

Back To The Future

Six-Storey Wood Frame Construction Comes of Age... Again

It's been more than half a decade since British Columbia gave the green light for six-storey wood frame construction. Although the new building code raised plenty of eyebrows – and even some ire – when it was introduced in 2009, today an increasing number of developers are embracing the opportunities it creates.

One early adopter was Adera, a Vancouver-based developer long known for its commitment to cutting-edge green building techniques. Adera's Sail at UBC was the first true six-storey wood frame residence on campus. It was awarded gold for Best Low-Rise Residential in Vancouver/North Shore at the Urban Development Institute's 2014 Awards for Excellence as well as Best Multi-Family Low-Rise Development in BC at the 2013 Georgie Awards. The company's newest UBC project, Prodigy, is well under construction and sales are brisk.

More Bang for the Buck

So what's the appeal of wood? For most homebuyers, a prime consideration is the affordability factor.

"A six-storey concrete building will typically cost an additional \$60 to \$70 per square foot when compared to an equivalent suite in a wood-frame building – which can add up very quickly," said Al Poettcker, CEO and president of UBC Properties Trust (UBCPT). "Wood frame is an excellent



way to gain 50 per cent more density without significantly changing the final cost to the buyer."

He added that wood frame buildings provide an interesting aesthetic benefit.

"Six-storey wood frame buildings are not allowed to have any combustible materials on the façades," he said. "So developers use materials such as brick, metal or fibre cement siding like HardiPlank. Often when people stand outside, they can't tell it's a wood frame building."

Quiet Time

"Because the weight of two extra storeys requires more support, there is a lot more wood mass in a six-storey wood frame," Poettcker said. "So these buildings tend to be quieter."

Taking this concept a step further, Adera's newest six-storey wood frame – The Shore in North Vancouver's

Capilano neighbourhood – has introduced advanced acoustic technology to reduce sound transmission even more.

"People often think a concrete building is quieter than wood frame," said Eric Andreasen, Adera's vice president of marketing and sales. "In fact, an independent sound engineer conducted field tests and confirmed this new system has made The Shore the highest performing wood frame building in the province – probably in Canada – equal to or even better than concrete."

Safe and Sustainable

Michael Geller, architect, developer and well-known advocate for innovation in housing, acknowledges that when the legislation was first introduced, many had concerns about wood's shrinkage over time. "People wondered if it would be exacerbated

by adding two extra floors," he says. "Now we're seeing ever increasing use of pre-fab joists and laminated wood products, so it's no longer an issue."

As a bonus, many of these products also reduce waste because they are made from young, renewable wood.

And here's something many consumers aren't aware of – but should be. A five- or six-storey residential building is subject to stricter fire suppression regulations than a building of four storeys or less.

"Fires rarely happen during construction," Poettcker stressed. "But developers have definitely responded with stricter protocols to deal with this outside possibility."

Vision and History

Geller said he's thrilled with the rapidly increasing number of six-storey wood frame buildings now found throughout the Lower Mainland. "It is a testament to the legitimacy of this construction approach that Ontario has recently copied BC by allowing six-storey wood frame construction," he said.

"People have forgotten that many of Vancouver's original buildings were six-storey, heavy timber construction – just walk through neighbourhoods like Gastown and you'll see them still there. So you could say it's like we're going back to the future."