

RECONCILIATION IN ACTION

How Indigenous-led Development in Vancouver Is Redefining Housing in B.C.

By Glenn Miller

SUMMARY

This article explores the impact of three First Nations in Vancouver that are bringing new energy to the development of housing in Canada's most expensive city. The Squamish Nation is building Señákw, located on reserve land in the heart of Vancouver. Poised to be Canada's largest rental community, the development is leveraging the largest loan ever made by CMHC in partnership with Westbank Corporation. Also in Vancouver, the MST Partnership, comprising the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, is moving ahead with two large mixed-use housing projects. The most advanced, the Heather Lands, in partnership with the provincial government – is utilizing an 'attainable ownership' model that the government hopes to expand to the entire province. MST already ranks as the largest Indigenous-led developer in the country.

SOMMAIRE

Cet article explore l'impact de trois Premières Nations de Vancouver qui apportent une nouvelle énergie au développement du logement dans la ville la plus chère du Canada. La Nation Squamish construit Señákw, situé sur des terres de réserve au cœur de Vancouver. Ce projet, qui devrait devenir la plus grande communauté locative du Canada, a reçu le plus gros prêt jamais accordé par la SCHL, en partenariat avec la Westbank Corporation. Toujours à Vancouver, le Partenariat MST, qui regroupe les Nations Musqueam, Squamish et Tsleil-Waututh, va de l'avant avec deux grands projets de logements à usage mixte. Le plus avancé, Heather Lands, en partenariat avec le gouvernement provincial, utilise un modèle de « propriété accessible » que le gouvernement espère étendre à l'ensemble de la province. MST est déjà le plus grand promoteur autochtone du pays.

INTRODUCTION

The Squamish Nation lost its traditional territory in 1877, when the government established the Kitsilano Indian Reserve. This was followed by years of industrial development in False Creek that obliterated visible signs of the village where the Squamish peoples had fished, traded, and gathered since before recorded time. Then, a full century after the remaining Indigenous residents and their possessions had been forcibly shipped away on a barge in 1913, and more than two decades after a drawn-out, but ultimately successful legal challenge, 10.5 acres of remaining reserve land were finally returned to the Squamish Nation in 2003.

But it would take until September 2022 for the wheels of justice to turn full circle, when Squamish Council Chairperson Khelsilem and other leaders gathered on the site of the former village for a ground-breaking ceremony to launch a new community called Señákw. The name translates as 'the place inside the head of False Creek.' Standing next to Prime Minister Trudeau, Khelsilem called the moment "an historic achievement for the Squamish Nation."

"Initiatives like these are reconciliation in action," Trudeau said. Marc Miller, Trudeau's minister of Crown-Indigenous relations is on the record saying, "it is time to give land back."

CANADA'S LARGEST NEW RENTAL DEVELOPMENT

Believed to be the largest Indigenous-led housing project in Canadian history, Señákw's 11 towers will range in height from 12 to 58 storeys. With the benefit a \$1.4-billion loan from the Canada

Mortgage and Housing Corporation – CMHC's largest ever – to help finance 2,950 units of rental apartments over the first two phases, 590 of which (20 per cent) are 'affordable rental,' the plan is to construct 6,000 rental units by 2030. Although this much needed rental housing will be open to all, 250 apartments are reserved for members of the Squamish Nation. More than 60 per cent of these units will be family-friendly two- and three-bedroom apartments, with relatively few parking spaces.

More than 60 per cent of Señákw is given over to the public realm, which includes parks, walking paths, commercial space and other amenities to promote a transit-friendly environment. The mixed-use project is led by Nch'kaý Development Corporation, the economic development arm of the Squamish Nation. In partnership with Westbank, one of B.C.'s best-known developers, Señákw expects to achieve net-zero status, in part by recovering sewer heat from the City's nearby sanitary sewer trunk main as a low-carbon source of thermal energy to generate heating and cooling. Creative Energy, Westbank's subsidiary in charge of the district energy component, forecasts that the WET (waste energy transfer) technology will eliminate 120,000 tonnes of GHG emissions over a 30-year period.

Señákw is on reserve lands, so the project is not subject to regulation by the City of Vancouver. Nonetheless, a 120-year agreement covering access to municipal services such as water, storm and sanitary sewers is in place, and "development will be constructed in accordance with (Step 3 of) the B.C. Building Code, ... the City of Vancouver's (fire safety) standards." The City would

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Señákw conceptual rendering by Westbank Projects Corp. Source: senakw.com.

normally require the developer to consult with neighbours, but Señákw is proceeding independently. This has not been without controversy, with complaints about the level of density and a controversial access road. A clear benefit, however, is the speed with which the project has moved ahead, with three distinctively designed towers already visible on the skyline.

