

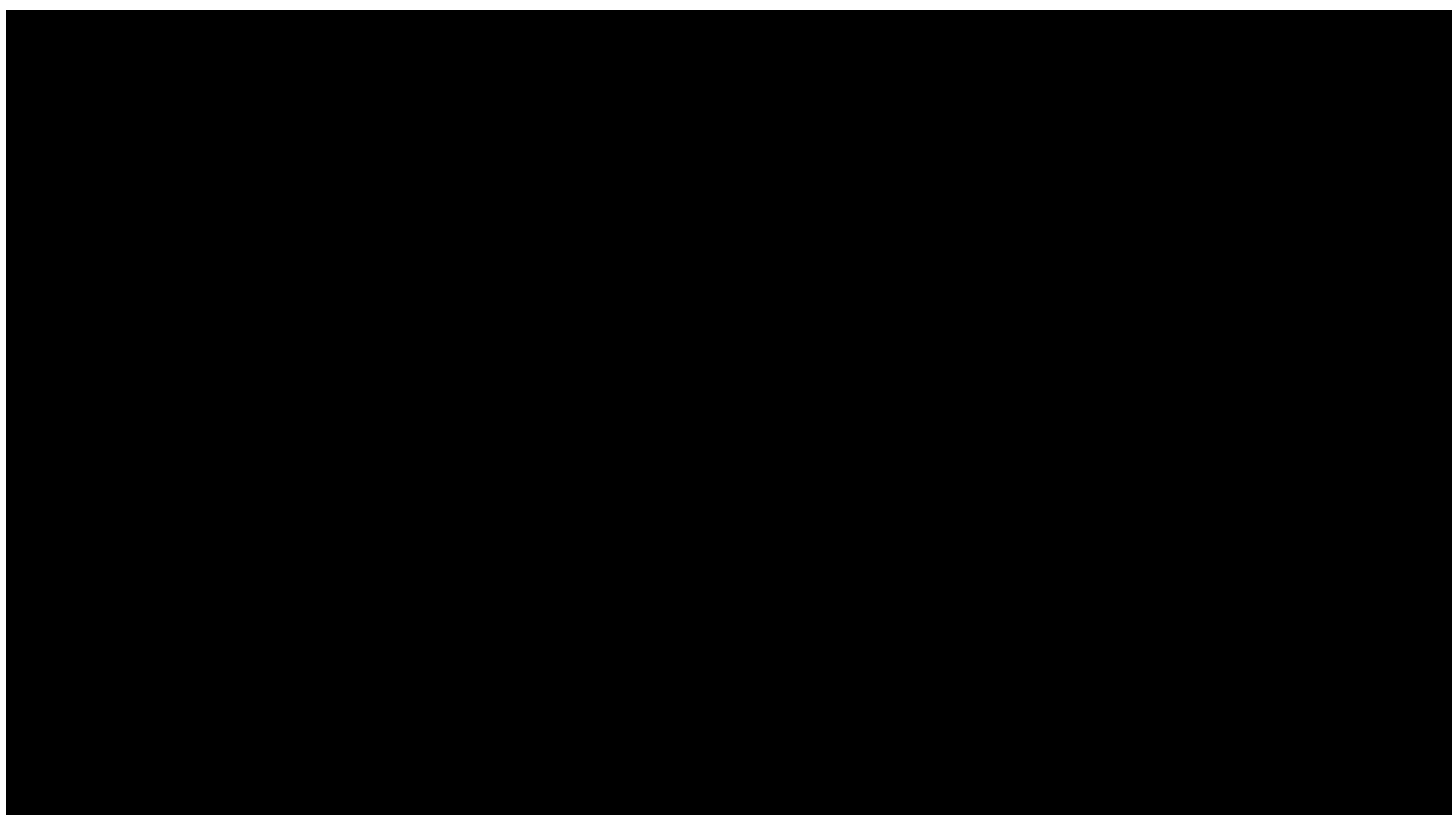
The three-bedroom challenge: space in short supply for Vancouver families



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Space is in short supply in Matthew and Courtney Emerson's two-bedroom Kitsilano condo. They would love to have a play area for their young son,

office space for the adults, and room to grow if they decide to have another child.

But finding a three-bedroom unit in their price range of about \$750,000 has been nearly impossible.

“They just don’t seem to be in the market,” Matthew said. “We find a lot of townhomes, which are great and we’d be happy to do that, if we could afford it. When we looked at three-bedroom condos, they just didn’t really exist.”

For developers like Beau Jarvis, there is an easy solution to the problem of finding affordable three-bedroom condos in Vancouver. All the city has to do, he says, is relax one simple rule in local bylaws: that every bedroom in any new home needs at least one window.

“It’s rooted in good intention from the policy side of it, and that is livability,” said Jarvis, senior vice-president for Wesgroup properties. “If we could change that and have what is called ‘borrowed-light bedrooms’ ... we could easily make smaller three-bedroom units that would be more affordable.”

