



Towers of change

Auf einem schmalen Streifen Land im Herzen von Vancouver entsteht ein visionäres neues Wohnviertel – erbaut von den Nachfahren der indigenen Bevölkerung, die einst von dort vertrieben wurde.
 Von HANNAH MACREADY

ADVANCED **AUDIO**

A revolutionary new skyline is taking shape at the edge of downtown Vancouver, where three towers stand nearly finished, glassy and sky-bound. Crews move between cement trucks and scaffolding. Rebar sticks up from future foundations. The site is bordered by seawall and city but governed by neither.

This is one of the most ambitious housing projects in Canadian history. The Squamish Nation – the Indigenous peoples on whose ancestral land most of Vancouver was built – is constructing 11 towers, housing more than 6,000 rental units, on a 10.5-acre plot of land. When complete, Señákw will be the densest residential neighbourhood in Canada, rising not from city land, but from sovereign Squamish territory.

sky-bound
 • hochaufragend

scaffolding ['skæfɪldɪŋ]
 • Gerüst(e)

rebar
 • Armierungseisen

seawall
 • Hafendamm

indigenous [ɪnˈdɪdʒɪnəs]
 • indigen

ancestral land
 [ænˈsestrəl]
 • angestammtes Land

rental unit
 • Mietwohnung

plot of land
 • Grundstück

dense
 • dicht

residential neighbourhood
 • Wohnviertel

territory: sovereign ~
 ['sɒvrɪn]
 • Hoheitsgebiet

SQUAMISH

Find out more about the Squamish language here: www.spotlight-online.de/squamish

Señákw's future: this shows what the towers will look like when they are completed

Foto: Revery Architecture





Sustainable travel:
Señákw's plan
revolves around
cycling and public
transit connections

Forced to leave their homes

The buildings now at Señákw are not the first to stand on this land.

Long before Vancouver existed, this narrow **stretch** of coastline was home to the Skw̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw, known in English as the Squamish Nation. Señákw was once a **thriving** Squamish village, used by families to fish, hunt and gather near the **mouth** of False Creek. The waters were rich with **salmon**. Cedar trees lined the banks. Longhouses stood near the **shore**.

In 1913, Señákw's residents were **evicted** from the land. Squamish families were forced out, and a **barge** arrived to carry them away. As they were being ferried out into the Burrard Inlet, their homes were burned behind them.

In the decades that followed, the former village site was **absorbed** into the industrial city. Railway lines were laid. Buildings went up. The land remained **designated** as Kitsilano Indian Reserve No. 6, but the Squamish Nation was left with neither access nor control.

In the 1960s, Squamish leaders **compiled** documentation, interviewed

survivors and assembled the basis for a **court case**. In 1977, the Nation **filed** the Omnibus Trust Action against the federal government. Two decades later, Canada's **Federal Court** ruled that 10.5 acres of the original **reserve land** would be returned to the Squamish Nation in 2003. It remains one of only a few examples in Canadian history where Indigenous land taken without **consent** was formally handed back. The 2003 legal victory marked the start of a planning period for the Squamish Nation. The **precedent-setting** decision to return reserve land, while modest in size, offered a rare opportunity for the Squamish: to shape development on their own terms, under their own **jurisdiction**.

"Our past leaders, our **past hereditary chiefs**... some of them were no longer with us in that court case," said Jacob Lewis, Director of Community Development at Nch'kaý, the Squamish Nation's development corporation.

"So, for us to learn that history, to understand it... and to really honour those people that got it back for us is really significant."

stretch

- Abschnitt

thriving

- florierend

mouth

- hier: (Fluss)Mündung

salmon

- Lachs

cedar tree

- Zeder

shore

- Ufer

evict sb.

- jmdn. gewaltsam vertreiben

barge

- Lastkahn

absorb sth.

- etw. in sich aufnehmen

designate sth.

- etw. ausweisen

compile sth.

- etw. zusammenstellen

court case

- Gerichtsverfahren

file sth.

- etw. einreichen

Federal Court (N. Am.)

- Bundesgerichtshof

reserve land

- Reservat

consent

- Zustimmung

precedent-setting

- als Präzedenzfall dienend

jurisdiction

- Zuständigkeit, Gerichtsbarkeit

hereditary chief

- Häuptling durch Erbfolge

The vision

From above, the Señákw site has a strange silhouette. It's an unlikely canvas for a new neighbourhood, given the thin, almost boomerang-like shape of the land. But that limitation has pushed the design outward and upward.

When completed, Señákw will have 11 towers, the tallest of them with about 58 storeys. Nearly all the 6,000 units will be rental, an extraordinary number in a city where rental housing is both scarce and unaffordable.

