

High Rise; High Cost; High Risk

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In BC, as all over Canada, there is an insatiable demand for housing. The media is saturated with reports of record home shortages. To solve this problem, we need to understand this problem is homemade. We did this. So it can be fixed, but it will take an unrelenting will, over many years, to put it right. High-rise living in the lower mainland is a relatively recent lifestyle shift that has taken place over the last several decades. It is becoming the only housing choice for the majority, and that is a concern.

We are inundated with spokespeople, who on behalf of the construction industry, parrot the need for more development to meet housing demands. Yet, the data tells us most Canadians can't afford to purchase real estate. A [survey](#) carried out in mid June 2021 and conducted across all provinces concluded the majority (75%) of Canadians who want a home can't afford to purchase one. Still, the prevailing wisdom promoted by the building industry, and reinforced by the media, is there isn't enough product to keep up with demand. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to deduce it isn't Canadian citizens, cash in hand, creating this insatiable demand. In some scenarios, parents wanting to help their children are downsizing, or re-mortgaging their homes, to gift their kids a down payment, and in doing so, jeopardizing their savings for retirement.

Over the last few decades buyers have come from abroad; moneyed and in a buying frenzy. Many of the properties foreigners purchased were intended as investments and left empty. Others are put on the rental market, which should help with the shortage of rentals, right? Except, the [average rent](#) for a one bedroom strata unit in Vancouver is creeping towards \$3000 per month, and a two bedroom closing in on \$4000 per month. Price rates struggling families can't afford. For many families, the average monthly rents are equal to, or even more, than their monthly income. And to find a condo unit large enough to accommodate their family's needs is almost impossible. The small square footage of the average condo unit is prohibitive for families. Compact units may satisfy the needs of a single or a couple, but would be cramped quarters for those with children.

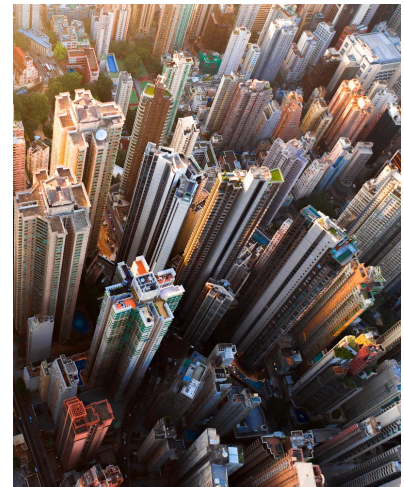


Photo credit: Manson Yim

People have intrinsic characteristics that need to be met, such as comfort and safety. What we live in and where it's located shapes how we feel about ourselves and determines the quality of our lives. Growing up and owning our own home is culturally ingrained in us. But living in high-rises means a very different life from living in a detached single family home. [Two studies](#) looked at how space is perceived by folks from different cultural groups.

Research on the psychological and emotional health of people living in [smaller spaces](#) and denser environments can depend on where and when you were brought up. People from highly populated countries may feel less crowded and more comfortable in highly populated areas. However, the studies are conflicting, as living on higher floors changes the comfort level for some people. What's indisputable is our environment impacts our emotional health and wellbeing.

Politicians and real estate developers often point to other world cities as proof that Canadian cities can handle more densification. Have you seen some of these densely populated cities? Should we hold them up as models we want to emulate, or as dire warnings of what can happen if we don't plan intelligently? We may not die from living cramped and packed close together. Prisoners housed in cells and wild animals confined to cages have proven that. However, they are not environments that promote quality of life. When governments plan housing for communities they need to take into account the psychological and physical impact that housing will have on residents.

Despite working hard, saving and sacrificing, it can be demoralizing, when the chance of owning a detached home is nothing more than a pipe dream. For many, even renting a single-family home with a backyard isn't a reality. The implications run deep because a house is more than a roof over our heads. Owning our own home with a backyard and feet placed firmly on the ground is not only what we want, it is often what we need to remain physically and emotionally safe. For too many Canadians, if homeownership is within financial reach, it will be a [small strata unit](#) in a high rise. For others, to put a roof over their heads will require renting a single room, moving back home, into trailers, tents, cars, or under a bridge.