To demonstrate the idea, Wesgroup drew up plans for two three-bedroom condos in a wood-frame, mid-rise building: one that meets Vancouver’s current requirements, and one with an interior third bedroom that would capture light from the living room using a transom window.

Wesgroup Properties drew up these plans for a pair of three-bedroom condos. In one of them, the third bedroom doesn't have an exterior window and uses borrowed light from the living room. In the other, all three bedrooms have windows — a design that adds an extra 264 square feet to the floor plan.



In this first reckoning, placing all three bedrooms along the exterior walls would require an extra 264 square feet of space. If the condo were sold at a relatively reasonable \$600 per square foot, that would add nearly \$160,000 to the purchase price.

“If you were to use the standard of one-third of your income to pay for housing, that’s an additional \$30,000 somebody needs to make in income,” said Brad Jones, Wesgroup’s director of development.

It is an idea that Emerson would consider if it meant finding something in his price range. As an architectural designer, he is well aware of the difficulties in designing a condo with three bedrooms on the exterior of a building.

“I think if it were designed appropriately, that it would be acceptable,” he said.

At least one Metro Vancouver city has already opted to allow this sort of

design.

New Westminster recently enacted a bylaw requiring all new multi-family projects to include at least 30 per cent two- and three-bedroom units, and a minimum of 10 per cent with three or more bedrooms.

“The advice that we got from architects (was) that to get the third bedroom in is really challenging,” explained Beverly Grieve, the city’s director of development.

And so the city updated its regulations to allow the third bedroom to have indirect light from two sources, via a light well, a window into another room, or a doorway.

In Vancouver, city staff are looking at a proposed policy that would also require 10 per cent of all units to have three bedrooms, and borrowed-light rooms could be up for debate during consultation with developers, according to Abigail Bond, director of housing policy and projects.

“I’m sure that question will come up during those discussions,” she said. “But it is important to make these homes livable for families — especially for children.”

Meanwhile, some planners argue that purpose-built third bedrooms might not even be necessary. What is really crucial is creating layouts that can be adapted easily to create more sleeping spaces as needed.

Urban planner Michael Mortensen, who has worked in the city’s planning department, recently played around with some floor plans for two-bedroom condos to demonstrate [how this could work](http://michaelmortensenblog.com/2016/01/19/making-apartments-work-harder-the-3rd-bedroom-challenge/) (<http://michaelmortensenblog.com/2016/01/19/making-apartments-work-harder-the-3rd-bedroom-challenge/>).

“I think we have to question some of our lifestyle requirements,” he explained. “Do we need a second bathroom or can you manage with one? Do you need an enormous walk-in closet? That’s a design fix — once you build a walk-in closet, you can’t do much with that space.”

One of his experiments eliminates the large walk-in from a master bedroom, giving space for two double-width bunk beds separated by a movable wall of shelving. Another design takes its inspiration from Japanese design, turning a dining room into a part-time sleeping space with a bed that can be folded away in the morning and converted into an eating area.

Mortensen, who is currently based in the U.K., is big on the idea of “square feet hours” — that is, evaluating a room’s usefulness based on how many hours it’s used each day. In this thinking, a large bedroom is not a great use of space in a city where real estate is at a premium.

He points out that Thomas Jefferson placed his bed in a hallway nook between two rooms at his grand Monticello plantation in Virginia.

“Kings and queens and presidents slept like this, in alcoves off grand rooms,” Mortensen said. “In the end, a bedroom is an eight-hour space.”

That is the kind of thinking that makes condo living comfortable for Adrian Crook, who has managed to fit five kids into a two-bedroom-plus-den in Yaletown.

“A lot of time what drives people to get larger places is the feeling that they need these single-purpose rooms,” said Crook, who chronicles his family’s adventures on the blog [5 Kids 1 Condo \(http://5kids1condo.com/\)](http://5kids1condo.com/).

“In a past life, I had a house in North Vancouver. ... There were some rooms that I didn’t use for weeks, and it just didn’t make sense to me to be paying for those.”

Now, he has turned his solarium into a master bedroom, where the bed folds up into the wall and a desk folds down to create a workspace during the day.

Another working area is also available in the bedroom shared by his two girls, where the bottom bunk folds out into two benches and a small table. And the boys’ bedroom includes a futon couch, TV, and videogame

consoles for playtime.



Dad, Adrian Crook with kids and triple buck bed in Vancouver, BC. March 25, 2016. Story on the difficulties of finding/building three bedroom condos in Vancouver. Adrian has managed to make living with five kids possible in a two-bed plus den by using some creative design ideas.



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Matthew Emerson with wife Courtney and 13month old son Eliot in Vancouver BC. April 2, 2016. They have been looking for a three-bedroom condo to house their growing family, but say it's nearly impossible to find something within their price range.

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