



# ***MIXING IN MID-RISE:***

## ***AN ANALYSIS OF THE KEY FACTORS IN THE REDEVELOPMENT OF VANCOUVER'S NEIGHBOURHOOD SHOPPING STREETS***

**Jonathan Pradinuk**

Queen's University  
School of Urban and Regional Planning  
Copyright © Jonathan Pradinuk, 2013

---

A report submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Urban and Regional Planning

---

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

---

### **BACKGROUND**

The challenge of housing a growing population on limited land has forced the City of Vancouver (CoV) to densify its low-rise residential neighbourhoods outside the downtown. One strategy involves encouraging the development of intensification corridors by redeveloping all transit accessible arterials with mid-rise buildings. Large stretches on many of Vancouver's arterials, including W. 10<sup>th</sup> Ave., Dunbar St., W. Broadway and Main St., have long functioned as neighbourhood shopping streets with a fine-grain fabric of older one and two-storey commercial buildings. According to development consultant Michael Geller (2012), "many point to [these C-2 zones] as Vancouver's 'unused zoned capacity' since it is close to transit and other services." However, Geller claims that "many sites are likely to remain under-developed" due to challenges such as fragmented ownership and the difficulty of building on small sites that are uneconomical to develop.

The purpose of this report is to analyze the key variables that encourage or discourage redevelopment along these neighbourhood shopping streets or C-2 zones. While there have been a number of projects built recently that have overcome these challenges, not all completed projects contribute equally to the public realm. Therefore, this report's outcome is a set of recommendations to improve the viability of redevelopment projects in the C-2 zones while also improving their quality. There are many benefits of redevelopment that stand to not be fully realized if there is not a greater understanding of these crucial development factors.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The report is structured to answer the following primary and secondary research questions:

#### **PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION**

- What factors either encourage or discourage the redevelopment of Vancouver's established neighbourhood shopping streets with mid-rise, mixed-use buildings?

#### **SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- Why is the redevelopment of these streets desirable?
- What are the existing land use conditions on these streets? (i.e. Where is successful redevelopment occurring? What streets are mostly underdeveloped?)
- What steps can planners take to facilitate the development of further and more successful redevelopment projects?

The research employed a mixed-methods approach utilizing a literature review, land use survey, examination of building precedents, and key-informant interviews. The majority of the 15 interview participants were residential developers, but the participants also included architects, planners and other development professionals in Vancouver. Content from the interviews was then analyzed and organized into five categories of factors.

## ***FINDINGS***

### ***MARKET FACTORS***

There is plenty of lively discussion in Vancouver about development costs and how they affect the viability of new housing projects. Although there are a host of factors that can make or break a new housing project, the market is invariably the biggest determinant of housing prices. There is high demand and limited supply of housing options in Vancouver's high-amenity low-rise neighbourhoods. Developers often market the neighbourhood in mid-rise projects, which attract a wide variety of buyers particularly young people entering the market and aging empty nesters or retirees.

### ***FINANCIAL FACTORS***

While not as profitable as high-rise buildings, there is nothing inherently unviable about mid-rise, mixed-use projects in Vancouver's C-2 zones. Wood-frame construction makes them generally economical to build. However, some developers are opting for concrete construction, which is more expensive but sells for a premium price. Regardless of construction material, the inbuilt complexity of mixed-use buildings makes them better suited to firms with experience doing similar projects. Securing long-term commercial tenants is a priority for some developers. After many years with very few new purpose-built rental projects, developers are beginning to take advantage of CoV policies incentivising purpose-built rental units in the C-2 zones.

### ***SITE FACTORS***

Due to fragmented ownership and small lot sizes, at least some lot assembly is usually required to acquire enough frontage for a four-storey building. Developers prefer corner lots, which allow for more flexible unit designs, and lots with sufficient depth to build a functioning underground parking garage. Some lots are simply not deep enough for redevelopment with the current parking requirements. Site contamination from previous uses, gas stations and drycleaners predominantly, also inhibits redevelopment.

