

History of Site

Heritage Architect's Statement of Significance (July 2011)

Beach Towers is an apartment complex of four point towers on two sites – one an entire city block bounded by Beach Avenue, Bidwell Street, Harwood Street and Cardero Street and the other at 1651 Harwood Street - located in Vancouver's West End overlooking English Bay.

The buildings are not listed on the Vancouver Heritage Register, but were identified in the City of Vancouver's Recent Landmarks inventory in the "A" Category.

HERITAGE VALUE

Beach Towers is of heritage value for its role in the development of the West End, as a cultural landscape and for its architectural design. In the post World War II era the West End of Vancouver was being rebuilt with higher density apartment buildings replacing many of the older single-family houses in what was once Vancouver's premier residential neighbourhood. Proximity to the downtown, beaches and water amenities, the West End became a desirable place to live as an alternative to suburban life.

Notions of countering urban sprawl with high-rise living close to downtown lead to the building of several towers in the West End in the late 1950's including Ocean Towers (1956) and Imperial Apartments (1958), both single slab towers. The development of an entire city block, two acres in size, for Beach Towers allowed architect CBK Van Norman the latitude to plan a scheme with multiple point towers on a tiered podium which would become the largest and most prominent product of high density living at the time in Vancouver. The influence of Le Corbusier's planned cities and British post-war experiments in high-density residential communities can be seen at Beach Towers. Evident as well is brutalism, where concrete is an integral part of the architectural composition.

As a cultural landscape, the arrangement and the design of the towers is strongly linked to the two level podium with paved plazas. The upper podium at the Harwood Street level is a large rectangular plaza with concrete pavers and surface parking where two of the towers are based.

Stepping down to the lower level is a sawtooth-edged plaza raised above Beach Avenue where the third tower is located and connect to the upper level by a pedestrian bridge. Space between towers and the raised apartment floors atop tall glazed lobbies contribute to the livability on site and allow views between the towers for inland neighbours. The plaza areas are surrounded by mature landscaping composed of perimeter concrete planters, lawns and trees. Combining a multi-level parkade and recreational amenities in the podium design promoted the livability and convenience of downtown high-rise living, The parkade and recreational amenities are visible along the Beach Avenue edge and the lower level recreational amenities are expressed by plaza level skylights. Fountains and two sculptures of steel tubing and brazed copper, designed by Lionel Thomas, are found in the plaza areas.

The architectural value of Beach Towers is related to the building's design and its prominent architect. Consisting of four towers, three on the original Beach Avenue fronting site (Laurier House, Macdonald House and Douglas House, built in 1962-65) and a fourth tower (Columbus House, across Harwood Street in 1968), they were built by Block Brothers of Alberta to designs by prominent architect CBK Van Norman with project architect Ojars Kalns. Van Norman was one of British Columbia's most noted modernist architects having designed the Customs House (demolished) and Burrard Building and was a keen promoter of modern development in downtown Vancouver.

The towers vary between 18 and 19 storeys with the Beach site towers covering an entire city block. They have distinct architectural expressions based on a similar sized floor plates. Laurier and Macdonald Houses at the upper plaza level are identical and have a cruciform plan with broad expanses of glazing, projecting concave shaped balconies and full height slender shafts of exposed concrete. Douglas House, at the lower plaza level, is based on a decagon in plan, while Columbus House has an octagonal floor plate. Both have broad full height vertical faces of exposed, ribbed concrete, tapering slightly from a broad base, and concave balconies forming the alternate facades.

CHARACTER DEFINING ELEMENTS

The building's main heritage features include:

Cultural Landscape

- the complex's location occupying an entire city block
- siting and design accommodate grade change on site
- configuration of podium base with point towers above and surrounding landscaping
- use of podium for paved plazas, parkade, surface parking and recreational amenities
- arrangement of towers to take advantage of views beneath and between structures
- extensive plazas with concrete pavers, concrete and metal railings
- integrated landscaping with perimeter concrete planters and surrounding lawns and trees
- skylights which express the lower level recreational facilities
- Lionel Thomas copper and steel sculptures and fountains

Architecture

- use of two distinct expressions of tower forms
- composition of tower forms emphasizing vertical concrete shafts with intervening
- pattern of concave balconies
- materials and colour, textured ribbed concrete, gold anodized aluminum window frames
- - lower levels with sawtooth edge visible along Beach Avenue

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