

Putting down roots: Trees, plants help ground multi-family developments



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Central to the Orchard development is a grove of 66 apple trees. *SUPPLIED / CALGARY HERALD*

It might be a leap to say an apple tree can bring a community together.

But when it's one of 66 trees in an acre of orchard — in a neighbourhood known more for its parking lots than existing residential roots — the leap may not be that big.

The Victoria Park site of The Orchard is “out in the middle of nowhere with the closest building a block and a half away,” says Brad Lamb, president of Lamb Developments. “We knew we had to build an amenity that would get people excited and would build a community.”

He says such a large green amenity — to anchor two 31-storey towers along 12th Avenue S.E. with Red Sparkle and Parkland apple trees that could produce as many as 100,000 apples each year — will be unique in that it is not often such a large parcel is available in an inner-city location.

“We get to build and create a sense of community while adding beauty, and growing food.” Lamb Developments' The Orchard is the most striking example of planning that involves the addition of trees to the urban landscape.

But there are others.

Charron Ungar, president of Avi Urban, says the company included almost 250 trees and 500 bushes in its sold-out Sawyer project in the southwest neighbourhood of Silverado. The three condo buildings, built in a U-shape, surround an extensively landscaped central courtyard that includes the trees, walking paths and park benches.

In the 158-unit, two-building Canoe in southeast Auburn Bay, an “outdoor living room concept” with lounge furniture and a fire pit is surrounded by hundreds of trees around connective dock-inspired walkways. The walkways will also take homeowners through the development to the future LRT station and retail plaza next door.

“These are really private parks that can bring or entice people to come together,” says Ungar. “They develop a sense of community where you can meet your neighbour, take a walk or read a book.”

He says, especially as the landscaping matures (as it has in the company’s townhome development of The Enclave in Aspen Woods), the sense of pride builds in homeowners about where they live and that means the whole project is better maintained, driving up each unit’s value.

Doug Owens, general manager of housing at Brookfield Residential, says his company planted more than 570 trees (13 different species) and 3,500 shrubs in its Mosaic Mirage development in McKenzie Towne.

They “will all mature over time to provide a rich environment for homeowners as well as wildlife.”

He says shrubs and ornamental grasses are considered carefully to ensure an understanding of how the plants will mature, what type of visual interest they will create for homeowners during the winter and the summer, as well as what long-term care and maintenance will be required.

And while the addition of trees may be especially important in new or redeveloped neighbourhoods, they can also benefit projects in older, already lush inner-city communities.

In the infill Mosaic Bridgeland project, Owens says landscaping options were limited due to site constrictions. The inner courtyard was lined with mature Swedish Columnar giving homeowners mature landscaping almost immediately.

Mature larger trees are not always possible to add, he says, because they are difficult to transplant and more often die after being moved.

“In place of the larger trees we are able to simply plant more and let Mother Nature and time take care of the rest.”

Gary Beyer, president of The Providence Group, says his company will be taking the whole concept of building a strong community within a condo project to another logical step in its next development.

Currently constructing the two-building, 83 unit V&V (Victory and Venture) in the north inner-city community of Bridgeland, Beyer says the 25- to 35-year-old demographic his projects are mainly targeted toward have an active, outdoor lifestyle.

V&V, in the midst of an older neighbourhood with a mature canopy of trees, near pathways, large parks like Prince’s and St. Patrick’s islands, and near roads taking them directly to the mountains, includes a rooftop garden with fireplaces.

In his next inner-city project, currently in approvals before the city, the proposed 148-unit condo development will have a community garden on its rooftop.

“This is where the demographic is heading: towards simplicity, including growing their own vegetables. It is a real swing of the pendulum,” Beyer says.