



WESTCOAST HOMES

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INNOVATION

Rowhouses memorialize one man's passion

The late Art Cowie championed a three-residence addition to a well-travelled intersection



PHOTOS BY GLENN BAGLO/PNG

The rowhouses are located at the northwest corner of Cambie and 33rd -- and at the intersection of regulator caution and developer enthusiasm.

Cowie's vision came to fruition with fee-simple project

BY CLAUDIA KWAN

He and his wife Cathy were originally supposed to move into one of the three rowhouses, but it now feels too big; she's now put it on the market for \$1.988 million. The two other rowhouses are also being sold for comparable prices.

Cathy also smiles when she recounts why her husband was so persistent about fee-simple housing. "Art was very innovative ... before his time, really," she says.

In addition to being a test case for fee-simple housing, Cowie decided to add one bedroom unit above the garages for the rowhouses, meaning there are now six homes on the 80 x 125 lot, instead of just one single family home. The combination of fee-simple and the laneway homes is believed to be a first in Canada. Cowie was intent on adding housing density to the Cambie corridor to allow more people to live in the city.

"Art said 'we need this in Vancouver, Vancouver needs this. Everybody is doing the same thing, we need innovative approaches to housing.'"

Situated across from Queen Elizabeth Park, the flatroofed homes are clad in brick and grey siding. They are quite contemporary looking compared to their neighbours.

The Cowies' townhouse is the first of the three to be completed. A small front yard adds some greenery to Cambie Street before visitors walk in the living room. A spacious hallway brings you to an expansive kitchen with microwave and oven inset into the wall, and cabinets that take full advantage of the high ceilings.

If you backtrack slightly, you'll have no trouble spotting the three-storey staircase that leads you to the other floors. A shaft of light streams down from the skylight overhead, making the flat metal railing and glass safety barrier sparkle in the sunshine. The staircase space is big enough to allow installation of an elevator as occupants age.

The master bedroom, two guest bedrooms, and a laundry room are on the second floor. More light spills through windows in the hallway; the triple-paneled glass is surprisingly effective at screening out traffic noise.

A large open room on the third floor could be used as a gym, home theatre, or entertainment space with a wet bar. It's situated immediately beside the rooftop deck.

A fresh air-heat exchange system allows for an up to 30 per cent reduction in energy costs, and the home is pre-wired for solar panels.



actually is, thanks to the 11-foot ceilings and liberal use of standard and transom windows. A lofted area above a linen closet adds lots of storage, and could eventually be converted into a

sleeping nook, while a neatly planned kitchen includes a tiny dishwasher. The bathroom is huge for a home this size, and noise from the garage is minimal, thanks to a unique roll up door.

Cathy Cowie rejects the idea that Art Cowie didn't live to see his dream come true. "He got to see the project approved, and construction start," she says. "He had a vision that so many households could be improved - this is the start."

The city's legal department believes the province should amend the Land

uses act to allow party wall agreements to be permanently attached to a property; the province doesn't agree this is necessary.

Other fee-simple townhome projects have been built in Burnaby, Coquitlam, and Langley over the past three decades without significant legal disputes arising over the party wall.

Until such a change goes through, Anton says it is unlikely city hall will permit other fee-simple rowhouses to proceed in Vancouver.

Art Cowie thought the fee-simple rowhouse would appeal to households who want the convenience of a multi-residence property - safety, proximity to the urban lifestyle - but who don't want their autonomy limited.

Initial construction costs are higher because each home requires its own hookups for water and sewer access, but supporters say the price tag is offset by the absence of maintenance fees.

rowhouses. City hall insisted on the installation of two walls between each residence, separated by a one-inch gap. Builder MYK Construction, a co-developer, estimates that move added \$250,000 in costs, factoring in additional concrete and steel stabilization measures required to deal with increased weight.

He gave up his seat in the Legislature in 1993 to allow now-Premier Gordon Campbell to run. He never gave up on bringing progressive housing ideas to the attention of the public and policymakers.

In the new millennium, Cowie began a protracted battle to bring fee-simple rowhouses to the City of Vancouver. It's a battle that continues, even though he died last year at the age of 75 from respiratory failure, after a short battle with ALS.

Any agreements between two owners on how to settle issues to do with his or her property, and must be renegotiated between the new owner and the neighbour.

"It's not good public policy to build a legal entity with an uncertain legal future. The City of Vancouver believes it's better to have a legally binding structure."

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