

# Senakw: In Vancouver the Squamish Nation shapes a sustainable village of 9,000

[Alex Bozikovic](#) Published February 2, 2021



The Senakw buildings will cover only 10 per cent of the site.

Revery Architecture/Revery Architecture

Imagine: It's 2035. As you look across False Creek toward downtown Vancouver, the two arms of a ceremonial gate rise alongside the Burrard Street Bridge. It's flanked by a dozen towers, their façades punctuated with imagery by Indigenous artists, surrounded by green landscapes and copses of red cedar.

This is a Vancouver in which the Squamish Nation has had a strong presence on the skyline – and a serious impact on the city, having built

6,000 homes in a new neighbourhood called Senakw.

Fourteen months after the proposal [was publicly introduced](#), its architecture is largely complete, and it has evolved. "The expression of Squamish values is becoming more and more clear," said Khelsilem, a Squamish councillor who is leading the project for his nation in partnership with developers Westbank. They plan to start construction late this year.

Khelsilem recently walked me through the project together with its lead architect, Venelin Kokalov of [Revery Architecture](#). It will be the largest and most prominent example yet of Indigenous city-building in North America, and its urban design breaks dramatically with convention: Senakw will be compact, green and dense, bringing public life across the site and below ground.

The four-million-square-foot complex will occupy a three-pointed, 4.7-hectare fragment of traditional Squamish land along False Creek. The site includes the area under the bridge and a strip alongside Vanier Park.

The project, which is not subject to city regulation, now consists of 12 buildings ranging from 17 to 59 storeys. Since last year, the Squamish and Westbank have added an office tower. It will include low-emissions construction and energy-efficient architecture, very few private cars and a rich mix of activities.

"Because we're in control as landowners and developers, there are many opportunities to shape different aspects of the project," said Khelsilem, who uses only one name.



Renderings of the new Senakw development by the Squamish Nation in Vancouver.

Revery Architecture/Revery Architecture

One theme is sustainability, which for the Squamish means a strong push away from private vehicles. The rapid transit terminal on the bridge, Khelsilem said, served that goal. It would link buses, a future LRT line, and a bike garage with space for 6,000 bicycles and hundreds of e-bikes available for rent. There will be “minimal” car access and parking.

All this would be marked by that gateway, to be designed by an Indigenous artist. “There’s a strong desire to express Squamish identity though the public realm,” Khelsilem said, “and through the rest of the development.”

Senakw will run on a new low-carbon district energy system. And Mr. Kokalov said that while Senakw’s tall buildings will have structures of concrete – generally a very energy-intensive material – the team is pursuing low-carbon cement, which can reduce the concrete’s carbon footprint substantially, and engineering that can significantly reduce the quantity of concrete in the floor slabs. The towers will be faced with screens that



provide shade, displaying imagery that holds significance to the Squamish: a fish, for instance, a symbol of regeneration.

Senakw will also be quite literally connected to the earth. Mr. Kokalov, who now leads the firm that was formerly Bing Thom Architects, uses a provocative phrase to describe the scheme: "Towers in the park." Usually that refers to a modernist trope of tall towers, surrounded by light and air, in a sea of green space. This idea rarely worked well in North America. The contemporary consensus in urban design, particularly in downtown Vancouver, is the opposite: Buildings should present a clear, consistent face to public streets.

The latter is generally a valid approach, but it has its limits. How would it work on a site like this, with oblong fingers stretching in three directions and a bridge overhead? In normal practice this site – if it was developed at all – would have a handful of buildings that are short and squat. Such is the case with [a planned development by Concord](#), next door on the old Molson brewery site.

The Squamish have a different view, Khelsilem said. The Senakw buildings will cover only 10 per cent of the site. And the outdoor spaces around them "will be accessible by the residents and also by the general public," he said.

Meanwhile stores, restaurants and the bike garage – reached by long, shallow ramps – will sit one level below ground. (Cars, very few of them, will get the next level down.) A series of courtyards will connect the first basement level to the open air and green space above.

All this makes a powerful and utopian vision: Roughly 9,000 people can live in very close quarters, moving on foot or e-bike or ramp from home to daycare to green space – and freely sharing their neighbourhood with guests. This, Khelsilem said, is familiar. "It's about opening up, and not alienating people," he said. "It's a village feeling, reminiscent of our

historical community here."

*We have a weekly Western Canada newsletter written by our B.C. and Alberta bureau chiefs, providing a comprehensive package of the news you need to know about the region and its place in the issues facing Canada.*

[Sign up today.](#)