

In interior design lingo, it's called the "wow" factor -- something so special

in a home, it nearly knocks your eyes out.

It might not be a single element of the home. It could well be a combination of finishings with furnishings, or a creative use of space.

Given the typical parameters they have to work under, these design teams can do phenomenal things. The same goes for the development of communities.

The vision of the developers' in-house experts to be able to picture what a raw chunk of dirt will look like -- with homes, green space, stands of trees and water features -- continually amazes me.



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Entrance to the Mission Group Sheerwater project illustrating some of the Kelowna area's innovative designs.

After five days in the Okanagan Valley, visiting developments in and around Vernon, Lake Country, Kelowna, Westbank, Penticton and Osoyoos, co-writer Kathy McCormick and I, along with our editor Barb Livingstone were, to say the very least, more than just a little amazed and impressed with what we saw in the way of development of recreation properties.

There are the Okanagan's basic three Ws -- weather, water and wine. Everything we saw had at least one of these three elements; some had them all.

We also all agreed a fourth W had to be added -- wow.

You'll probably get a sense of this as you read today's second instalment in the Herald's Recreation and Investment Properties section of our five-part series.

It is the product of our working visit to the rapidly growing playground for Calgarians intent on experiencing the valley lifestyle.

This week's segment is on Kelowna and environs.

So, here are just some of the sites that wowed us.

Maybe it's because I'm a golfer, but when Rod Cochrane, general manager of The Golf Club at The Rise, stopped the cart near the top of the hills overlooking Okanagan Lake -- and we walked into the middle of the 18th fairway -- I immediately thought of two things.

The first was: Imagine the carry the ball would get coming off the tee heading down the sloping fairway to the green.

The second was the beauty of the hole.

There, about 1,500 feet below where we were standing was the lake and views that seemed to go forever.

Little did I know at the time, but on the east side of the lake tucked in around a bend in the shoreline -- and rubbing shoulders with the rocky, forested headlands and sheltered, sandy bays of small Ellison Provincial Park just a few kilometres south of Vernon -- was my next run-in with wow.

The Outback is being created by Derek Trethewey on land his family has owned for something like four decades.

It was, admits the president of the Okanagan Lake Development Corp. "in the middle of nowhere," but it has become a destination for Calgarians looking for an upscale getaway.

Wow starts with a boat tour around the property that has homes perched atop granite outcroppings, where you can see weather coming hours in advance to other homes tucked away from the quiet waters of South Bay.

A quick tour of one of the modern-designed and engineered residences elicited another quiet "wow."

There were floor-to-ceiling windows and perfectly-located decks with nothing below but the lake, surrounding hills and sky.

I could have stood there for hours.

In Lake Country, the 20/20 Group and Trethewey's OLDC are putting together impressive, high-priced developments with, of course, knockout views of as many as three lakes.

Then down into Kelowna.

I can't believe the amount of construction going on there and in the hills around it.

I won't spend time talking about what we saw here because much of it is described in today's articles.

Safe to say we got a unique perspective from a helicopter tour put on by The Mission Group, which has a couple of major projects ready to go.

Westbank is on the quiet side of the lake.

But in among the vineyards, wineries, orchards and cattle herds, there is also a lot going on.

Renascence, with former Calgarian Larry Kelly as chair, has three new projects set various price ranges on the books and in the ground.

A leisurely drive south from there to Penticton is the home of one of the premiere ironman competitions -- it attracted something like 2,700 athletes this year.

The wow here has to be the views from the Naramata hills where another former Calgarian Randy Kowalchuk has partnered up with Robin Agur to begin the careful, environmentally-friendly development of the benchlands into exclusive housing.

From some of the lots, you can see almost to Summerland.

Osoyoos is still largely undiscovered by Calgary baby-boomers, investors and retirees.

But that's all changing, thanks in large part to the Spirit Ridge development by the Osoyoos Indian Band that is perched in the desert hills above the town.

Opened in 2005, the multi-faceted complex has the Nk'Mip Cellars winery, cultural centre, golf course, villas, RV park and campground -- and one of the nicest outdoor dining rooms I've seen.

You're going to read a whole lot more about the place and projects we saw, but I thought I'd just give you a hint of what's to come.

Hardly mentioned the wine we taste-tested -- wow.

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