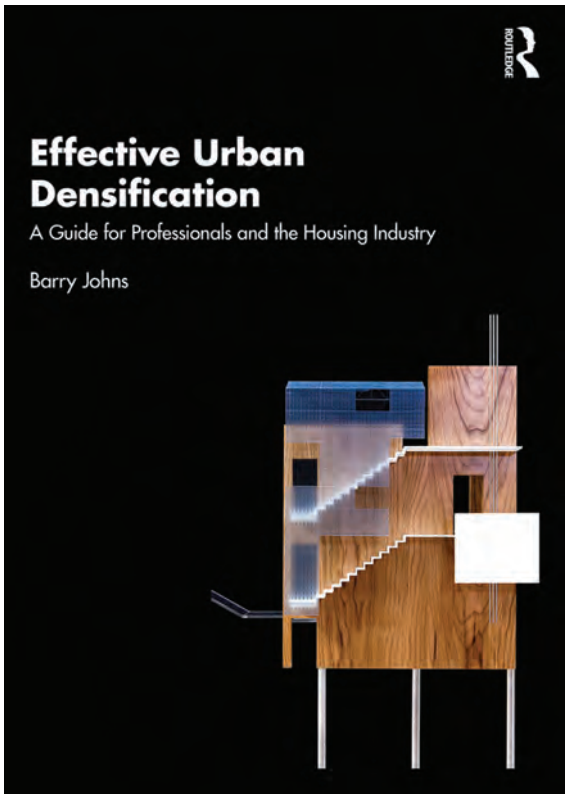


Effective Urban Densification: A Guide for Professionals and the Housing Industry

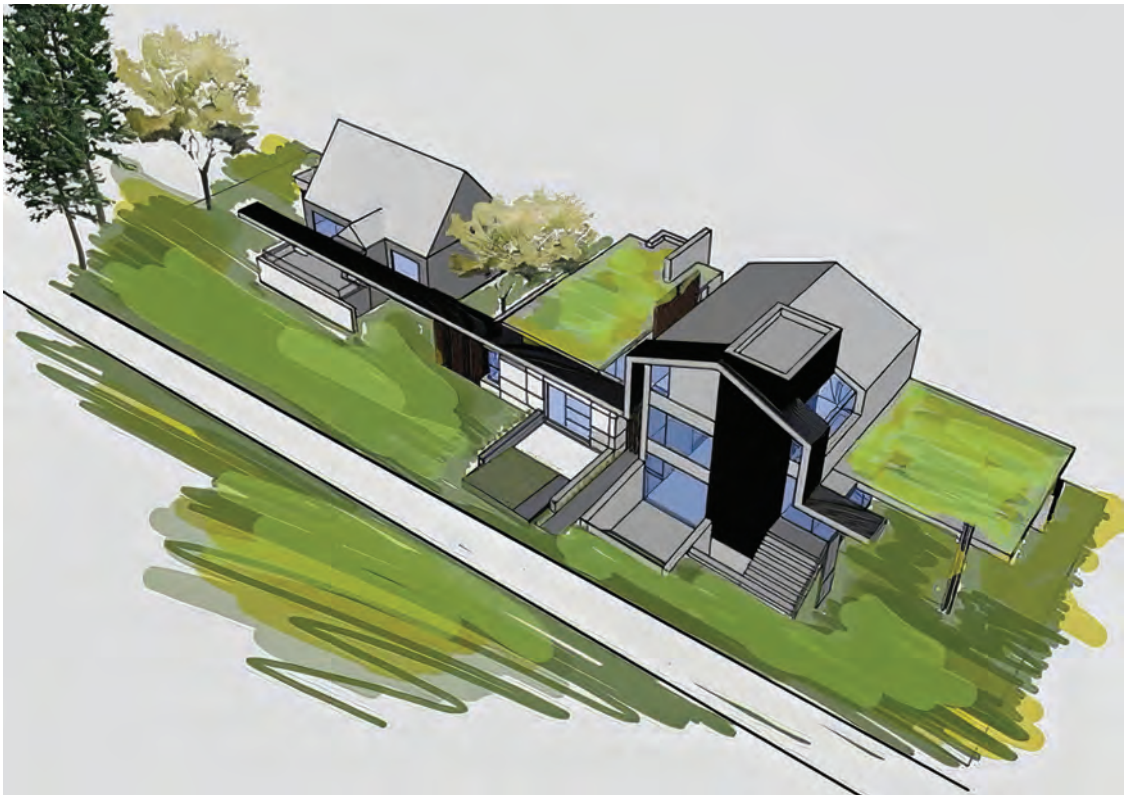
By Barry Johns (Routledge, 2024)

It is a relief to read a book containing genuine fresh thinking on housing—just what the Canadian housing sector desperately needs right now. In *Effective Urban Densification: A Guide for Professionals and the Housing Industry*, Alberta architect Barry Johns models for one form of new housing—infill—the kind of analysis and new directions that we would do well to undertake to address the delivery of all forms of housing in our country. This is a must-read for developers and architects, but it may be even more eye-opening for homeowners holding a lot of equity, government officials and planners sponsoring new zoning, and neighbours who fret about the loss of their lovely communities.

