

# Barbara Yaffe: Vancouver's push for taller towers may be short-sighted

Alternative: Smaller projects could cut costs, preserve city's character, says Patrick Condon

VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST    SEPTEMBER 29, 2014



Patrick Condon, chairman of the urban-design program at UBC, says the city is taking the wrong approach with its urban densification efforts.

**Photograph by:** Arlen Redekop, Vancouver Sun

VANCOUVER — Vancouver is a recognized urban-design leader in North America but recent city planning decisions suggest “a feeling of having lost our way.”

Patrick Condon, chairman of the urban-design program at the University of B.C., expresses concern about the city's recent approval of large-scale housing developments beyond the downtown core. And his thoughtful perspective deserves attention.

Condon believes Vancouver's progressive green agenda is falling prey to a belief by decision-makers that Vancouver must keep building high-density tall towers in order to compete with other locations for business investment.

“Our successes in the downtown let us think that tall glass towers were a great idea everywhere. Turns out, they may not be. At least citizens don't seem to think so.”

In an online publication last year, Condon wrote that city planners may fear “Vancouver is in danger of losing its primacy in the region to more dynamic cities to the east, in time being resigned to a role of retirement community and tourist destination, a pretty place with no real industry, a sort of Canadian version of Venice.”

This view “assumes that the fickle goddess of global investment must be persuaded to direct her gaze our way for us to flourish.”

Condon, who moved to Vancouver from the U.S. 22 years ago, applauds his adopted city's densification efforts.

But he insists better ways exist to foster livability and affordability than approving big buildings which, he says, are more earthquake-prone and block sunlight.

They're also "expensive, energy inefficient and, to many, an alien building form."

"Vancouver is actually already accepting more new density ... than any other city in North America per capita, including New York City."

Condon, who, with his family, lives in a half duplex in Kits, opines: "Vancouver has been a leader in adding density, but now this leadership is at risk, largely (because of a) disrespect for the physical qualities of neighbourhoods that residents cherish."

The professor of landscape architecture — supporting many of the Green party's policies in the civic campaign — points to recent experience in Grandview-Woodland, where residents opposed the city's official community plan for their area, presented after extensive community consultations.

Residents felt their views were dismissed, Condon says. He believes Vancouverites more readily would accept smaller-scale development — buildings of up to four storeys, preferably not exceeding tree heights, along its 200 kilometres of arterial roads.

"It costs far less per square foot to build and is more compatible with neighbourhood character."

He praises the sort of densification taking place in Kitsilano, particularly around 12th and Arbutus, which features low-rise buildings surrounded by walkways and green space.

Condon also would like to see zoning changes to allow homeowners across Vancouver to subdivide and stratify their properties, creating more affordable laneway-type housing, which at present, the city permits only to be rented.

The "young generation of Vancouver residents is having a very hard time getting a foothold in the process of building (home equity) wealth ... Letting them buy instead of rent would help."

Condon thinks more townhouses, including stacked townhouses of up to four storeys, should be built and sold as non-strata freehold properties.

The co-author of Seven Rules for Sustainable Communities says Vancouverites would prefer their city grow "organically in thousands of small increments rather than with a handful of huge projects."

He adds: "the issue of affordability in this town is maddening. Nobody can solve it."

That said, laneway houses, basement rental units, more affordable low-rise condo units on arterial streets and allowing stratification of all single-family lots into at least three units "is a better strategy right now."

[byaffe@vancouversun.com](mailto:byaffe@vancouversun.com)

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun

- rule 1. Restore the streetcar city.
- rule 2. Design an interconnected street system.
- rule 3. Create and use local commercial services, frequent transit, and schools within a five-minute walk.
- rule 4. Locate good jobs close to affordable homes.
- rule 5. Provide a diversity of housing types.
- rule 6. Create a linked system of natural areas and parks.
- rule 7. Invest in lighter, greener, cheaper, and smarter infrastructure.