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Pack up the kids - we're movin' downtown!

By Kerry Gold
Globe and Mail Update

In Vancouver, astute city planning is paying off as families buy into a trend toward urban living

Vancouver families are more urban than ever. They are choosing a life of sushi, parks and cycling around the Sea Wall for their children over the traditional tree forts and street hockey.

There are more children living downtown than in Vancouver's most expensive residential neighbourhood. The higher-density plans of the past 30 years and the soaring house prices of the 2000s have changed the city's demographic makeup.

Former city planning director Larry Beasley is proud that his celebrated 1980s density measures have made downtown appealing to people with kids.

"The quality of life we have been able to establish downtown draws more and more people," Mr. Beasley said. "Historically, it's been that you might want to hang out downtown when you are young and single, and come back when you're an empty nester, but boy, you sure couldn't raise your kids there. That's not true of downtown Vancouver. There are more children downtown than there are in Point Grey."

There are an estimated 7,200 children living in the downtown peninsula. In Point Grey, there are less than half that number. Point Grey has long been viewed as the choice family neighbourhood, and downtown the haven for singles. Not so much any more.

Peter Hoffmann and his wife, Juliette Hukin, have raised daughters Zoe, 9 and Talia, 6, downtown from birth. The family has a 20th-floor view of ocean and mountains, and access to movie theatres and some of the world's best restaurants a few steps outside their front door.

"I think it's really cool that kids get this urban experience. I think it helps them grow up faster in a positive way," says Mr. Hoffmann, who lives in the downtown West End. "My kids have their favourite Japanese noodle restaurant. Vancouver is so international. And downtown is such a nice place to live."

Former premier Mike Harcourt was mayor of Vancouver in the 1980s, when the foundation was laid for a thriving downtown.

"We wanted a livable city. We didn't want to follow this North American model of a dead downtown and deadening suburbs. We brought in changes around False Creek, Coal Harbour and Yaletown. We made housing available downtown.

"Far more people are living in duplexes, townhouses and apartments than in single-family homes. I think that cultural shift is in the big cities and it's irreversible."

Development consultant Michael Geller also says there's been a shift in thinking about families and dwellings.

"Around the world, whether it's living in a Park Avenue apartment or an apartment in Prague or Budapest or anywhere, families with children live in apartments. That generally was not North America. Kids in an apartment here were considered poor." Mr. Geller says. "Whereas now, there is a choice being made by people to spend \$700,000 on a downtown apartment with maybe one or two young children, rather than live in a larger house in Burnaby or Coquitlam for the same money."

Andrew Yan, researcher and urban planner for architect Bing Thom's research division BTA Works, says the number of kids downtown doubled between census years 1996 and 2006. However, it would be a mistake to consider downtown a uniquely booming breeding ground. The population is higher downtown than in other neighbourhoods, which means the number of children would also go up.

But a denser downtown, with more families, was on the agenda back in the 1970s and 1980s - and it was a radical idea at the time.

Mr. Geller remembers working with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. to develop the South False Creek area with families in mind.

"I was the federal government project manager, and that was the first attempt to encourage families with children to live in the city," he recalls. "And at the time, a city planner resigned because he thought it was so inappropriate for families with children to be forced to live in the south shore of False Creek. Prominent politicians of the day even spoke out against it."

But did the campaign to urbanize families work too well?

With those 7,200 kids living the urban life, there are growing pains. One problem is a paucity of two and three-bedroom condominiums. According to figures supplied by Landcor Data Corp., only 0.8 per cent of condos built downtown in 2009 had three bedrooms. In 2008, the figure was 7 per cent. Another problem is the availability of nearby schools. Both Mr. Hoffmann's daughters and Mr. Granby's daughters commute to school outside of downtown.

"It was perhaps unexpected that you would have such a large amount of children in downtown - the planners didn't anticipate this," says Mr. Yan. "When downtown was planned in the eighties, the table was set for urban living. What folks didn't suspect is it would happen so fast and in such large amounts."

A pressing problem is that developers aren't building family-sized condos.

"I think that's one potential future challenge towards how many families can or [are] willing to live downtown," says Mr. Yan. "And being the greenest city means you need to have a stock of affordable, family-oriented housing. "Without an adequate solution towards affordable and livable housing for families with children, we may be promoting a form of boutique environmentalism ... as opposed to a concept of sustainable, dense, urban living."

Although he is resistant to the idea, Mr. Hoffmann says he may have to move into a house because his daughters now want their own bedrooms. He knows of another family living in a one-bedroom with two children who are reluctantly planning to leave downtown for something bigger.

"I don't know how many people stay in the West End and raise their children," says Mr. Hoffmann.

Brent Granby is a stay-at-home dad and president of the West End Residents Association. He and wife Anita Palepu, a doctor at downtown St. Paul's Hospital, are raising daughters Mallika 10, and Saffrin, 11, downtown. They have no plans to leave.

But in terms of real estate, they are the lucky ones. They live in a three-bedroom condo bought six years ago. It's since doubled in price.

"The space is big enough for us," says Mr. Granby. "But I think there is a serious shortage of spaces to accommodate families. We have a lot of friends who move out of the West End at a certain point because it's so expensive.

"How affordable it is for families to stay downtown in an apartment? It's not. So how do you create newer development downtown that's still affordable and ecologically sustainable?"

The reason three-bedroom condos are not built is that developers are obsessed with price per square foot, says Mr. Geller.

"I blame some of the marketing people who tell the developer they have to achieve a certain price point or they won't sell their unit. Generally speaking, the smaller the unit, the higher the price per square foot the developer can achieve."

He says a possible solution is a third bedroom that can operate as a secondary rental suite until it's needed for a growing family. That option, which he's implemented in a previous development, would make a three-bedroom condo more affordable and supply rental housing.

He also believes the smaller family-size condo will become the way of the future. He is currently acting as consultant on a controversial proposal to add 25 three-bedroom, 900-square-foot rental townhouses to the Beach Towers building in the West End. Mr. Geller can't remember the last time new rental units aimed at families were built in the West End.

"As more families with children choose to live downtown, we will start to see developers building smaller three-bedroom units," he says. "And by smaller, I mean under 900 square feet because most of the detached single-family houses that were built after World War II were three-bedroom houses under 900 square feet. So I guess maybe what we now need are bungalows in the sky."

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