levels of insulation, efficient windows, heat recovery ventilation, and energy efficient lighting and appliances. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this project is that it was built as a speculative development. Since financial rewards in the development industry rely on low first costs, any money spent on green features (emphasis on life cycle costing) had to be weighed in against what the market value would bear. Arden Craig showed us that high quality, efficient buildings can be realized in a highly competitive residential development market.

Our tour proceeded to the Molehill Community Cohousing Project. Molehill is a cluster of 26 Victorian and Edwardian homes owned by the City of Vancouver that were once used as boarding houses; when renovated they will provide 175 affordable housing units for low-income singles, seniors, and families. Blair Petrie, the co-ordinator of Molehill Community Housing Society, opened our tour with a history of the site and a description of the social objectives of the project (low income-affordable housing, developing a sense of community and preserving greenspace). Sean McEwen, the project architect, was also on hand to explain some of the restoration design features and extensive public process the project had to undergo. A laneway that separates the two rows of houses is central to the redevelopment of Molehill; it will become a landscaped pedestrian oriented corridor that will feature community garden plots, a common laundry area, tool and garden sheds, parking and meeting rooms. One of the key 'green' features of Molehill is the geo-thermal heating system. Lynn Mueller from Pacific GeoExchange was on hand to describe the system. Water run through pipes drilled deep into the ground absorb the constant heat of the earth. The water is then brought back to the surface and run through a compressor to extract and transfer the heat to the hot water heating system of the house. While the system is more expensive to install than a typical natural gas forced air system, the only electricity used is to power the compressor. This results in a pay-back period of 4 ½ years for the system, and eliminates 5 tons of greenhouse gasses from being emitted into the atmosphere every year.

The tour retraced our route back to Strathcona Community Gardens where cold drinks and hot pizza's from Union Deli were waiting. Located off Prior near Main St., the gardens were established in 1985 on reclaimed industrial lands owned by the Vancouver Parks Board and run by a group of local citizens, including Muggs Sigursierson. We relaxed in the central garden area as Muggs began the tour, telling the tale of community working together to turn clay laden soil into fertile black gold one plot at a time. The gardens feature a greenhouse, nursery beds, a vine walk, herb garden, and orchard, bee hives, compost centre, a pond/marsh and approximately 290 plots, some raised for gardeners with mobility or strength challenges. The garden shed -- used for meetings, seed collection, and herb drying -- is the only "off-grid"-permitted building in Vancouver. The building uses reclaimed materials, incorporates solar-passive design, grey-water cleansing, rain-water collection, composting toilet, and a photovoltaic panel array that powers the building lights, and even runs the occasional circular saw. Craig Edwards from Sheltair Scientific had originally designed and installed the system, and was on-hand to give a description. The system has been on-line for 5 years now and has been function smoothly, with minimal maintenance (just topping up battery levels).

The final stop of the tour was the cob meditation shed built by Ian Marcuse. The meditation shed is a quiet, peaceful sanctuary nestled into Ian's organic garden in the middle of the bustle of Commercial Drive. Inside the heavy curved walls, temperatures are cool and the hum of the city non-existent. Cob is a very old form of earth building with its roots coming from the four corners of the ancient civilized world. Cob is a mixture of soil, sand, clay, straw and water mixed with the feet in "cob-dance" kind of a jig. Coconut sized patties are formed and passed via human chain to the wall in progress and kneaded into the course below. The buildings are finished with natural plaster and timber roofs with large overhangs.

Over a cool cerveza on the patio of Havana's, we reflected on the tour and the diversity of projects we visited and realized that "green building" has many meanings. It's not a form of building per se; rather it is a refinement of existing practice that can be applied to improve projects of all types and sizes. Ironically, some of these improvements are merely reinventions of an ancient wheel. Many thanks to our gracious hosts and presentors who gave their Saturday for our enlightenment, the various donors of gifts, and all those who participated in the event on what was the first real sunny Saturday of the summer.