



# City of Vancouver *Land Use and Development Policies and Guidelines*

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## BALCONY ENCLOSURE GUIDELINES

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**Note:** The guidelines in this report are organized under standardized headings which are being used for all guideline reports. As a consequence, there are gaps in the numbering sequence where no guidelines apply under a standardized heading.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

The original guidelines were prepared in 1985 by Raymond Letkeman Architect in consultation with Planning and Permit and Licenses Department staff.

## 1 Application and Intent

These guidelines are to be used in conjunction with those district schedules and official development plans which permit enclosed balconies to be excluded from floor space ratio (FSR).

The intent of the guidelines is to encourage good design that will complement and maintain building character, while having regard for fire safety and the interests of neighbouring building occupants.

There are so many different types of balconies and different circumstances concerning enclosures that it is not possible to write definitive guidelines. Hence a measure of discretion is needed by the Director of Planning in considering balcony enclosures. These guidelines illustrate some design considerations to assist applicants in the design of balcony enclosures, as well as to assist City staff in their evaluation.

The guidelines apply to the enclosure of existing open balconies and to the enclosure of balconies in new construction, **and where in either case an exclusion in the computation of floor space ratio (FSR) is sought.** Enclosures which do not meet the guidelines cannot be accorded the benefit of an exclusion from FSR. Reference to these guidelines is recommended for any balcony enclosure, whether or not an exclusion from FSR is sought.

All enclosed balconies must maintain sufficient spatial separation related to fire and life safety by complying with the guidelines pertaining to the **Building By-law** (see Section 5.4.3 on page 6).

The following features, although in some cases similar to balconies which may be excludable from FSR, are not subject to these guidelines:

- (a) canopies, porches or verandahs, galleries, porticos, sun decks and roof decks or gardens; and
- (b) other features which the Director of Planning considers similar.

Unless specifically stated otherwise, individual guidelines are applicable to balcony enclosures in both existing buildings and new construction.

## 2 General Design Considerations

The purpose of an enclosed balcony is to afford an occupant the year-round enjoyment of those uses to which an open balcony normally would be used in fair and warm weather. An enclosed balcony may also offer noise buffering in certain locations such as on busy arterial streets. Illustrative details must accompany all balcony enclosure applications.

While a balcony enclosure may provide many attractive uses for the occupant, careful attention should be given to preserving the design integrity of facades in existing buildings and, in new construction, to creating an identifiable architectural element such as through a distinctive shape and a predominance of clear glass. Consideration should also be given to adjoining and neighbouring dwelling units that may be affected by the proposed balcony enclosure, including the building bulk and view blockage implications of balcony enclosures.

Balcony enclosures should:

- (a) Respect and maintain view and sunlight/daylight access to adjoining and neighbouring dwellings and their balconies;
- (b) Be generally limited to one balcony enclosure per dwelling unit, although additional enclosures may be appropriate for large-sized dwelling units, having regard for the potential increase in the apparent building bulk when substantial numbers of such balconies are involved;
- (c) Be generally limited to locations other than corner balconies and balconies projecting into side yards due to the potentially greater increase in apparent building bulk, loss of views from adjoining and neighbouring dwellings (see Figures 1 and 2), and limiting distances relating to fire safety;
- (d) Be generally limited to lower floors in high-rise developments noting the views, shadow and building bulk impact that can result from enclosure of balconies in towers.

Where it is determined in existing buildings that the enclosure of corner balconies and balconies projecting into side yards will not impair views from adjoining or neighbouring units, impair light

and air to such units, and meet spatial separation requirements of the **Building By-law**, the Director of Planning may permit balconies in these locations to be enclosed.

**Figure 1. Example of Encouraged Open Corner Balcony Retaining Views**



**Figure 2. Example of Discouraged Enclosed Corner Balcony Blocking Views**



## 5 Architectural Components

### 5.4 Balconies

#### 5.4.1 Building Character

Balcony enclosures should:

- (a) Be compatible with the exterior building face and character;

There are times when it may not be appropriate to enclose a balcony due to the unique character of an existing building, such as some heritage or historic buildings or buildings with a unique decorative style. When provided, balcony enclosures should try to respect the style of architecture of the building. For example, if a building's facades are formal in their expression, balance may play a much more important role than were the facade informally arranged.

