

The Victoria Townhomes

Seattle, Washington

Project Type:
Residential

Case No:
C032005

Year:
2002



SUMMARY

Located next to the Victoria, an 80-year-old vintage apartment building turned condominium, the Victoria Townhomes are a new addition to the prestigious Queen Anne Hill neighborhood of Seattle. Intended as a solution to the parking problem at the Victoria, the ten Victoria Townhomes were constructed atop a partially underground parking structure that provides parking for residents of both buildings. An urban infill project, the townhomes set the standards for a new design review process in Seattle and reflect the historical architecture of the neighborhood as well as the design of the original building.

FEATURES

- Urban infill
 - Solution to parking problem in adjacent building
 - Set design review standards in Seattle
 - Innovative design reflects surrounding historic architecture
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SPECIAL FEATURES

- Urban infill
- Solution to parking problem in adjacent building
- Set design review standards in Seattle
- Innovative design reflects surrounding historic architecture

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GENERAL AND SITE DESCRIPTION

For more than 80 years, the Victoria, on top of Queen Anne Hill, has been one of Seattle's most prestigious residential addresses. The property consists of two parts: the original building, now called the Victoria Condominiums, and the new section called the Victoria Townhomes, which sits on top of an underground parking garage that serves both buildings. The conversion of the condominiums and the construction of the new townhomes in 1998 helped to set new standards for the design review process in Seattle. It also demonstrated how creative urban infill projects not only can reflect the historic architecture of a neighborhood, but also can bring new economic life to an existing property.

The structure of Victoria Condominiums was designed in 1921 by famed architect John Graham, who liked the project so much that he intended to reside there himself. The building takes up most of a full city block and is situated on the foundation of a hospital that had started to be built, but was never completed. Located at the crest of the hill on West Highland Drive, the property looks out over downtown Seattle, Elliott Bay, and the Space Needle.

The building was originally built as luxury apartments for wealthy Seattle residents who wanted all of the luxuries of a private home without the upkeep of a house. It included design features for maids and servants, such as a separate rear door for each apartment, basement-level maids' quarters, and a small, closet-sized space near each rear entry with a door opening into the apartment as well as a door accessible from the corridor. These small spaces were used for deliveries of milk, groceries, and fresh laundry, and for the discrete removal of trash. They are still in use today as the building management removes all garbage and recycling in this manner.

Public areas of the building were finished at a very high quality level, with elaborately painted plaster moldings, Tennessee marble entry vestibules, and gold-leaf, hand-painted crests on the outside of each unit's main door. Residents also had use of custom-engraved stationery that promoted the exclusivity of this address.

In 1972, an ownership group led by Bruce C. Lorig (founder of Lorig Associates, LLC) purchased the Victoria as an investment, and owned and managed it for many years thereafter. In 1987, Lorig invested \$1 million in upgrading the building's systems, installing new electrical and plumbing throughout. A major fire broke out near the end of the project, damaging 24 units in the west wing. The reconstruction of that wing following the fire led to a study of the potential for converting the entire building into condominiums, and sales were completed in 1999.

The Victoria Condominiums and the Victoria Townhomes are a central element of the Highland Drive area on top of Queen Anne Hill, which is one of Seattle's most sought-after neighborhoods due to its proximity to downtown and its spectacular views. To the north of the Victoria block are the St. Anne's Catholic elementary, middle school, and convent buildings while to the east and west lie small, two- and three-story brick apartment buildings as well as large single-family homes.

DEVELOPMENT AND APPROVAL PROCESS

The development of the Victoria Townhomes came about as a solution to a parking problem: in order for the original Victoria to be converted into condominiums, sufficient assigned parking had to be provided. For many years, only 49 individual garages had been squeezed onto the strip of land at the back of the original building. Built to accommodate the smaller cars of the 1920s and 1930s, these garages were difficult to navigate with contemporary automobiles. Also, there were not enough spaces to meet current code and market requirements of two parking spaces per condominium unit.

Lorig studied a variety of alternatives for solving the parking problem and ultimately designed a two-level underground structure, with a separate entrance for each level in order to accommodate grade changes. To help offset the cost of building underground parking, he elected to build the townhomes atop the structured parking. The number of townhomes constructed (ten) was determined primarily by the number of extra parking spaces available beyond those needed for the condominiums. The garage contains a total of 128 spaces.