Photo credit: Wes Hicks

As long as wealthy foreigners want to buy in Canada, developers will use their political weight to pressure for the right to build more high-rises. Much of the public takes it on faith that developers calculate pricing based on costs and value. Yet, it's not a developer's goal to offer you value for your money. Their priority is to squeeze every dollar out of each unit they sell. Pricing is based on comparatives. Pre-selling the best units offshore to wealthy people before locals even have access, guarantees them higher 'sold prices', which in turn, are used for comparatives when they release the remaining stock to locals. Another technique they use to keep prices high is to release products in stages and methodically increase prices at certain peak times to create urgency in buyers. Creating demand (illusionary or not) is an integral part of their business. Regardless of how concerned developers may present themselves with the shortage of affordable housing, the bottom line is, that they work for themselves. And since developers influence markets by perpetually pressurizing prices as hard as a market can bear, prices keep

escalating. Sky-scrapers, over 40 floors, are a product that can generate developers the most profit on the smallest footprint. We will be seeing lots of them.

The crisis of families who can't find adequate affordable housing brings into question whether high-rise living is appropriate housing for families. Even if it was financially within their means. Rather than, building more and faster, shouldn't we be building safer and lower? Being closer to the ground is healthier. Studies have found that more than half of the residents, adults and children, in urban settings who are deprived of easy access to [green spaces](#) and nature risk developing mental health problems. Home is a place to unwind in peace, safety and privacy. Home is our haven, our sanctuary. Living above dozens of retail stores with hundreds of families above below and next door, while a cacophony of traffic, honking, construction and machinery noises fill the air is not most people's idea of a sanctuary. The implications can be more than just unpleasant.

Ongoing research is now establishing that populations that live close to noise pollution of this kind (considerably higher decibels than on a quiet residential street) are at higher risk for [diabetes](#) and cardiovascular disease. Yet flawed planning decisions mean high-rise development in the lower mainland is concentrated in these very environments.



High-rises are being constructed on highways, main traffic arteries, along SkyTrain railways and stations. Marketing campaigns for new condo projects cleverly gloss over what used to be the most important decision when buying real estate; location, location, location. We will be seeing more poor decisions being set in motion, to provide affordable housing, as the pressure builds. And it will be the residents of future builds that will bear the brunt of these decisions.

The research from a [Denmark 2019 study](#) found the risk of psychiatric disorders increased for dwellers in environments disconnected from nature. Proximity to nature improves immune function, mood and psychological restoration to name a few of the many benefits natural surroundings provide. Scientists found that, "Exposure to green space is comparable to family history and parental age when predicting mental health outcomes. Only socioeconomic status was a slightly stronger indicator." High-rise locations leave much to be desired. Discord, [pollution](#), density and sunless streets shaded by forests of high-rises conflict with healthy living. These findings are highly relevant to anyone who prioritizes quality of life.

A more recent [2021 study](#) published in the Journal of Environment International, and conducted by researchers at the University of British Columbia (UBC), further validated the health risks found in urban high-rise living. Children living in environments prone to pollution, and lacking easy access to green space, affect their long-term wellbeing. The study found young children who have lived in compromised environments had a higher risk of being diagnosed with a developmental disorder called attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This condition is associated with behaviour disorders, learning, and social impairments. In the conclusion of the UBC study, it states:

"We found evidence suggesting environmental inequalities where children living in greener neighbourhoods with low air pollution had substantially lower risk of ADHD compared to those with higher air pollution and lower green-space exposure."