- (b) Be reviewed by the original designer of the existing building if possible, or an architect to assess the design compatibility of the proposed balcony enclosures with the existing building facade (see the Appendix on page 7 regarding the application process and submission requirements);
- (c) Be grouped so as to maintain and enhance visual interest;

Visual interest achieved through facade modulation and the play of solids against voids should be respected. As a consequence, not all of the balconies on the face of a building should be enclosed if it would result in a facade devoid of such visual interest.

- (d) Retain existing railings in order to achieve design continuity with open balconies and maintain thematic character of the original building (see Figure 3).
- (e) In new construction, be identifiable as a distinct facade component, typically expressed as a distinct shape and through a predominance of clear glazing (i.e. floor-to-ceiling for the full exterior perimeter of the space which will also mitigate additional building bulk by maximizing the glass area of the enclosure and its "lightness").

#### 5.4.2 Balcony Enclosure Materials and Function

- (1) Balcony enclosures should retain the material and colour of the existing exterior wall and balcony;

Should a balcony screen, for example, between common balconies be replaced with a solid wall, the new wall should be compatible with the exterior wall finish and colour so as to complement the building (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3. Example of Balcony Enclosures Retaining Existing Railings**

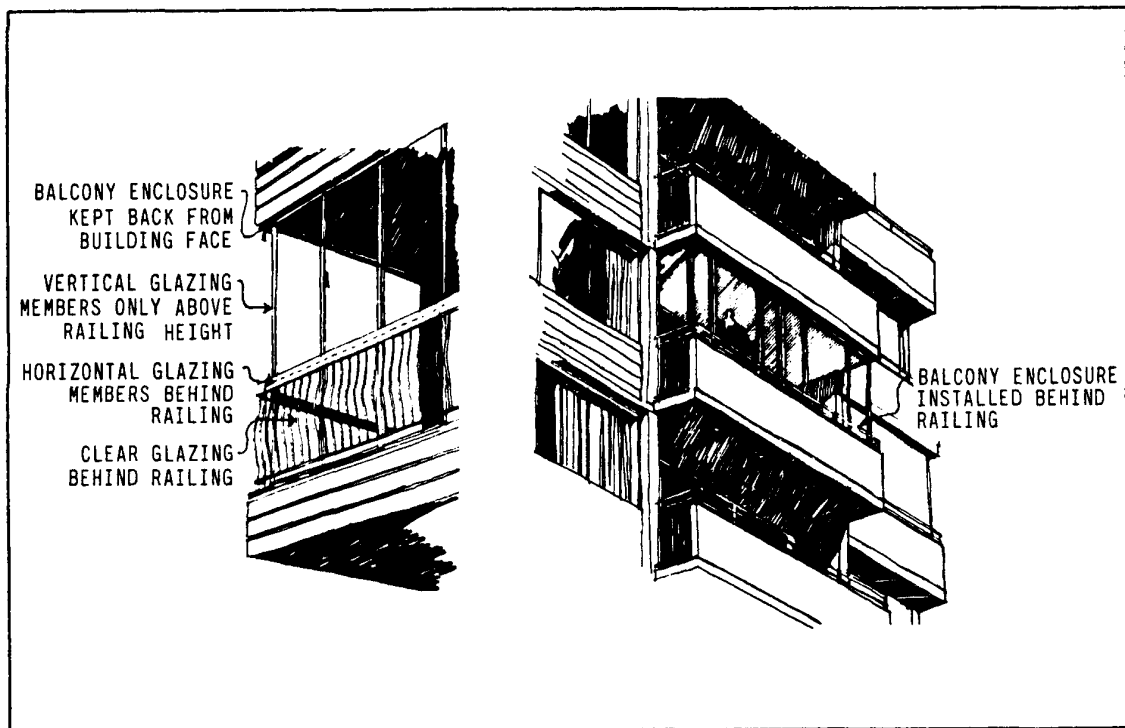
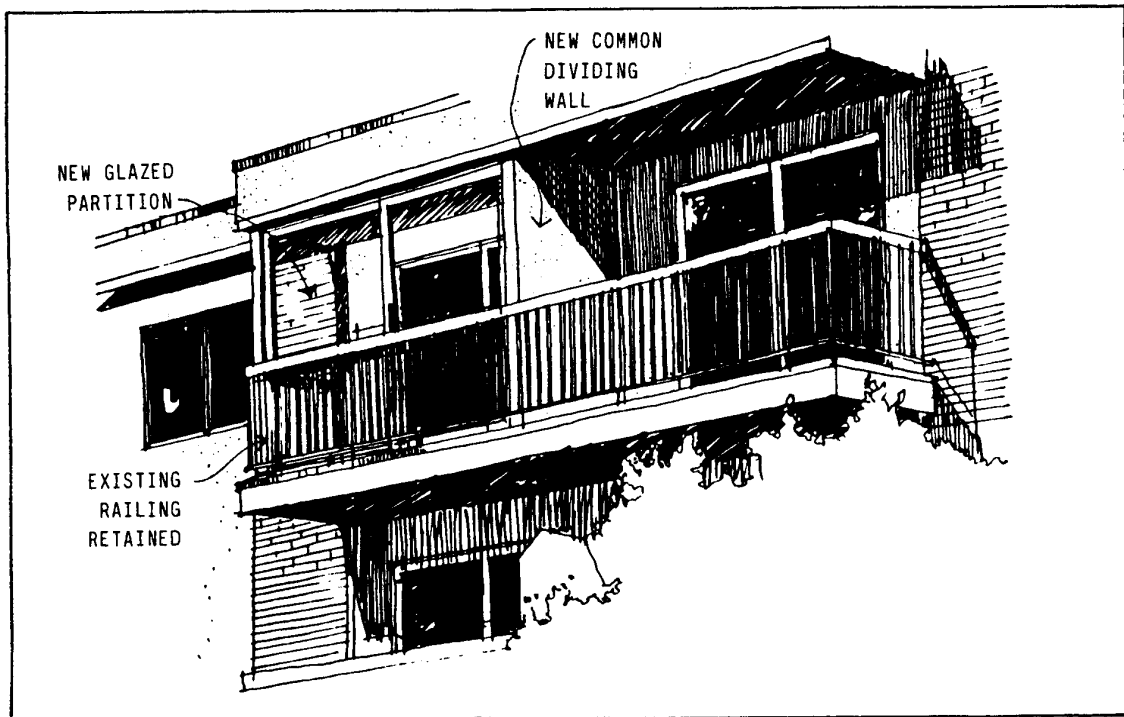


