The Skyline Divide

The Skyline Divide is an adaptive reuse project that transforms a long-vacant historic bank in downtown Ferndale into a vibrant mixed-use, middle housing development. By pairing middle housing principles with a mass timber rooftop addition, the project reinvents an underutilized structure as a catalyst for community revitalization in Whatcom County. It also offers a replicable model for towns and small cities across Western Washington.

The project reimagines the "Neighborhood Commercial" or "Corner Store" model recently promoted by the Washington State Department of Commerce. Traditionally, this model brings shops and services into residential neighborhoods; here, the idea is inverted by bringing family-scale housing back into the town center. In doing so, The Skyline Divide addresses a critical regional challenge: the lack of attainable urban housing for growing families, which forces many to relocate to the suburbs—weakening downtown vitality and fueling car-dependent sprawl.

Innovation

The design embraces creativity in both program and form. A distinctive, angular rooftop addition "hovers" over the historic structure—clearly contemporary yet respectful of the building's past. Its sawtooth profile is not just aesthetic: it enhances daylighting, optimizes solar orientation, and supports water collection while showcasing the structural logic of Cross-Laminated Timber (CLT).

Inside, two unique housing experiences emerge. One unit is defined by sweeping ribbon windows overlooking the street, while the other is illuminated by clerestories tucked beneath the sawtooth roof. These units show how modest infill can still achieve architectural richness and variety.

By merging innovative programming with expressive but purposeful design, The Skyline Divide illustrates how adaptive reuse can spark creativity while addressing urgent housing and urban challenges.

Constructability

Straightforward constructability is a hallmark of the project. The historic bank is largely preserved, minimizing demolition while retaining embodied carbon. New residential units are built entirely of CLT, a material that is light, strong, and rapidly assembled through prefabrication. This reduces construction time and on-site disruption—especially important for tight downtown sites.

The addition is organized around a simple 12-foot structural bay, reducing custom detailing and enabling efficient fabrication. This rhythm produces well-proportioned living spaces

while creating predictable conditions for mechanical, electrical, and plumbing runs. All systems are consolidated along a party wall, streamlining installation and simplifying future maintenance.

This combination of prefabricated efficiency and thoughtful detailing demonstrates how innovative housing can be built simply and effectively, even within the constraints of a historic retrofit.

Sustainability

The Skyline Divide is designed to be Net-Zero ready. CLT provides both structure and finish, reducing material use and exposing the warmth of natural wood. Its assemblies support thick layers of continuous wood fiber insulation, ensuring excellent thermal performance.

High-performance windows and airtight construction further minimize energy loss, reducing loads on the heat pump HVAC system and Energy Star appliances. Together, these measures lower operational energy demand, making Net-Zero performance cost-effective and achievable.

The sawtooth roof also acts as a performance tool: it maximizes daylight, reducing reliance on artificial lighting, and directs rainwater to a collection and greywater reuse system. A flat roof area provides concealed space for equipment and potential solar arrays, ensuring adaptability.

By uniting adaptive reuse with renewable materials, efficient systems, and resource stewardship, the project positions sustainability as both ethos and outcome.

Affordability

Affordability is embedded at every level. By designing under the Residential Code rather than the Commercial Code, the project reduces regulatory hurdles and lowers costs. Each unit occupies an entire floor, offering generous layouts that meet middle housing needs without expensive customization.

CLT construction supports affordability by compressing schedules, reducing labor, and minimizing finishing work. Standardized bays avoid costly bespoke solutions, while collocated systems cut complexity and simplify repairs.

Adaptive reuse itself saves money: preserving the bank building avoids new foundations and extensive structural work while retaining embodied energy. Revitalized ground-floor commercial space provides potential rental income that offsets housing costs and supports long-term viability.

Here, affordability is not about compromise but efficiency—delivering a building that is beautiful, sustainable, and attainable for both residents and community.

Conclusion

The Skyline Divide shows how underutilized historic buildings can be reimagined as engines of renewal. Through innovative design, efficient constructability, sustainable performance, and cost-conscious strategies, the project delivers more than housing: it offers a replicable blueprint for resilient, attainable, and inspiring town center revitalization.