Do people have any idea what high-rise living is really like before they buy? Common complaints of condo dwellers include excruciatingly long elevator waits, non-functioning elevators, vibrations /tremors, annoying disruptive neighbours, blaring televisions, nauseating cooking, barbecue, [cannabis](#) and cigarette smoke, noisy children, exercise addicts pounding away at ungodly hours and sketchy strangers in lobbies and hallways. When criminal activity is associated with a condo suite this can cause significant safety risks for other residents. Crime is typically higher than in suburban neighbourhoods. Complaints abound about incompetent and/or corrupt management companies as well. Strata owners are fed up with strata councils applying rules arbitrarily. There are literally thousands of angry condo owners who are currently in conflict with other owners, or the building's management, with no acceptable resolution in sight. Luckier, wealthy residents in buildings with 24/7 concierge services tend to be more content and experience less neighbour and management problems.



Photo credit: Roberto Nickson

What colour drapes you choose, what you put on your balcony, and if you are allowed to renovate, or have a pet are simple rights detached house dwellers take for granted. These choices are lost in high-rise living. Rules we choose to follow, that we set for ourselves, feel very different from rules imposed on us by others. Home should be where we feel most in control. Being controlled by rigid rules and regulations is not how most people imagine ownership to be. In most people's minds, home ownership is synonymous with freedom and independence. The freedom and right to self-determination and choice. Strata living often crushes those illusions.

Monthly maintenance fees associated with strata living are often hefty and leave people financially strained and drained. The cost of building insurance (included in maintenance fees) has in recent times [skyrocketed](#) and keeps rising. Mixed use buildings require special policies to cover the additional risks multi-use buildings pose. Once you purchase, the drain on your income leaves little hope of saving for a move to something better. Particularly, if your building is assessed with a significant levy. Extraordinary problems like the infamous [leaky condo crisis](#) of the 90s affecting tens of thousands of owners of leaky condo units, left them through no fault of their own, bankrupt and emotionally shattered and exhausted. Structural and design defects in

high-rise buildings such as [falling glass](#) window panes, chunks of cladding coming loose, burst pipes, faulty mechanicals and numerous other design and construction problems can bring assessments so large it brings owners to their knees. Less catastrophic, but more customary are the issues created by the residents, such as floods and overflowing bathtubs, which can still cause major disruption. Insurance deductibles often don't cover these events.

Above and beyond the everyday irritants are the scarier life and death dangers high-rise living poses. A [2016 study](#) published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal reports the higher you live the less likely you will survive cardiac arrest. Living above the third floor significantly reduces your chance of surviving. The population is aging, and the healthcare system is strained. It is questionable if emergency personnel and ambulances will be available for an emergency call. If one does arrive, fire and police personnel must figure out where and how to access a building. Front doors are typically locked and by the time they gain entry precious minutes have lapsed which can be the difference between life and death. Many ambulance stretchers don't fit in smaller elevators. It's not unusual for elevators not to be functioning at all. Narrow hallways and stairways aren't much better if someone in a wheelchair needs to be moved. Other life-threatening medical emergencies present similar dire consequences. It can take more minutes than you have for even able-bodied people to exit a building by way of stairs from higher floors. Installing defibrillators, emergency elevators, wider stairwells, air conditioning, higher-rated fire resistant materials, instructional videos for effective evacuation plans, additional exits, first aid/fire equipment on each floor, reliable sprinkler systems and higher balcony railings are just a few things developers could have been installing in buildings in the last decades. But because it wasn't required, it didn't happen. It could take years, decades even if there is opposition, to implement code changes to make these improvements compulsory. And still, even if new codes were implemented today for future builds, it would do nothing to address the deficiencies of older buildings.



Climate change is bringing extreme storms, floods and fires. What disasters can high-rises survive? Severe weather can cause electrical outages affecting the operation of elevators, lights, air conditioning, heating and cooling systems.

Some buildings don't have backup generators. This leaves the elderly, children and mobile impaired, hostages in their own homes if they don't have access to an elevator to evacuate. The results can be devastating. In BC during the 2021 summer months of June to August eight

hundred people died due to extreme heat. It was reported at least 650,000 farm animals died. Billions of sea animals and an unknown number of pets died. These deaths weren't painless and quick. The heat dome brought temperatures reaching over 40 C (F 104). At 35C (F 95) human [survivability](#) is limited. Scientists predict climate

change will continue to wreak devastation. As of now, something as basic and necessary as air conditioning is not required for developers to include in units, not even in higher south facing units. Air conditioning is no longer about comfort, it is about saving lives.