The 0.49-acre (0.19-hectare) townhome site was particularly challenging for this design as it was originally zoned for two mid-rise (six-story) apartment buildings. As noted by the project's architect, James Bodoia of Mithun Architects, mid-rise buildings were "not the right fit for the neighborhood." This block is a key transition point between the more dense apartment buildings to the east and the large, elegant single-family homes to the west, so a more subtle design was needed even if it meant a zoning change.

The developer and architect demonstrated to the Seattle design review committee the contrast between what the current residential zoning would allow and what they envisioned for a less dense design. They presented full renderings of six-story apartment buildings that would comply with the zoning. Then they

presented renderings of the townhomes and the parking garage and convinced the committee that the necessary zoning changes for that design were worthwhile. The committee granted seven variances that included trading the full height of the previous zoning for more lot coverage, allowing for smaller setbacks, and permitting them to control landscaping in the right-of-way between the buildings and the street. According to Bodoia, the townhomes are now referenced as a standard for other projects undergoing the design review process in Seattle.

PLANNING AND DESIGN

The Victoria Townhomes were designed to blend in with and play off of the historic architecture of the neighborhood, particularly that of the adjacent Victoria Condominiums. The pitched roofs define the individual units and are architecturally related to the rooflines of the convent buildings and single-family homes across the street. Design details such as medallions set into the exposed concrete foundation were copied from the Victoria Condominium building, creating a visual link between the two structures.

The sloped site allowed for two levels of partially below-grade parking, thereby raising the first-floor level of the townhomes to four to six feet (0.37 to 1.8 meters) above the street. This elevation provides more privacy for the residents as well as greater light to come in through each unit's expansive windows. The landscape architect, Atelier, planted a layered scheme in the 20-foot (six-meter) right-of-way between the townhomes and the street; the plantings give one the impression that they have been there for many years.

The zoning variance obtained by the developer enabled the homes to be built to the edge of the sidewalk, thereby maximizing each home's space on the tight lot. A tall, wrought-iron fence enclosing the homes provides privacy, while stairs to each entry door create a physical and visual separation from the street. This type of entry gives the townhomes "an East Coast brownstone feel," states Laura Reynolds of Lorig Associates, while still being very functional.

At the top of each stairway and along each unit's front wall are elegant porches, complete with extensive plantings. The lush greenery and seasonal flowers on the elevated porches create both a sense of privacy for the residents as well as natural decoration for passersby. The townhomes blend in so well with their surroundings that some neighborhood residents thought they were a renovation project rather than new construction.

Inside, the two-level homes range in size from 2,000 to 2,400 square feet (186 to 223 square meters). One of the main design concepts focused on the flow of space on the first floor. To ensure that the flow of traffic does not "dead end" in the kitchen, a central hallway links the main rooms from the front living room through the dining area and into the kitchen. Pillars define the entry foyer, with living and dining areas providing an open and airy feel. Ten-foot-high (three-meter-high) ceilings, large windows, and hardwood floors on the main level also tie the spaces together.

All of the townhomes feature fireplaces, large kitchens with eating areas, recessed lighting, first-floor powder rooms, mudrooms/laundry rooms, and outdoor patios. On the second floor, nine-foot (2.7-meter) ceilings contribute to the spacious feel of the three bedrooms and two bathrooms. Each master suite has a large bathroom with a separate tub and shower and toilet room, and the walk-in closets are large. The project budget included an allowance for each tenant to install a closet organization system.

The owners of two of the townhomes elected to finish the third floor of their units, creating loft spaces suitable for an office or an extra guest bedroom.

The underground parking garage can be easily accessed at each level. Condominium residents park on the lower level and can access their building through a short, canopied passageway between the two buildings, while townhome residents enjoy semiprivate stairways from the parking level to their homes. Each stairway serves two to three units, with separate locking systems for security purposes. Careful consideration was given to the number and placement of driveways and entrance locations, including attention to grading in order to meet requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The parking garage also holds the mechanical rough-in for air conditioning for each townhome unit, in the event residents wish to install that feature at a later date.

FINANCING AND MARKETING

When the price of the townhomes was first determined, many thought that they were too expensive and that there was not a market for this type of large condominium product. While the West Highland Drive address of the original Victoria Condominium building is well known and can command premium pricing, the townhomes face Comstock Street to the north and do not have the same views. The appraisers of the project doubted that the townhomes would sell; plus, there were no similar urban infill project developments that could serve as comparables for their conclusions. This resulted in a low appraisal value and limited bank financing.

