

[Michael Geller](#) / Vancouver Courier

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Vancouver is constrained by ocean, mountains and ALR, but columnist Michael Geller says a more important issue is whether we are making the best use of the land we already have. photo Dan Toulgoet

We are often told that Vancouver is running out of land.

While the region is constrained by ocean, mountains and ALR, a more important issue is whether we are really making the best use of the land we already have. I do not believe we are.

This was the underlying theme of my [recent lecture \(http://www.vancourier.com/opinion/it-s-time-to-revisit-mayor-s-task-force-on-housing-affordability-1.2220118\)](http://www.vancourier.com/opinion/it-s-time-to-revisit-mayor-s-task-force-on-housing-affordability-1.2220118) titled “12 New Affordable Housing Ideas,” which followed up on a similar lecture just over a year ago.

There are numerous ways we can create new housing sites in the region if we just use our imagination. They range from the small — subdividing corner lots for smaller, detached single-family houses — to large-scale redevelopment of aging public and social housing projects.

When you fly over Vancouver you see a lot of green and blue, but there is also a lot of grey. The grey areas include streets, rooftops, and large swaths of industrial lands.

I see real potential in building housing on top of existing apartment buildings and other rooftops. While this might seem far-fetched, it is already happening in many places. One Toronto non-profit increased the number of units by locating modular housing units on its rooftop. It's an excellent way to conserve and upgrade older buildings, and increase housing stock.

While in the past progressive zoning bylaws separated residential and industrial development to prevent people from having to live next to noxious industry, today's industry is very different from our grandfather's industry. I foresee many opportunities for mixing new housing with uses such as high-tech industries, and even warehousing, storage, and other similar uses.

In response to those who might be concerned this will simply increase the value of industrial land, I would argue that as long as industrial development is maximized, does it really matter if land values rise because the sites can now accommodate new housing.

Many Vancouver architects and planners will remember a 1980s downtown Vancouver zoning policy that allowed residential development on the upper floors of office buildings, provided the amount of office space was increased. This “4+1+1” zoning

provision, which allowed extra housing density in return for an additional office space, might be a precedent for future development on light industrial lands.

I also see opportunities to build new housing over public infrastructure such as roads and railway lines, including key nodes along the recently acquired Arbutus Railway Corridor.

My talk also suggested other ideas.

While it's often sacrilege to suggest that we should be building on green spaces, I know of two green spaces that should be developed for housing. The first is a berm running along Sixth Avenue that was created to protect future residents of the south shore of False Creek from railway noise. Now that the railway no longer runs, we should build new market and non-market housing here.

We should also cut off a strip of the Langara Golf Course, fronting along Cambie Street for new housing. This would be very feasible, without destroying the golf course. More importantly, given the new Canada Line station and land values in the area, this would make a lot of sense.

I would also like to see more housing over water, noting the desirability of floating homes. While I acknowledge these homes must not interfere with the operations of Port Metro Vancouver, there are many locations where floating homes could be accommodated. Furthermore, they may be the best solution to address rising sea levels and climate change.

As I noted in my last column, the 2012 Mayor's Task Force on Affordable Housing included excellent recommendations on how to create more affordable housing. While the city's chief housing officer attended my talk, he has not yet called to thank me for my suggestions.

However, I hope the city will now carry out an annual review of the task force recommendations to see how much progress we are making.

I also urge city planners to prepare an overall planning framework for the city, including new procedures to determine how we finance growth, since the current "let's make a deal" approach to determining community amenity contributions is unfair, and adding to the cost of housing.

But that's another story for another day.

michaelarthurgeller@gmail.com
@michaelgeller

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