

WHO SAYS, “VANCOUVER HAS RUN OUT OF DEVELOPABLE LAND?”

GORDON HARRIS 2017



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Canada’s most livable city is perfectly able to make room for newcomers

Even amid the flurry of headlines about Vancouver’s prohibitive housing prices , it would be fantastically incorrect to claim there is no room left in Canada’s most livable city.

Yet, that’s just what Grant E. Moore, the former Manager of Planning for the Halton District School Board, argued in the spring [2017 Plan Canada, the journal of the planning profession in Canada](#). In a polemic that was both unsupported by any selection of data and tinged with xenophobia, Moore began by suggesting that we should all be living in fear of because *other people* are anti-immigration. (“One clear lesson of the American election is that opposition to multiculturalism has become an extraordinarily powerful organizing tool for the political right.”) Then, he gave that anti-immigration bandwagon a nice push, saying, flatly, that we have come to a time “when the easy ability to accommodate large immigrant populations is at an end.” He goes on: “Vancouver has run out of developable land, hemmed in as it is by mountains, agricultural reserves and the Pacific Ocean. Opportunities for low-

density development now exist only in the Lower Mainland's distant suburbs. Similar conditions prevail in Greater Toronto and environs ..."

Absent a handy new source of single-family homes, Moore warns that we should expect the worst from our Canadian neighbours. "Decreased tolerance for multiculturalism, coupled with the inability of our largest metropolitan areas to provide business-as-usual urban form, settlement patterns, and affordable housing choices, could threaten the civic peace that Canadians have come to expect."

Rather than rethink the form and sustainability of our housing, Moore concludes that we should slam the door on newcomers: "What is really needed in Canada is a national population policy, based on objectives that identify how large a population Canada needs, and in what areas of the country newcomers are needed and prepared to settle."

It is entirely reasonable to encourage a forthright discussion about immigration. Others are already engaged. The Conference Board of Canada, for example, maintains a [webpage](#) on the topic, headlined: "Why is immigration important to Canada?" Principally, the Conference Board says, Canada's current population is aging (more than 25 per cent of us will be over 65 by 2035) *and* we are failing to replace ourselves with a fertility rate of 1.6 – putting us 181st in the world. So, we need to maintain immigration levels to ensure there are enough Canadians working and paying taxes when the baby boom bulge settles into retirement. The Conference Board argues that immigration rates should go up to generate even more economic activity.

But the pros and cons of immigration are more commonly discussed on newspaper opinion pages or on Talk Radio. The priority for a publication like *Plan Canada*, the journal for Canada's professional planning community, must surely focus instead on the accuracy and integrity of the planning conversation. On which count, it is ludicrous to suggest that Vancouver or Toronto are, in any literal way, full.

Moore seemed to anticipate criticism, with this line of defence: "While the principles of Ontario's growth management plan for the region might appeal to planners (infill, redevelopment and new construction at higher densities), it is doubtful that many married couples with young children view this as anything other than a dystopian future of apartment life and mass transit."

In addition to being histrionic, this is demonstrably incorrect. Certainly, central Canadians should have a right to spend hours every day in a car on the 401, rather than brave the dystopian horrors of a quick subway ride from a conveniently located condominium. But there is lots of evidence that "many married couples with children," are embracing higher-density living.

Consider the actual situation in Vancouver, [where the population has increased in the last 50 years](#) from 410,000 in 1966 to 610,000 in 2016. Note, too, that these numbers are for the City of Vancouver proper, not the larger Metropolitan Vancouver area, where new suburban development has occurred during that half century. By Moore's standard, Vancouver was already fully built out in the mid-sixties; there certainly has been no increase in the number of single-family dwellings any time since. Yet, the population rose by 50 per cent, giving Vancouver has the highest density in Canada with 5,493 people per square kilometre.

But here's the important part. Or two parts. First, the "business-as-usual urban form" that made this growth possible has consistently won accolades and awards for being some of the best high-density development in the world. And second, Vancouver boasts (or complains about) having the highest urban land values in Canada, which suggests that, far from a dystopian nightmare to be avoided, this is a place where people want to be.

And why not? It's beautiful and, by national or global standards, famously liveable. Consider the dense and still-growing neighbourhoods around Vancouver's False Creek, highly functional communities where families are finding high-density living to be perfectly suitable. Or look to [UniverCity](#), a complete community that has emerged next to the Burnaby Mountain campus of [Simon Fraser University \(SFU\)](#). UniverCity is not within the City of Vancouver, but it's right in the geographic centre of the famously constrained Metro Vancouver. UniverCity was purpose-built on an intentionally small footprint (a little less than 30 hectares: about half the size of the average under-utilized 18-hole urban golf course). When SFU decided to develop its endowment lands in the mid-1990s, it had a choice: it could "meet demand" by covering all 385 hectares with single-family homes; or it could build a compact, walkable and fully serviced community with the same number of housing units in a much smaller area. It chose the latter, donating most of the land to the Burnaby Mountain Conservation Area and developing the rest – including shops and services, a LEED Gold elementary school, the greenest childcare centre on the planet and (already in place) the second-busiest transit centre in the region.

People have flocked to the multi-family residential homes on offer, in everything from townhouses to a 17-storey tower. After 15 years of construction, the population has just passed 5,000 – on its way to 9,000-plus. And 38 per cent of UniverCity households have at least one child living at home. Most important: in answer to [regular surveys](#), these people say they are happy in a well-designed, well-serviced higher-density community. Many are asking the development authority, SFU Community Trust (of which I am President and CEO), for larger units to accommodate their growing families. But no one is demanding single-family homes and few are moving away in search of the bigger box.

Back in Vancouver, it is beyond silly to suggest that the city is out of developable land. On the modest end, even without disturbing the fundamental nature of the

city's coveted single-family neighbourhoods, Vancouver added more than 2,000 [laneway homes](#) in the first six years of a program to make better use of its roomy and often beautiful back alleys. More ambitiously, there are currently at least eight major redevelopment sites in the planning stages, ranging from six to 36 hectares totalling over 320 hectares (roughly the size of New York's Central Park or nearly 600 football fields!). On one of the smallest, the [Little Mountain](#) site just off popular Main Street, there is currently allowance for the construction of 1,400 units in townhouses and mid-rise towers. The largest site, at [Jericho](#), could ultimately be popular and dense enough to justify the extension of the regional rapid transit system – although, not surprisingly, there is considerable controversy about the prospect. Moore is not alone in believing that density equals dystopia. So, we should have those conversations. But we should have them with an open mind – and a reasonable attention to evidence and accuracy, facts, if you will. For starters, we should stop peddling the notion that everyone is desperate to drive for hours every day to some ever-more-distant suburb in search of a 2,500-square-foot home surrounded by a lawn on which no video-game addicted youngster will ever agree to play. People buy houses in the suburbs because we give them little choice. We develop family-friendly urban neighbourhoods too slowly, and then we spend obscene amounts of money on automobile infrastructure to subsidize development of land that would be better left to agriculture or nature.

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