The original price for each of the ten townhomes was around \$500,000; however, their market value has more than doubled in the three years since they opened. During 2001, one of the corner units sold for \$1.1 million after a very short time on the market.

Lorig Associates, the developer, managed the marketing process for both the Victoria Condominiums as well as the townhomes. Sales of the condominiums went relatively quickly, as many existing residents opted to purchase their units. The process for selling the townhomes, however, was more involved and required more sophisticated marketing, since the project was under construction and it was more difficult to envision how elegant the townhomes would be when completed.

Lorig Associates targeted current residents of Queen Anne Hill for the townhomes, and interest in the project spread quickly once the neighbors realized what was planned, and who was planning it. Lorig Associates' reputation for building high-quality projects (particularly near this neighborhood) and Mithun Partners' reputation for innovative design both made a difference in the marketing of the project. Buyers of townhome units included the project manager of the Lorig Associates development team, a commercial airline pilot, a retiree, and a professional in international sales.

The townhomes and the condominiums were owned by a private partnership until all of the units were sold. Since Lorig and his investors had owned the land and the original building for so many years, the cost of the land for the townhomes was quite low, which helped to offset the price of building underground parking.

EXPERIENCE GAINED

- Despite the doubts of the bank and its appraisers, Lorig created a high-quality townhome development that reflects the surrounding neighborhood, proved to be highly marketable, and has grown in value over time.
- The financial feasibility of the project was based in part on the low cost of the land (due to Lorig's longtime ownership of the project) as well as a tight market for high-end condominiums in Seattle at the time the project was completed.
- The success of the Victoria Townhome project is further evidence of Lorig's theory that urban infill projects can combine creative solutions for housing with the need for sufficient parking.
- Bodoia demonstrated his ability to be sensitive to historic, traditional design elements while incorporating the kinds of updated features now required by today's residents. His blending of the past and the present lends an appearance of maturity to the townhome project.

PROJECT DATA**LAND USE INFORMATION**

| | |
|--|-----------|
| | Townhomes |
| Site area (acres/hectares) | 0.43/0.17 |
| Total dwelling units planned/completed | 10/10 |
| Gross density (units per acre/units per hectare) | 23.2/58 |

LAND USE PLAN

| | | |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| | Townhomes | |
| Use | Acres/Hectares | Percentage of Site |
| Attached residential | 0.43/0.17 | 100 |

RESIDENTIAL UNIT INFORMATION

| Unit Type | Unit Size (Square Feet/ Square Meters) | Number of Units Planned/Built | Range of Original Sales Prices |
|------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Two-bedroom townhome | 2,200/204 | 3/3 | \$490,000-505,000 |
| Three-bedroom townhome | 2,410/224 | 7/7 | \$490,000-505,000* |

*One of these units recently sold for \$1.1 million.

DEVELOPMENT COST INFORMATION

Total development costs for townhouses/garage: \$4,179,670.83

DEVELOPMENT SCHEDULE (FOR TOWNHOMES)

Site purchased: 1972 by an ownership group led by Bruce Lorig
 Owned/operated as surface garages: 1972-1998
 Planning started: 1996-1997
 Sales started: December 1997
 Construction started: 1998
 First closing: October 1998
 Project sales completed: February 1999

DIRECTIONS

From Airport: Follow signs from the airport to I-5 northbound. Drive to Seattle, and take the Mercer Street exit. At the bottom of the exit, bear right, and then curve immediately to the left along the southern edge of Lake Union onto Valley Street. Follow through several lights and underneath an overpass. Immediately after the overpass, turn right on the first side road, which ends in a T-junction at 5th Avenue. Turn right onto 5th Avenue (the Experience Music Project museum is directly in front of you: it is very big and colorful), and follow 5th to the second light. Turn left onto Roy Street. Follow Roy until a T-junction at Queen Anne Avenue. Turn right (most of the traffic turns to the right) and go sharply up the hill. Right before the top of the hill, turn left onto Highland Drive. The apartment complex is on the right, on the second block.

Driving time: 25 minutes in nonpeak traffic.

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This Development Case Study is intended as a resource for subscribers in improving the quality of future projects. Data contained herein were made available by the project's development team and constitute a report on, not an endorsement of, the project by ULI-the Urban Land Institute.

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