

History of Site

Heritage Architect's Statement of Significance

Beach Towers is located in Vancouver's West End on a prominent site overlooking English Bay. Architecturally, it is a good example of late modern high-rise residential architecture and urban planning, consisting of three towers occupying an entire city block with a parkade base, recreational amenities and plazas. A fourth tower was built later on a site directly across Harwood Street and is part of the Beach Towers complex. 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.

Beach Towers is of heritage value for its contribution to the development of the West End, for its contribution to urban planning and for its architectural design.

In the 1950's much of the West End of Vancouver was being rebuilt with low-rise apartment buildings. These were gradually replacing many of the older single family houses in what was once Vancouver's premier residential neighbourhood. Due to its proximity to the downtown, beaches and water amenities, the West End became a desirable place for high-rise residential buildings when zoning changes allowed more density in the 1960's. 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 1960's, of which Beach Towers was the largest development. As such Beach Towers shows the evolution of the city's West End and its increasing densification.

The influence of European and British post war architecture, particularly experiments in high density residential communities, incorporating modern amenities can be seen at Beach Towers. Evident as well is brutalism, where concrete is expressed as part of the architectural composition.

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. Van Norman was one of British Columbia's most noted modernist architects having designed the Customs House (demolished), and Burrard Building.

The towers vary between 19 and 12 storeys with the Beach site towers

covering an entire city block. The sloping nature of the site causes the lower levels of parking and recreational amenities to be expressed in a sawtooth profile of the building plaza visible along Beach Avenue.

The towers have two distinct architectural expressions based on similar sized floor plates. Laurier and Macdonald Houses 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 and Columbus Houses are similar in exterior expression but differ in floor plate shape, Douglas being based on a pentagon and Columbus on 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. Extensive plaza areas, elevated walkways and landscaping and surface parking occupy the majority of the site. Views between the towers are features of the projects design.

Character Defining Elements

- The building's main heritage features include:
- the complex's location occupying an entire city block
- lower levels with sawtooth edge visible along Beach Ave.
- extensive plazas and landscaping including perimeter planting
- arrangement of towers to take advantage of views between the structures
- 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 incorporation of bronze sculptures and fountains
- skylights which express the lower level recreational facilities

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Beach Towers Rezoning Application
1600 Beach Avenue & 1651 Harwood Street, Vancouver BC
November 22, 2010