

Material dilemma squeezes housing

One of the arguments for more highrise towers in Vancouver is that it would provide more affordable housing.



GERRY KAHRMANN The Cordovan, at 557 East Cordova in the Downtown Eastside, is an example of an affordable low-rise development.

But there's a catch: highrises made out of concrete are much more expensive to build than lowrises made out of wood. So building any concrete highrise might make it unaffordable.

"It depends on the finish and complexities of construction, but usually a 40 per cent increase (with concrete) is a safe bet," said University of B.C. landscape architecture professor Patrick Condon. "I don't think anybody would debate that one."

Some might argue that the higher a tower goes the lower the price per floor would be, and that the price would eventually even out.

But Jon Stovell of Reliance Properties has found that in the competitive condo market, "it never gets that cheap, even all the way to the top. Arguably the top of the building costs even more, because that has to pull the train."

Stovell said wood is "ideally suited" for four-storey developments. But he said the high price of land downtown forces developers to go as high as they can.

"Usually what happens is the land value is indexed to extract the purchase price from a developer for the land, as though you're fully building out property," said Stovell. "You have to go high, as high as you can, so you can get the bench of the sales revenue back from the upper floors."

Outside the pricey downtown core, however, small wood-frame buildings might be an affordable answer.

And Condon said they could provide a lot of density.

"We did a project with our students, a city plan for (Vancouver) back in 2010, and we were easily able to get enough new dwelling units into the city, at less than four storeys throughout the city, which allowed us to double the population," he said.

"As ridiculous as it sounds, we were able to get up to 1.4 million people ... with almost no towers in the plan except at certain transit locations."

Condon said Vancouver already has some good examples of "gentle infill and gradually densifying." He points to Kitsilano as an example of a neighbourhood that has densified without losing its character.

"Single family homes (were converted) into what are now triplexes and fourplexes, to add density without really changing the appearance," he said.

"Also the four-storey buildings that have gone in along Fourth Avenue and Broadway have added a lot of density, in a form that makes that street a lot better, and adds vitality to those neighbourhoods."

Daniel Boffo built an affordable low-rise development called the Cordovan at 557 East

Cordova in 2015. It included 24 condos and five social housing units, with prices ranging from \$229,900 to \$494,900.

“We call them stacked townhomes, because they all had their own front door open to a central courtyard,” he said.

“The two-storey units on levels three and four had rooftop patios and came with parking. The one bedroom units had no parking. It is a wood-frame building over one level of concrete.”

He was able to charge lower prices because the land was cheap — the location was an empty lot on the edge of the Downtown Eastside.

“It was probably the most urban project we had done, up to that date. It was definitely the grittiest,” he said. “We were trying to figure out if the appetite was there for market housing, and we were pleasantly surprised that our vision was bought into by 24 families. Maybe one (unit) is rented out, all (the rest) are end users.”

Five units were sold to the MPA Society, a non-profit that works with people who have mental illness. The units now house people who pay the welfare shelter rate of \$375.

“We reduced the purchase price,” said Boffo. “It was initially at \$750,000 for the five units, and we lowered it to \$500,000. B.C. Housing, the municipal government, the feds and private donors came together to make it work.”

The development was attacked by Downtown Eastside activists, who argued it was gentrifying the neighbourhood.

The city has now zoned the area north of Hastings between Carrall and Heatley as condo-free, so there won’t be any more market developments like it in the neighbourhood. Boffo thinks the condo-free zone is a mistake.

“I think (the area) should be a mix,” he said.

“I don’t believe in ‘ghettoizing’ a neighbourhood, whether it is in a poor state, or in a silver-spoon state. You need to have those mixes, or else you’re not going to break down stigmas.”

Boffo has a proposal for another market/social housing mix at Commercial and Venables. But it’s a 12-storey tower, which has created a lot of controversy in the neighbourhood.

He expects it will cost \$280 to \$300 per square foot to build, which would be \$100 to \$150 more per square foot than if it was a four-storey wood building. But he thinks that it makes sense to build a tower there rather than a low-rise, because the tower allows for more social housing units for the Kettle Society, which works with mentally ill people in the neighbourhood. (The current version of the plan is 200 market condos and 30 social housing units.)

He said the size of a building should depend on the location.

“Infill buildings (in single family neighbourhoods) provide an opportunity for housing for a different component of society,” he said.

“Others prefer highrise living, a more dense, central location. You’re not necessarily going to put a four-storey where a highrise is, or vice versa. It’s responsible density for a site-specific application.”

Stovell thinks that if the city really wants to build affordable housing, it has to rethink its approach.

“Seventy per cent of the land in the city of Vancouver is some version of single-family,” he said.

“We should be proportionately densifying every square inch of the city. In other words, RS1 or singlefamily (zones) should be able to have two or three homes — which it currently is, because you can have a basement suite and a laneway home, but you can’t sell them.

“And then all the four-storey zones should go to six or seven, and all the 10- or 15-storey zones should go to 20, and all the 300-foot towers should go to 400 feet, and so on.

“It proportionately intensifies every area of the city, so we still get all these suitable types of characters of homes.”