In June 2017 a fridge-freezer caught fire in a West London high-rise called the Grenfell Tower. It is believed the fire started on the lower 4th floor, but quickly spread to the top 24th floor. Seventy-two people died and more were injured. The design of the exterior cladding with combustible materials was responsible for the rapid spread. Other buildings with the same cladding remain in the city. In January 2022 a Bronx, [New York fire](#) killed seventeen people and eight children. The fire originated on the third floor of a nineteen-story 120 unit building, but many who died were on higher floors. They died from smoke inhalation. The cause of the fire is believed to be a faulty space heater.

Many tragedies receive little to no public or media attention. The standard [fire fighter ladder](#) rises to approx. 100 feet. That is equivalent to the height of 6–8 floors. If a ladder can reach even that high will depend on the setback of a building and any obstacles in the way. With residential high rises in Canada ranging from 12 to 100 floors and over 1000 feet in height, these ladders are futile. The lack of maintenance and improper installation of equipment, such as fire alarms, doors and sprinkler systems, if installed at all, can fail. Resident's health and safety rely on these systems to work. When a building is saddled with shoddy, incompetent or [shady](#) management that fail to keep records, which is by no stretch an anomaly, maintenance suffers. There are always solutions being examined to improve these deficiencies but changes take time to implement, are often expensive, and will not be equally effective for every high-rise.



Photo credit: Mark Konig

On the Pacific west coast, earthquake activity happens multiple times a day. Scientists inform us “the big one” is coming. They just can’t give us a date and time. Tens of thousands of Canadians living high above ground level is not a comforting thought. It is the magnitude and location of the centre of an earthquake that will determine if a building will withstand a quake. Other factors are the soil type a structure and foundation are constructed upon, and how long an earthquake’s energy/shaking will last. Buildings built under current BC building codes are *expected* to remain standing. Why does this statement bring to mind the Titanic? We will only know if expectations pan out, when the real test happens. As mentioned earlier, 2021 was a momentous year in BC for natural disasters. That is if we can call these events “natural” rather than man induced climate change. In addition to what a heat wave could do, we also witnessed what heavy rains can do. Bridges were washed away, farms and homes

were destroyed, millions of animals drowned, highways and roads buckled and collapsed, landslides buried people, and oil pipelines were shut down because they were in jeopardy. When our infrastructure is so vulnerable to heavy rain, what will the consequences be when [the big one](#) comes? Many will claim that spotlighting these dangers and disasters is fear mongering. But these are real threats. We can hang on to the belief they will never happen to us, and they may not. But they will happen to someone.

A befitting piece of advice is, 'Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it'. That should apply to every potential buyer cruising a presentation centre and dreaming of luxury living. The excited purchaser can end up owning a box in the sky with no concrete idea of when they can take possession and if the finishings and amenities will be as presented. The completion date can move years without penalty to the developer. Size, shape and finishings can change substantially. No compensation is owed to the buyers if there are significant changes to the amenities. In the past, this was a sufficient reason for a buyer to get out of contract, but not anymore.

Something as simple as reading the disclosure statement before signing a contract can mitigate some disappointments down the road. Too many buyers don't bother to read the disclosure statement. Even with the seven-day rescission period that BC law provides purchasers to rescind without penalty, the disclosure statement remains unread. According to the [Real Estate Development Marketing Act \("REDMA"\)](#) purchasers are to be provided with a disclosure statement before entering into a purchase agreement and given adequate time to read it. This often doesn't happen, and the blame can be placed on both ends; the buyer and the seller. However, it's the buyer who is disadvantaged. Dazzled by the promise of 'brand new' everything and luxury amenities, reading a hundred-page statement of construction details, legalese, floor plans, warranties, assignments rules, etc., is the last thing an excited buyer wants to do. They are more interested in showing friends and family the glossy brochure of their new condo and getting advice on which colour scheme they should choose. They want to seal the deal before someone else grabs "their" unit. A threat they are told is real and likely true. In BC, the market for several decades has been brisk and hot.