The design, led by Venelin Kokalov of Revery Architecture, leans into the history and traditions of the Squamish people. Some towers are shaped to resemble longhouses. These traditional cedar buildings were burned down during the 1913 eviction. Other towers were inspired in part by the Ch'ich'iyúy Elxwíkn – also known as the Two Sisters – twin mountain peaks visible from the skyline and sacred to the Squamish and neighbouring Nations.

On several buildings, balconies curve like salmon swimming upstream, a nod to the Squamish Nation's deep relationship with water.

Creating this synergy between culture and craftsmanship took time. "At first, we came up with different ideas, and they were rejected," Kokalov said. "The geometry I was using wasn't Coast Salish. I had to learn to respect that. They gave me books, lists and guidance. I dived deeply into it. That was a huge learning curve."

Nimbyism

However, not everyone has welcomed the project. Because Señákw sits on reserve land, the land is governed by the Squamish Nation, not the city of Vancouver. This means that the building plans did not have to go through the City of Vancouver for approval.

The towers will rise within view of some of the city's wealthiest neighbourhoods, and the scale of the project has sparked negative reactions. Critics have called it too tall, too dense, too fast.



"You're in walking distance to almost everything"

Venelin Kokalov

Parking, in particular, has been an ongoing concern. Critics argue that 6,000 units with minimal parking will cause chaos in the streets. But Kokalov says the location was ideal for designing a neighbourhood around transit, not cars. "You're in walking distance to almost everything. This is the heart of Vancouver," he said. "With all the bike infrastructure, transit links... We don't believe there's a car problem."

For Jacob Lewis, those debates miss the bigger picture. "This is our land. It's a reserve," he said. "We're the governing jurisdiction." That means planning decisions, such as how tall to build, how many units to include or how to manage transit, are made by the Nation, not the city.

Unlike most megaprojects, which require political compromise, Señákw is happening fast. "We're looking at only 22 years to get to where we're at now with the three towers," said Lewis.

canvas

• Leinwand; hier: Entwurf

given

• angesichts

storey

• Stockwerk

scarce

[skeɪs]
• knapp, rar

sacred

[ˈseɪkrɪd]
• heilig

nod

• hier: Wink, Reverenz

craftsmanship

• Handwerkskunst

nimbyism (not in my backyard)

• Sankt-Florians-Prinzip

scale

• Ausmaß

spark sth.

• etw. auslösen

INFO TO GO

A style of art originating from Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, characterized by geometric designs

“There are projects in the city that are still going through planning after that long a period [of time].”

Where cooperation does come in, he said, is in the infrastructure. Water, power, transit, emergency services, those all depend on connections to the city. “That’s where we’ve really had to build those relationships,” Lewis said, pointing to the service agreement now in place with Vancouver. “It’s about how we’re going to work together in building this new community.”

Urban futures

The story of Seákw asks the question: what happens when the future of the city is shaped by people who were never meant to survive its past?

For some critics, the very idea of Indigenous-led high-rises seems like a contradiction. In 2022, a former city councillor asked the CBC how “Indigenous ways of building” could be reconciled with “high-rises made out of concrete”.



“This is our land. It’s a reserve, We’re the governing jurisdiction”

Jacob Lewis

Lewis rejects that idea. “It’s a common misconception that Indigenous people need to be frozen in time,” he said. “But part of our teachings is to use the tools that are available for you, and tools evolve... whether physical tools or technological tools.”

For much of the previous century, Indigenous nations were pushed off high-value land, denied political rights and shut out from development decisions in their own territories. Seákw’s economic model is structured to reverse that trend, creating income streams that will support housing, education and community programmes – hopefully, for generations to come. It’s clear that Indigenous nations are no longer waiting for recognition. They are building, planning and asserting control over both land and their future.

power

• hier: Strom, Elektrizität

emergency services

• Rettungsdienste

service agreement

• Leistungsvereinbarung

indigenous-led

• unter Führung der indigenen Bevölkerung

high-rise

• Hochhaus

contradiction

• Widerspruch

city councillor

• Stadtrat, Stadträtin

CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) (Can.)

• staatliche Rundfunkgesellschaft Kanadas

reconcile sth.

[ˈrekɔnsaɪl]

• etw. in Einklang bringen

concrete

[ˈkɒŋkri:t]

• Beton

misconception

[ˌmɪskənˈsepʃən]

• Irrglaube

structured

• ausgerichtet

reverse sth.

• etw. umkehren

assert sth.

• etw. geltend machen



Phase one: a model of the first three towers that will be completed by 2026



In a park: this is how the public space for gardening, gathering, art and performance is expected to look when completed