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JAMES: Condo towers not all that eco-friendly

[Elizabeth James](#) / North Shore News

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"Towers are the least energy efficient form of development because of their glass-wall, concrete construction and elevators."

- Elizabeth Murphy, Vision and NPA: more of the same, Common Ground, July 2014

Beauty, as the saying goes, can be found in the eye of the beholder.

The corollary of that truism, of course, is that ugliness can be found likewise by examining the preferences of the viewer. So with no malice against architects at a personal level, I confess to finding highrise glass and concrete design monotonous and, for the most part, unattractive insults to the environment. That said, I have always consoled myself that the towers judged by their peers to be award-winning were at least "green" and prevented urban sprawl from encroaching any further onto agricultural lands.

Now, not only has my sprawl theory been shattered, I have discovered from Elizabeth Murphy and others that "green" these towers are not.

As mentioned in my July 23 column, Murphy is a former property development officer with BC Housing and the City of Vancouver.

Yet, on July 2 and despite her qualifications, Murphy's statement about towers was challenged by the first of several comments posted below the online version of her article.

"How does she prove this? I would like to see this cited," blogged Michael.

Judging by the response to that fair question, the blogger may now be wondering why he hadn't remembered another axiom: if you truly want honesty, never ask a question if you don't want to hear the answer.

That's because Murphy and environmental consultant Rand Chatterjee gave Michael and readers like me more disturbing data than we expected.

Over the years, while praying in vain for North Shore councils not to buckle under the provincially driven Metro Vancouver Regional Growth Strategy, I have believed the condo towers they approved were energy efficient and otherwise eco-friendly. Alas, even that has been taken from me and from those who share my opinion.

Chatterjee, a man I once met during a meeting about the Canada Line, was first up to bat.

After saying concrete has the second highest thermal transmissivity after glass, he explained that the "building envelope of (even) the newest towers with triple-pane, argon-filled, low-e windows - there are none in Vancouver - cannot claim an R-value over three."

He says three doesn't come close to a "poorly built R2000 home that, in practice, easily meets an average insulation value of R15."

Then, there's the matter of the power demand of elevators moving a "five-tonne weight - cab and counter-weight" many

hundreds of times a day.

Chatterjee claims **glass-wall construction lasts only “20-30 years before a full building envelopment will be required”** and the carbon equation will not look nearly as attractive and “sustainable” as developers would have us and our councils believe. Nor, come to that, will the strata fees.

Does Chatterjee really mean to imply that the tower projects councils are approving throughout the Lower Mainland today will end up as the leaky-condos of tomorrow — when developers will again shrug and say, “Not our fault; we built to the code.”?

In 2009, while discussing the relationship between local area planning and sustainability, Chatterjee wrote in the Georgia Straight that, “each person has the unique perspective and capacity to help plan his or her own neighbourhood.”

He is so right.

The problem is, despite endless public meetings and hearings, somehow community voices have lost out to the pressures from developers.

Too often over this term of North Shore — and Metro — councils, residents have had to settle for big-and-tall projects over broad-and-short in a desperate effort to retain views, gain green space and pathetically few “non-market” housing units from the deal.

And talking of “the deal” — as Steveston residents discovered earlier this year, conditional deals, as carefully described and approved by council, are not always deals — at least not when the developer finds he/she/they cannot sell as many of the mixed-use units as they’d counted on.

So it will be interesting to see what developers do if the commercial/residential market slows sales on the North Shore projects in Seylynn Village, on Lonsdale and on Marine Drive in North and West Vancouver.

What will councils do when developers return to renegotiate their deals in order to maintain their shareholders’ profit-margins?

Hazen Colbert, a North Vancouver risk manager and financial consultant, warns: “There have been too many condo projects approved through rose-tinted lenses.

“Some decision-makers are unaware that municipalities can be adversely affected by a bust cycle. I highly recommend (they) get their amenity contributions from current developments in hard cash — and now, not later.”

There are members of all three councils who are listening on behalf of the greater good — hence the “go slow” urgings of District of North Vancouver councillors Lisa Muri and Doug Mackay-Dunn and the four in the city who, on July 7, voted for 0.75 floor space ratio instead of 1.6.

But it remains to be seen whether North Shore councils as a whole will heed all the red flags and come closer still to my way of viewing those condo towers.

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