## **LAND USE & URBAN DESIGN FACTORS**

The CoV has fairly stringent regulations regarding building form and design. The rear of new mid-rise buildings should effectively relate to the abutting residential and the front should foster a dynamic pedestrian environment. Large building step-backs can help create a more neighbourly relationship with the abutting ground-oriented homes while also providing amenity space for residents of the arterial building. Significant measures need to address the real negative externalities that arise when placing residential units on busy arterials. Unfortunately, inadequate attention is often given to the design of CRUs leading to bland and uninteresting storefronts in new mixed-use buildings.

## **REGULATORY & PROCESS FACTORS**

The provision of the required residential and commercial parking spaces can severely inhibit the viability of redevelopment on size-constrained lots. As a charter city, the CoV has the most demanding building code in Canada in terms of energy utilization. With such high standards in place, developers refuted the costly requirement for LEED Gold accreditation in rezonings. Inconsistent application of regulations and some review processes, including the Urban Design Panel (UDP), lead to costly delays. Proactive and innovative public engagement strategies can also benefit the approvals process.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **#1 REDUCE PARKING REQUIREMENTS AND MAKE THEM MORE FLEXIBLE**

The CoV should drop parking minimums and adopt a more flexible market-based approach to parking standards.

### **#2 MODIFY EXISTING HEIGHT AND FSR REGULATIONS IN C-2 ZONES**

Five or six storey buildings are likely suitable in many areas with appropriately scaled step-backs to limit the impact of shadowing, especially on north-south heading streets. Total permitted height in four-storey buildings should be increased to allow for taller CRUs at grade.

### **#3 CONTINUE EXPLORATION OF 'TRANSITION ZONES' BEHIND ARTERIALS**

In addition to providing a greater variety of housing types at higher densities in low-rise neighbourhoods, townhouses and rowhouses behind arterials create a greater transition from mid-rise, mixed-use projects. The CoV should continue exploring the creation of transition zones.

**#4 ENCOURAGE INNOVATIVE DESIGN SOLUTIONS THROUGH PERFORMANCE-BASED ZONING**

While not all projects need to reflect excellence in design, there needs to be more examples that properly acknowledge the public role of these streets. The CoV should encourage innovative solutions by implementing performance-based zoning regulations.

**#5 ENCOURAGE BETTER DESIGN OF CRUs**

The CoV should review how the UDP evaluates CRUs and should push for greater unit depths and heights, which are important factors for commercial tenants. Opportunity to express individuality in storefronts should also be emphasized.

**#6 ALLOW FOR GREATER FLEXIBILITY OF USES AT GRADE**

Although redevelopment increases the amount of nearby potential patrons, new CRUs in replacing mixed-use buildings on the edges of C-2 zones are often similarly unsuccessful as those they replace. The CoV should consider allowing greater flexibility of uses at grade at the edges of C-2 zones, where there are other uses that may contribute more to the neighbourhood.

**#7 ALLOW FOR SMALLER UNITS TO IMPROVE AFFORDABILITY**

Smaller suite sizes may be the simplest way to provide more affordable rental and entry-level units in Vancouver. The CoV should consider lowering the current minimum suite sizes in mid-rise, mixed-use projects, where tenants are more likely to spend time in nearby ‘third spaces’.

**#8 EXPLORE ALTERNATIVES TO LEED ACCREDITATION**

The CoV should consider waving the LEED Gold requirement for rezonings in wood frame mid-rise buildings on arterials, which are already very energy efficient. There are other ways to ensure buildings meet green performance standards without the added costs of LEED.

**#9 IMPROVE SITE APPROVALS PROCESSING EFFICIENCY**

Resolving conflicting requirements from different CoV departments and improving the clarity surrounding development regulations and approval processes would limit costly and unexpected delays.

**#10 UPDATE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS AND IMPROVE COMMUNICATION PROCESSES**

Updating long out-dated neighbourhood plans would provide opportunity for the public and developers to engage in a discussion about the future of neighbourhood shopping streets. Developers that initiate proactive engagement strategies often benefit from greater public support of their projects.