‘ATTAINABLE OWNERSHIP’ – A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO AFFORDABILITY

Also in Vancouver, the MST Partnership is working to redevelop several additional housing projects on shared traditional territory. The most advanced is in partnership with the province, a 21-acre property called the Heather Lands, a site formerly occupied by the RCMP. A second project, the Jericho Lands, is a 90-acre site previously used by the Department of National Defense.

The MST Partnership, comprising the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, was established in 2014, following a positive experience working together to represent Indigenous interests during the 2010 Olympics. Planning for the Heather Lands has been a 50-50 joint venture for MST with Canada Lands Corporation (CLC), a self-financing Crown corporation specializing in acquiring and integrating surplus federal lands into the community. Agreements have been reached for MST to acquire the CLC interest in these lands, so that the Nations can again hold them in perpetuity and use

them to advance the economic and cultural sustainability of their people. MST’s development partner for the Heather Lands is the Aquilini Group, which has a successful track record partnering with First Nations in the region.

In October 2024, the Province of BC and MST announced a partnership to develop all 2,600 homes on the Heather Lands under the Attainable Housing Initiative (AHI). Under a 60/40 purchase financing arrangement, ‘middle income earners’ will be eligible to purchase strata units on a 99-year lease for 60 per cent of the market value with a five per cent down payment. The province will initially cover the remaining 40 per cent of the market price with the land owner and developer. The balance will then be repaid by the buyer to the province either when the owner sells an AHI unit or after 25 years from the purchase date, whichever comes first. Strict rules will prevent profiteering.

Comprehensive planning of the Heather Lands site began in 2016, jointly overseen with the City of Vancouver’s planning department. According to Elisa Campbell, Vice President, Real Estate (West Region) with CLC, a unique part of the process, and one that she finds most personally rewarding, is on-going collaboration between CLC’s design team and four cultural liaison advisors appointed by MST and CLC. These individuals bring their cumulative cultural knowledge to advise on the background and complex history of the Heather Lands and other properties.



Heather Lands conceptual illustration. Rendering: MST Partnership and Canada Lands Company.

One of those advisors is Sxeláltenaat-Adrienne Charlie from the Squamish Nation. Sxeláltenaat is the granddaughter of Jericho Charlie, who famously built a 300-foot potlatch house on the Jericho lands. She has been involved with MST and CLC since late 2019, pointing out that the unique policy statement created for the Heather Lands is the first to integrate a cultural interpretive plan as a way to guide the design process. A key purpose of the MST collaboration, she says, is to “rekindle relationships that overcome negative mindsets established through the process of colonialization that treated the Nations as separate peoples.”

A practical example of how cultural interpretation affects design is advice regarding the orientation of buildings to link pathways to important views, north to the mountains and south to the river. Commenting on the role of high-rise housing in ‘building community,’ Adrienne Charlie explains that the Indigenous word for ‘long’ (as in longhouse) also means ‘tall,’ so developing the lands with high rises is simply ‘a modern take on an ancient idea.’

BUILDING HOUSING, BUT ALSO KNOWLEDGE AND CAPACITY FOR THE FUTURE

The housing and mixed-use projects described in this article represent a turning point in the role of Indigenous enterprise in Vancouver, B.C. – and quite possibly throughout Canada. CLC’s Elisa Campbell notes that while “All First Nations agreements are different, Canada Lands is actively bringing the learnings from the Vancouver experience to CLC projects across Canada.”

Five ways that Indigenous-led development is making a difference:

- First Nations are having to buy back lands that were taken from them, but are nevertheless willing to “share the wealth for the greater good of the community.”
- Land holdings of some 160 acres in development valued at more than \$2B makes the MST Partnership one of the largest developers in Canada.



The 90-acre Jericho Lands redevelopment featuring 13,000 homes will house up to 24,000 residents, with retail, restaurants, and office and industrial space is a joint venture between MST Development Corporation and Canada Lands Company. Around 20 per cent of the housing on the site – approximately 2,600 units – will be set aside for social housing, with a further 1,300 units for secured-market and below-market rental housing. Rendering: Revery Architecture (Tandem Studios).

- These Indigenous-led projects represent much-needed housing not just for members of the Nations but also for the wider community.
- Putting Indigenous principles into practice is showing the way for non-Indigenous organizations, including federal departments and agencies, to integrate longer-term thinking into their business practices.
- First Nations-led projects are building housing but are also focused on building development capacity within the Indigenous community. The role being played by non-Indigenous senior staffers with the MST Partnership in accelerating the transfer of knowledge within the corporation should not be overlooked. “If we do our jobs right,” says one, “we will work our way out of a job.”

Glenn Miller FCIP is a planner based in Toronto. He is also a member of the *Plan Canada* editorial committee. With thanks to team members from Nch’kay Development Corporation, the MST Partnership, and Canada Lands Company who provided information for this article. 🍌

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