

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Mickadeit: Costa Mesa gets its ocean view

By [FRANK MICKADEIT](#)

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I was at a body shop in Costa Mesa's industrial Westside one morning a couple of weeks ago, cleaning out the car that had just been totaled, when I got a call from Mayor **Jim Righeimer**.

"I've got something to show you," he said, secretively.

Thinking it must be something involving the sleaze that has enveloped Costa Mesa politics, I had no problem postponing my tearful farewell to my XKR. Righeimer swung by and said we were going just a few blocks away. As we pulled away from the shop, I glanced behind us to see if he'd been followed.

We drove to the 1000 block of West 18th, still within the industrial district, and pulled over in front of a vacant lot.

A body dump?

At one end of the lot stood two narrow, detached homes, three stories high. On the roof of each home was a deck with all-weather couches and chairs. And from each deck you could see the Pacific Ocean. Ocean views. In famously landlocked Costa Mesa.

This was a *good-news* Costa Mesa story, and I'd been sucked in. Might as well make something of it.

The story of the Sea House development starts with an audacious guy, **Bryan Coggins**, who was just 30 when he bought the 1.7- acre parcel for \$5.2 million in 2008. While in an industrial area, the city had created an overlay zoning that also allowed residential to be built – should anybody dare attempt it.

Coggins grew up in Seattle and saw that city's eclectic urban housing products thrive. He started living in Costa Mesa while getting a degree in economics from Claremont-McKenna and became convinced that the Westside was ripe for innovative housing that would appeal to a demographic that had middle-class incomes but didn't want to live in the kind of subdivisions they'd grown up in.

He came up with a first-in-OC concept: a detached live-work home. He'd done a lot of research, visiting attached-unit live-work projects in Santa Ana and Aliso Viejo, for example.

But there was another amenity he thought he could bring to the market from that location. "I had a hunch that you could see the ocean from that site," he told me. In other words, he *believed* that if he built roof decks 30 feet up they'd have ocean views. But he wasn't sure. So before he bid on the property he had the owner climb 30 feet up a tree that was on the lot. Yes, he could see the ocean, the guy assured him.

Coggins then felt confident enough to outbid a half-dozen other developers. He took his plans for 33 homes to the city, which approved them. (Righeimer was on the Planning Commission, which is why he is particularly proud of the project.)

Then the economy tanked. Fortunately, Coggins had a tenant for the two old houses that were still on the lot, and he rode it out. When real estate prices started coming back last year, he was ready to sell the fully entitled project to a homebuilder, which had been his plan all along. MBK Homes bought it for a reported \$7 million and started building.

Since a soft opening last month, about 500 people have walked through the homes them and eight are sold. Buyers include an architect and a filmmaker. Prices range from the high \$500,000's to the mid \$600,000's.

Righeimer and I did a little self-guided tour through the models. Ten-foot ceilings. Hip as all get out.

The first floor is a walk-in office or studio and a garage. On the second floor, a Coldplay video was running on the 55-inch flat-screen in the living room, and in the kitchen there were a Viking appliances and a fancy water spigot over the stove so you don't have to schlep a heavy pasta pot eight feet from the sink. The bedrooms are on the third floor and, of course, they lead to our destination – the flight of stairs that goes to the rooftop deck, where we take in a sweeping view of the Pacific.

“Can you believe we're in Costa Mesa?” Righeimer says. “This is the new Westside, baby.”

He points out a large bird cruising just above our eye level, out over the old Barham Ranch, which sits between the housing project and the ocean.

“Look, a hawk!” he says.

“It's a vulture,” I said, but I got the point. OK, there are some power lines, but still. It was a sight to behold.

Mickadeit writes Mon.-Fri. Contact him at 714-796-4994 or fmickadeit@ocregister.com

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