Residential condo towers are not the only windfall for developers. 'For profit' [Over building](#) of care homes, is another area of housing that needs re-assessing. In the Marketplace episode 'Crisis in Home Care,' March 18, 2022, it is stated our government pays for 'for profit' care homes to be built to warehouse seniors when what would be significantly more desirable, and less expensive, is to use the funds to support seniors in their own homes. To allow them the dignity to age in place.

Developers are businessmen, not social workers. Their objective is to effectuate construction, and then power price their product as high as the market will bear. That's what a successful developer does. It stands to reason, that the massive financial undertaking and overall responsibility of such towering construction needs to generate generous rewards to make it worthwhile. What we must always keep in mind is, it's not



Photo credit: Gary Bendig

a developer's job to solve the unaffordable housing crisis. Nor will they. Looking out for the welfare of the masses is our government's job.

While the contribution architects, engineers, developers and marketers make in city planning is important, allowing them to dominate the decisions of municipalities leads us down the wrong road. If municipalities aren't permitted to control the issuing of building permits in their communities, their residents, in turn, don't have a say in how their communities grow and develop. Developers have personal and financial interests in what, how, when and where, the city planning departments are projecting for current and future design and land use. It is a conflict of interest for

them to have power over such decisions. It is akin to allowing the fox to guard the henhouse. Who is questioning these planning choices? Instead of making strata units more livable, there are rumblings in the industry about getting rid of parking spaces and balconies. Yikes, what's next?

There have been complaints in the news and on the internet coming from young people who think homeowners are too greedy, which is why they can't afford to buy a house. They believe it's what they deserve, and expect. Let's put this into perspective. Most of the world struggles to meet their basic needs to sustain life. Half the world's population lives on less than [\\$5.50 per day](#). Others suffering more extreme poverty live on less than \$1.90 per day. A great deal of the world feels North Americans are spoiled, whiners, wasteful and privileged. We certainly consume more than our share. North Americans expect to go from their parent's comfy home into a condo rental for a year or two and then on to purchasing their own home.

Many youth today live well, pursue advanced educations, have high tech phones, computers, own cars, frequent restaurants and spas, enjoy annual vacations, as well as jaunts to Whistler, Mexico, Hawaii and Vegas. Those who feel long-time homeowners are greedy and selfish should look in the mirror. Past generations, who didn't inherit, struggled to own the homes they live in. Many skimmed and scraped, saved every penny, purchased a modest house and spent decades paying down the mortgage. They paid their dues. They earned, and deserve, what they have. And they will need the proceeds from the sale of their homes to support themselves in their senior years. Disgruntled youth should focus their discontent on big business and the billionaires they produce. The people who pay minimal taxes but collect exorbitant wages, and businesses reaping



Photo credit: Tania Melnychuk

record profits. That is who youth should look to for why they are struggling. It's not the single-family homeowner who is threatening their futures, it's the excessively wealthy who own multiple homes, rental and vacation properties, yachts, luxury cars and private jets.

The bottom line is, young or old, we all want to live in safe, healthy green environments with good quality food, water, air and medical care. Who can make this happen? Those in government can. Know what the person you vote for stands for. Look at what they've already done; who and what they've supported and advocated for in the past. That will tell you more about who they are than what they say they are going to do.

A grateful Canadian single-family home owner

Disclosure - This is a personal opinion piece. Those who love the perceived status of literally living [the high life](#), relish the views, easy access to shopping and are unconcerned with the risks, privacy and space are exactly who should live in them. To each their own. But, living high is not for everyone. There needs to be affordable housing alternatives with the infrastructure to support it.

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