While the industry and government are putting their emphasis seemingly at all costs on increasing housing supply, mostly looking to cut away bottlenecks that stall supply, Johns is skeptical. He convincingly shows that in cities with great supply records, prices have continued to increase inordinately, and whole segments of the population are still left without many options—he echoes the popular but inherently sad term, the "missing middle." Johns takes his thinking elsewhere, to much more fertile ground, focusing instead on spiralling land costs as the barrier to affordability. He looks at displacement and lack of fit as the key barriers to community acceptance of new housing, which also contribute to limiting consumer options. According to Johns, these are the real problems to solve.

Johns then applies these considerations to infill development. He knows that infill, in principle, is a good idea and a way to significantly expand housing opportunity and choice, while taking advantage of social and physical infrastructure already in place in mature neighbourhoods—but he insists that we must put this within the context of gentle densification, solving tight interface conditions. Johns sees the flaws in the current delivery status quo, where government randomly opens up the infill opportunity through zoning and expedited process, instantly pushing up market values, and the housing providers go trawling into mature neighbourhoods finding homes to demolish and build anew at jarringly higher density and scale. Yes, says Johns, housing is delivered, but existing residents have to leave, perfectly good housing is tipped into the landfill, and neighbours are bruised by uncomfortable fit. He questions just how gentle this infill actually is. He also worries about destabilization of the neighbourhood. He poses the simple question: why does all this have to be? Not many people will give up home and hearth just to access their equity, neighbours will ultimately put a political stop to hurtful development, most developers will segue to easier opportunities and, most importantly, affordable housing is not delivered but is often actually lost through demolition. Is unfettered infill really worth all that?

Johns systematically tackles these issues, with the result being what he has branded as BAAKFIL ("back alley advantage, kinship, family, integrated living")—with a design tool kit to show how to make it work. In his model, the existing homeowner joins in partnership with a developer to create infill in open rear yard areas, and stays on after construction. The unit form suits many household types, and is carefully designed for comfortable neighbourhood fit. Most vitally, new homes can be offered to the consumer at a significantly lower price because land value—the most harmful variable in the affordable pro forma—is removed from the equation through the use of a bare land condominium structure, in which only the land under the new unit is purchased and the lot is held in common. There is no need for displacement, no neighbourhood uproar, and less-costly housing is provided for the new resident. Johns elaborates on the community benefits of diversifying household types, engendering localized sociability (particularly in laneways), and fostering new choices such as multigenerational homes and shared living.



ABOVE CENTRE A demonstration project, currently in progress, adds three new units behind an existing neighbourhood home and includes gardens, a linear trellis courtyard and alley upgrades.
ABOVE RIGHT In a reinterpretation of the row house typology, a second demonstration project retains an existing house on a corner lot and adds a rental suite and two new units. One of the new buildings is a universal unit with a rooftop garden, accessed by an interior lift overlooking a courtyard. A connecting canopy follows the rooflines of the new units and ends at a veranda added to the existing house.

But Johns is no dreamer. He tackles the financing issues, the homeowner concerns, the developer difficulties and the marketing challenges for something new and different. He has tested his model in discussion with experts and is currently undertaking two demonstration projects, making refinements and diversifying ways and means. This is especially helpful regardless of perspective, because Johns has a section to answer most readers' questions, with the testimony of experts to back him up. This turns the book into a practical guidebook for individual implementation. A patently enjoyable aspect of the book is Johns's personal reflections at the beginning, which explain the genesis of his quest, and his storytelling at the end to describe a better future with his ideas firmly deployed.

The only liability to the book, if there is one, is that it sometimes takes a rather academic tone with explanations and justifications of Johns's analytical methodology. This is understandable because this book is a polishing of his doctoral dissertation. The benefit to this style is that it makes abundantly clear that this is not just about theoretical ideas and wishful thinking: it has solid proofs, wide evaluation to cut possible liabilities, and good critique by experts who know their stuff. You can depend on the practical realism of the BAAKFIL model.

Some may wonder why Johns did not more fully explore his architectural solutions in the designer's tool kit that is integral to his model. There are questions to be asked about layout, siting and alternatives. Perhaps Johns knows his architect colleagues—their need to own designs, to prevail with better solutions, and to tailor to clients' needs and style. Perhaps he leaves design questions unresolved on purpose, as a challenge to his colleagues to amplify the model.

The biggest and most fascinating challenge that Johns puts forth, however, may be for the entire housing industry and equally for government, going well beyond infill. How can innovative thinking, beyond fostering supply, lead to new housing targeted where it is needed, while being politically resilient? We might think of how gentle densification can be further expanded with the low impacts of BAAKFIL, at the block or even neighbourhood level. For mid-scale in all suburbs, we might think about how considerations of removing land from the development proforma could open up vast parking lots in shopping malls for housing, or how better design sculpting might resolve rude adjacencies for neighbours. These politically acceptable low- and mid-rise innovations might stave off the need for more and more high-rises, now being pushed in some Canadian cities at almost any location, even if isolated or harshly impactful.

Barry Johns has done much to tame infill in this book, but he has also set a new pace and direction for the housing discussion in Canada. At all scales, how can we cut land value for affordability and secure fit for political resilience? Coming from an architect, we get the whole picture—and a delicious taste of potential.

Larry Beasley, C.M. is a former chief planner for the City of Vancouver.