

Why smaller housing is better for some

Surrey project offering Canada's smallest condos raises questions about minimum suite sizes, need for parking and consumer expectations

BY MICHAEL GELLER, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 13, 2013

Municipal affairs lawyer and former Vancouver social planner and alderman Jonathan Baker can be a very witty guy. I once sought a legal opinion from him after then-Vancouver planning director Ray Spaxman suggested the zoning of a site might not be valid since the zoning line had been drawn accidentally. Baker responded that zoning is like pregnancy; it's a blessed event, whether accidental or not.

Baker was an outspoken alderman back in the late 1980s, when VLC Properties' Jack Poole first proposed building affordable rental apartments on city-owned land on Drake Street.

When Poole requested that council relax minimum unit size bylaws to permit apartments less than 320 square feet, Baker predicted these apartments would be little more than coffins for their residents. Twenty years after completion of 600 Drake Street, Concert Properties (formerly VLC Properties) reports that the building - in which 64 per cent of the suites are less than 320 square feet - has one of the lowest vacancy rates in its portfolio.

I thought of Baker at last month's Housing Affordability Symposium organized by the Canadian Home Builders' Association in collaboration with BC Housing and the provincial government. A panel was discussing housing for "millennials," those born after the early 1980s, and developer Charan Sethi of Tien Sher was at the podium telling the audience about Balance, his **Surrey project that offers new condominiums priced from \$109,900.**

They will be Canada's smallest condos, in many instances less than 320 square feet. The pictures he presented illustrated careful attention to the detailed suite layouts; the kitchen area is small but functional with an under-counter washer/dryer. There are also plenty of built-in features and storage areas to maximize flexibility and livability.

Sethi told the audience that despite support from the City of Surrey, and evidence of significant demand from potential buyers, it was difficult to convince CMHC and financial institutions that they should finance the project. However, he persisted and eventually lenders came forward after being convinced **there are many buyers willing to trade off living space for affordability and a brand new home.** Soon, Balance will get underway, and I am confident it will sell well.

I realize that many people will agree with Baker and worry about the long-term health and social impacts of living in small spaces. This is by no means a new concern. Back in the 1960s, as a young architectural student in England, I learned about the Parker Morris housing standards, which established minimum room and unit sizes for government-funded public housing. When many British planners moved to Canada, they brought these and other minimum space standards with them and they have remained to this day for both social housing and market housing.

While I agree it is important to provide adequate living spaces to social housing tenants, especially families with children, I also think governments should allow smaller ownership units like those being offered in Balance. They can be particularly attractive to first-time buyers for whom neighbourhood cafes and restaurants are part of their living space.

However, in order to facilitate more "micro-suite" projects, I would recommend that municipalities consider a number of regulatory changes.

In addition to reconsidering minimum suite size bylaws, municipalities also need to revise their parking standards. Today, with the availability of numerous car-sharing programs, along with improved transit and cycling infrastructure, many people are choosing not to own a car. At Balance and an increasing number of condominium developments around Metro, it is not mandatory to buy a parking space with a unit, thus saving buyers tens of thousands of dollars.

Furthermore, at a time when we are trying to reduce greenhouse gases and traffic congestion, if anything, municipalities should be establishing maximum requirements, not minimum requirements.

The one exception is for visitor parking. Even if residents do not own cars, their visitors might. To avoid neighbourhood parking problems, it is important to ensure provision of adequate visitor parking, at least for the foreseeable future.

Municipalities also should reconsider how they establish the various permit fees charged to developers. Today, while some fees are based on building area or construction cost, most are calculated on a per-unit basis. This effectively penalizes developers and consumers of smaller suites. By calculating fees on overall building area, rather than the number of units, municipal governments can further encourage development of more affordable units.

The Housing Affordability Symposium featured both panel presentations and group discussions in a workshop setting. During these discussions, a number of participants suggested that another way to create more affordable housing is to reduce consumer expectations and demand more modest finishes and features in new homes.

For example, they asked whether new units always had to have granite and marble countertops and stainless steel appliances. Do two-bedroom apartments really need two bathrooms?

The reality is that my generation, and those who preceded me, rarely grew up in homes with granite and marble countertops. Similarly, many three-bedroom homes were less than 1,000 square feet with just one bathroom. Therefore, I find it ironic that at the same time as we decry the high cost of housing, it is difficult to find new homes with arborite countertops, or new houses less than 1,000 square feet.

I hope municipal governments will start to make the necessary changes to facilitate the development of smaller and more modest homes around Metro. And don't worry, they won't be like coffins!

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