



Amica at the Gorge

by ROBIN BRUNET

Purely from a visual perspective, Amica at the Gorge is a beautiful new addition to Saanich's portfolio of buildings, a sprawling, bright complex with stately bay windows and dormers that reflect traditional architecture of the surrounding Gorge Tillicum community, and graced by an elegant porte cochere plus the addition of a restored historic general store on one end.

But more important than its appearance is its function. Amica at the Gorge is a prime example of a progressive approach to seniors living, a continuum of care model whereby the four-storey, 125,000-square-foot facility is comprised of different neighbourhoods accommodating 166 studio/bachelor and two bedroom independent, assisted, and memory care living options.

Amica at the Gorge also features a fitness centre for daily exercises, specially developed and designed for seniors; a hobby kitchen with cooking demonstrations and for open use; library with Internet; and many other amenities.

Understandably for a project of this magnitude in a relatively small neighbourhood of about 12,000 residents, Amica at the Gorge has a long and complex history. Saanich Senior Living purchased the property in 2010 and sought to redevelop it by replacing an old existing hotel with an independent living home for seniors.

Christine Lintott Architects commenced design work based on this concept, but two significant events occurred. First, a corner lot next to the site with a service station and business that had reached the end of their life became available for sale. "The owners promptly snapped it up, which gave us much more street frontage, better loading, and improved overall access," says Christine Lintott.

Second and more importantly, operating partner BayBridge Senior Living played a major role in changing the concept of the project to a continuum of care facility: specifically, three self-contained neighbourhoods with their own kitchens, courtyards, activity spaces, and residences. While the independent living neighbourhood would afford its residents freedom of mobility, the assisted living and memory care neighbourhoods would have tighter security elements plus nurses and staff.

Unfortunately, Lintott's design had already evolved to the point where the form and character of the facility had been established and the approvals stage was approaching. "We had to redesign, and it was quite a challenge to fit all the operational requirements into what we had already drafted," she says. "Along with the redesign, Saanich Senior Living and BayBridge morphed into Amica Mature Lifestyles Inc., which is well known for developing these types of seniors complexes across the country. Fortunately, under Amica, we didn't have to follow a rigid template, because its approach to design is to adopt elements of the regions in which its facilities are located."

As progressive as the Amica continuum of care model is, it took considerable effort to convince Gorge Tillicum residents that the facility would be beneficial to their community. "They were concerned that it was too dense and too tall, so this inspired us to add setbacks and other features – which ultimately won them over," says Lintott.

It also helped that the owners and architect had undertaken an extensive exploration of the community. "The bay and clustered windows, balconies, stucco, and stone base of our facility are elements derived from the lovely



character homes of the region," says Lintott. "Even though the scale of our building is big, these elements helped make it fit into its surroundings."

Construction commenced in 2015, and although a wood frame structure had initially been considered prior to the redesign, the need for non-combustible materials meant that Knappett Projects Inc. was tasked with creating a concrete building.

Knappett project manager David Richardson and his crew faced several challenges. First, the complicated building form didn't lend itself easily to construction sequencing, and with roads on two sides of the site and a waterway and single family homes on the other two sides, little room was available for lay up or staging.

Site conditions were also less than favourable. "It consisted of blue clay," says Clint Plett, associate at RJC Engineers. "So instead of using traditional footings a continuous raft slab [in some areas up to four-feet thick] had to be created, which understandably added to the cost of the project."

The size of the building necessitated phased construction, "and we relied on careful scheduling and just-in-time deliveries due to the lack of laydown space," says Plett.

The top floor of Amica at the Gorge was engineered steel stud and the pitched roof consisted of trusses. "We did traditional framing rather than concrete in order to reduce the weight, in consideration of the large size of our raft slab," explains Plett.

In another show of respect to the community, it was decided that the abandoned wood frame Brookman's Grocery store on site, which had first opened in 1930, would be repurposed as a coffee shop. "We addressed rot issues

and other renovation elements, then we relocated it on a new foundation at the corner of the property, where it is now the centrepiece of the development," says Plett. Timber from existing buildings next to the old grocery was saved and incorporated into the new facility.

As of July, residents had begun moving into Amica at the Gorge amid ongoing landscaping work by Small and Rossell Landscape Architects (many of whose plantings were delayed until the fall due to a hot and dry summer), and community feedback has been enthusiastic.

This, combined with the fact that almost a decade ago a different developer had proposed a modern steel and glass condominium for the site, especially pleases Lintott. "We share a real sense of pride and accomplishment with the owners and builders of Amica at the Gorge. It's a terrific concept for seniors living, and we're happy to be designing three other Amicas on Vancouver Island as we speak." **A**

LOCATION
994 Gorge Road, Saanich, B.C.

OWNER/DEVELOPER
Amica Mature Lifestyles Inc.

ARCHITECT
Christine Lintott Architects

GENERAL CONTRACTOR
Knappett Projects Inc.

STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT
RJC Engineers

MECHANICAL CONSULTANT
AME Consulting Group

ELECTRICAL CONSULTANT
AES Engineering Ltd.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT
Small and Rossell Landscape Architects

TOTAL SIZE
125,000 square feet

TOTAL COST
\$30 million