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Higher Standards

Defining Okanagan Architecture

The Evolution of Okanagan Architecture

WHEN I FIRST ARRIVED IN THE VALLEY IN 1992, I WAS VERY CURIOUS TO DISCOVER QUINTESSENTIAL OKANAGAN-STYLE HOME ARCHITECTURE - NOT DEFINED BY MANSIONS, BUT RATHER THE TYPICAL RESIDENCE.

I thought: from Summerland south, it's got to be some type of desert-influenced, southwest style, not terribly unlike adobe abodes in New Mexico. I always did love that pueblo-style of home. It seemed to make great eco-sense, was suitable for this type of climate -made of earth-like material, cool in the summer, warm in the winter inside.

A lot of people seem to forget, even those that live here, that while our climate gets hot in the summer, it can be very cold in the winter. It's like that in New Mexico. And guess what? Even in **Osoyoos** there can be below freezing temperatures and snow in

the winter. I know, because I have been there in December.

From Summerland to perhaps Vernon, I could understand the general building style to be fairly standard. You know - bungalow - aside from larger manses, or perhaps just non-descript. Perhaps in this zone, it is understandable that there would be a confusion of architecture, or no style at all at the proletarian level. Function over form, or if style was an issue and affordable, you could do whatever you wanted.

The climate in this zone becomes slowly more temperate in the summer, a little colder in the winter. The veg-

etation increases – more deciduous trees, perhaps a little more rainfall.

I envisioned neighbourhoods of homes that you might find in any town or city – Pleasantville.

The exceptions would be homes near the lake or up in the hills. If they were on or near the lake, I would expect cottage-like dwellings; up in the hills like above Peachland, among the Ponderosa pines, more Pan-Abode style houses.

Vernon north: I was envisioning farm house style in farmland, and then travelling towards the Shuswap, as it becomes more forested, more wooden structures with shingled roofs.

I began my search to find quintessential styles for each of my self-defined Okanagan areas.

Aside from the rather rude shock of discovering that Summerland was a Tudor town (even though I understood the influence of English remittance folks), I did find in the south Valley some homes that seemed to me quite definitive for this area and climate. They are mostly older flat-top cement structures that look like they have been built from the 30s to the 50s – kind of a cross between Art Deco and pueblo.

They are attractive, practical, climate and land friendly and look like they can survive a long time. They do not impose themselves upon the landscape but rather blend in with it.

I found in my middle zone (Summerland to Vernon) some most attractive lakeside abodes that met my expectations – pleasant, spacious wooden homes with large windows and decks, designed for the leisurely

life of living on the water.

In the hills, especially above Peachland, I found split-level wooden residences, with stunning views, built into hills and surrounded by tiered landscaping. Very appropriate.

In the areas not close to lake or mountain, I found architectural style to be pretty mundane, if sometimes pleasant. Non-descript bungalows, homes of every style that you can think of, that made no particular sense when it came to the landscape or the climate. Lots of manufactured building materials used in a way that shouted out economy over style. Suburbs that reminded me of Surrey.

There were some notable exceptions, among them some distinctive older homes in Summerland and Penticton built of local river rock.

I found driving through Kelowna on Highway 97 to be abysmal, even back in 1992. I was disparaged at the expanding mall, box-store style development encroaching the landscape.

While there were some very pleasant residential pockets in Kelowna – along Abbott Street and in the Mission, I still could not pinpoint a distinctive home style.

I found the Grand Okanagan, the way it was then, and certain homes and condo developments, to be particularly interesting. They were built in a vaguely southwestern style – with their stucco walls and shades of pink and aqua – but not really. Obviously, builders were trying to make a regional architectural statement, which unfortunately was more derivative than successful.

Vernon did not surprise me with its army bungalows; Armstrong and Enderby had their fair shares of country-style homes and barns. Still not anything particularly unique.

The Evolution of Distinctive Design

In the last few years, however, I have noticed a major movement towards definitive Okanagan architectural styles. All of the writers in this issue of Okanagan Home seem to agree.

In the south, I really noticed this at Spirit Ridge, near Osoyoos and surrounding the N'kmip Winery, which is a new resort-residence complex. Its villas and apartment-style units are designed in a very tasteful Southwestern style, but are not tacky. Inside the villas, the décor is elegant, employing mostly real materials. Casa del Lago is an affordable community of villas and condos that is built in a general desert-inspired manner – not too blatantly Santa Fe.

Peachland is finally understanding that it is the White Rock or Carmel of the Valley, and so it should be. While living there, I always thought this lakeside town was an undiscovered jewel with first-class potential. Other people have discovered it since, and the development going on along Beach Avenue appears to be quite tasteful and in keeping with the low-key lakeside theme.

What has impressed me the most about Kelowna is Woodland Hills, which has won many Tommie awards. I visited there and it reminded me of Shaughnessy in Vancouver. Beautifully appointed, indi-

vidually designed homes, incorporating natural materials. The landscaping is very natural, employing indigenous low-maintenance plants. While these are multi-million dollar homes, builders of more affordable houses and condo complexes are taking note and incorporating similar elements into their designs.

Even the Craftsman style of residence that has been springing up in the Okanagan, in spite of the fact that it is too popular, impresses me. The homes built in this manner may look like they belong on the New England sea coast in a resort town, but as long as natural materials and real architectural features are incorporated, and each individual unit has its own separate appeal, I approve.

Making Architectural Progress

The architectural progress we are making in the Okanagan is surely a sign of more discriminating people from urban environments moving into the Valley for its lifestyle. They have the taste and the money to ask for what they want and expect. We can only hope there will be trickle-down architectural influences from the well-designed mansions in the execution of more affordable housing developments.

Market demand, the new urgent green movement, and the recent understanding of where we live, have pushed our architectural standards to a higher level. We are approaching a definitive Okanagan architectural vernacular that is finally in tune with our unique environment and climate.

■ DONA STURMANIS