



NOMiC's take on outdoor living includes private balconies along with a variety of shared outdoor "clusters" that allow small groups of people to gather safely outdoors without coming into close contact with others.

MAKING A BETTER BALCONY

The return of warm weather is reigniting the conversation about how to improve our private outdoor spaces

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‘Balconied suites’ sound like a brass ring for condo dwellers with outdoor-living aspirations. But a drive down the Gardiner, past condo alley, shows many of those tight concrete boxes serve as little more than ventilated storage spaces for bikes and boxes.

As COVID-19 keeps Toronto residents at home in the heat, however, housing experts are questioning why so many of the city’s balconies are poorly designed — too narrow to comfortably fit a lawn chair, unsheltered from high-altitude winds — and looking for better ways to imagine private outdoor spaces.

According to Sam Dufaux, an architect and principle at SvN Architects and Planners, developers often look for ways to tick the balcony box at the lowest cost and without sacrificing indoor floor space.

This can result in shallow Juliet balconies — with just enough room to step out and wave to neighbours. Even when they’re bigger than that, the typical depth is only about 1.5 metres.

The prevalence of stoops that size, he explains, is partly due to construction standards, which allow the concrete slab — under the floor of each unit — to be extended up to 1.5 metres past the edge of the building without counting toward the structure’s maximum square footage.

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WILL PANDEMIC FORCE INNOVATION?

BALCONY

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This adds value at a minimal cost to the developer, but 1.5 metres just isn't enough for a comfortable hang.

The City of Toronto discourages these slab extensions in its Tall Buildings Guidelines. That's because the continuous, uninsulated extension of slab from indoors to outdoors leads to heat loss from the units. Guidelines recommend balconies be rectangular and deeper than 1.5 metres. Still, the guide makes a big deal about balconies reaching too far and increasing the perceived heft of a building.

"We want them to be designed to maximize usability and comfort without making the building appear fatter or cast large shadows," explains Toronto Chief City Planner Gregg Lintern. The guide also lists balconies' impacts on "sky view, privacy and daylighting" as a concern. "It's

about striking a balance," says Lintern.

That's what SvN is hoping to do in its new residential project, the Green Gradient Building at 3803 Dundas Street West. The 13-storey 297-unit building, being developed by TAS, will be a mix of subsidized and market-rent suites looking out over the Humber River Valley. Each unit has its own outdoor space, ranging from Juliet and two-metre balconies on the building's street-facing side to generous four-metre-deep balconies facing the valley. The balconies are cantilevered, so no indoor space is sacrificed. And because the larger balconies face nature, not neighbours, the perceived heft of the building wasn't considered an issue. These varied structures have built-in bird feeders, bird baths and guardrails made of stainless steel mesh for trellising plants.

At another residential project for TAS, a two-tower

build at 385 The West Mall in Etobicoke, Dufaux and his colleagues have found another way to offer residents more private outdoor space. Each of the building's 650 units features a movable glass partition that can be shifted outward in winter to create a larger interior space or inward in summer to expand the size of the balcony.

It's an idea that's also piqued the interest of Toronto architecture and design firm BNKC, which is currently considering an expandable glass wall system for balconies and patios produced by the Finnish company Lumon. Its retractable system can be installed in both existing structures and new builds.

"These kind of ideas have been in the pipe for some time, but the conversation has been turned up recently, and we're looking closely at how design can benefit the current situation," says BNKC principle Jonathan King, referring to a significant

population of condo dwellers self-distancing at home.

King is also interested in exploring how the surrounding environment affects the ways in which balconies are used. At the moment, he and his team at BNKC are working on a mixed-use 330-unit development in Oakville called NOMiC that features a large network of green spaces along a permeable raised terrace, mixing zones of public, semi-private and fully private exterior spaces.

The two-building project features private balconies, and a variety of shared outdoor “clusters” that are distinct but adjoining and activity-specific: small seating areas, a suntanning zone, a green space to play sports on and a small outdoor theatre. The spaces provide room for small groups of people to gather safely outdoors without coming into close contact with others. “How we’re getting together is changing, and we want to create opportunities for those inter-

actions to occur,” says King.

The project acknowledges a truth that has been thrown into sharp relief during the pandemic: private outdoor space isn’t always about having a fully private experience. We’ve seen videos of European residents on their balconies, singing, exercising or cheering together, staying connected with neighbours.

The European approach may actually offer a glimpse of the way forward; both Dufaux and King mention the heavily greened Italian Bosco Verticale in Milan as a source of inspiration. The residential building’s balconies accommodate more than 900 trees, 5,000 shrubs and 11,000 perennial plants in built-in planters, improving air quality while beautifying the urban setting. The French, too, have launched trail-blazing projects that take a novel approach to private outdoor space. L’Arbre Blanc, a white 17-story building in Montpellier,

featuring hundreds of large balconies fluttering out from the rounded building’s surface like the branches of a futuristic tree.

The ideas are out there. The question is whether the pandemic and the lifestyle shifts that have accompanied it will carry enough force to push Toronto condo design forward.

“This is a debate builders and developers are always having internally — to balcony or not to balcony?” says Todd Spencer. He’s the senior director of national operations for GWL Realty, a company that develops and runs residential rental properties in the GTA and beyond. While it may be too early to say whether COVID-19 will drive significant innovation, Spencer says it’s certainly on everyone’s lips right now.

“It’s something I’ve definitely been hearing anecdotally,” he says: “‘Boy, am I happy to have a balcony.’”

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