Figure 4. Example of Low-Rise Balcony Enclosure Retaining Existing Balcony and Providing Dividing Wall to Neighbouring Open Balcony



- (2) In existing buildings, balcony enclosures should be done with clear double or single glazing, set in window frames that generally match the colour and be of the same material as those used for the glazing frames of the building.

Coloured or reflective glass, draperies, blinds and screens should not be used within the balcony enclosure because of their potential to block views and increase the bulk of the building (see Figures 5 and 6).

- (3) In new construction balcony enclosures should have a minimum single clear horizontal dimension of 1.8 m and a minimum area of 4.5 m<sup>2</sup>.
- (4) Balcony enclosures should maximize glass area to admit natural light to the interior space beyond and have windows openable from the inside to facilitate natural ventilation. Openable window area should be absolutely maximized to allow the space to be utilized in a manner similar to an open balcony whenever desired by the resident. Floor surfaces should be impervious such as tile to allow the space to be used as a greenhouse solarium (e.g. for gardening) or other amenity use.

Figure 5. Example of Encouraged Transparent Balcony Enclosures Retaining Original Character of Building

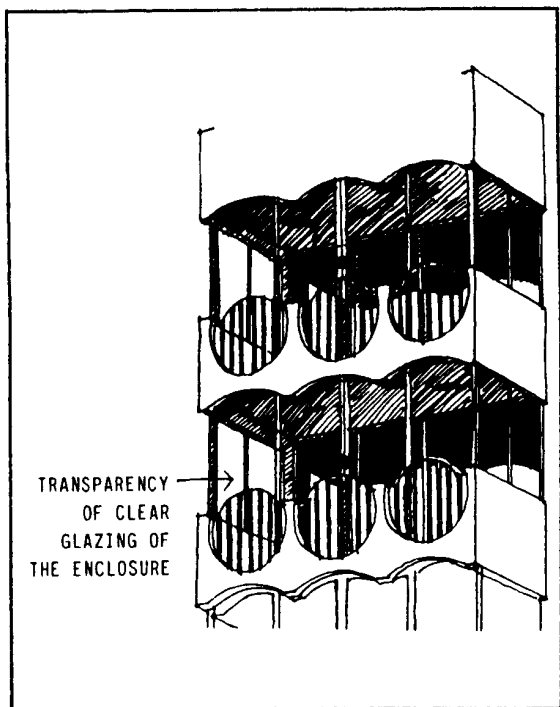
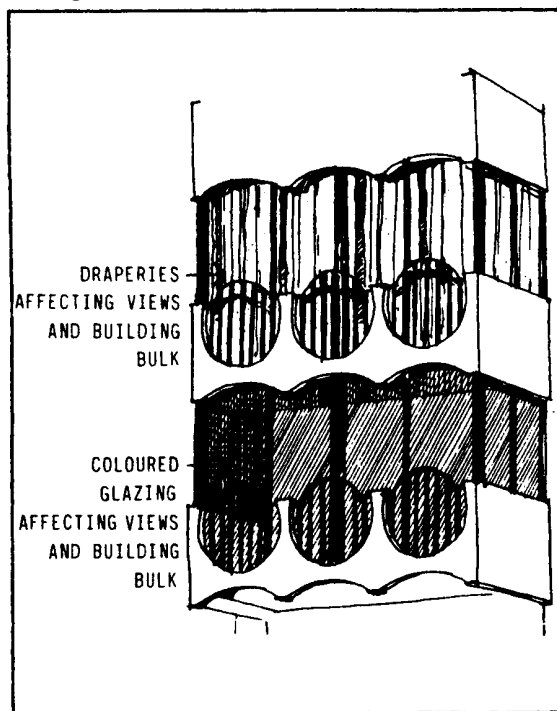


Figure 6. Example of Discouraged Non-Transparent Balcony Enclosures Increasing Apparent Bulk of Building Character



- (5) In new construction, incorporating a narrow (up to 0.6 m [2 ft.] in depth) open 'balconette' or French balcony as an extension to an enclosed balcony may, where appropriate, expand the usability of this space. Access to the French balcony should be through full height sliding or French (hinged) doors so that the enclosed balcony can function similar to an open balcony when so desired. Guardrails should be open rail or glass to maximize natural light penetration.
- (6) Thresholds between the interior of the unit and the enclosed balcony should be flush to allow access for disabled persons.

#### 5.4.3 Guidelines Pertaining to the **Building By-law** (Existing Buildings)

- (1) Balcony enclosure materials, including the ceiling and common dividing walls, should have the same construction and fire-resistance rating required for other components of the building.
- (2) Existing indoor/outdoor separation between the dwelling unit and the balcony must, in most cases, be retained to help prevent the spread of fire from unit to unit, and from building to building.

The patio or hinged door and glazing panels that separate the balcony from the main living area of the dwelling unit should usually remain intact and operable to lessen fire spread between units as well as between adjacent buildings.

Balconies in certain "high-rise" buildings (over 18 m or 59.0 ft.) may have been designed as a place of refuge from smoke, thereby requiring the retention of the existing exterior wall membrane (glazing) for smoke separation from the dwelling unit in the event of fire (see Figure 7).

- (3) Objects that could prevent sealing off the balcony enclosure in case of a fire, such as electrical wires or extension cords or objects of furniture, should not pass through door and window openings.

Whether balconies were intentionally designed as a place of refuge from smoke or not, the ability to seal them off from the main living area could be important in case of a fire. Cords may also pose a fire hazard if they fray and a safety hazard if someone were to trip over them.

- (4) Balcony enclosures should not enclose mechanical ventilation outlets such as kitchen range hoods, dryer or washroom vents, nor block light and ventilation for bedrooms or living areas.

**Figure 7. Example of an Encouraged Balcony Enclosure that Retains the Building's Exterior Wall Glazing (for Smoke Isolation) between the Main Living Area and Enclosed Balcony**



- (5) Recessed balconies or recessed portions of balconies in buildings more than 18 m in height must not be enclosed unless at least a 760 mm (30 inch) deep open area across the front of the enclosed portion of the balcony is provided, accessible from within the suite.

Since these balconies often function as areas of refuge in case of fire, ventilation and emergency access are important. A minimum 760 mm open area across the front of the enclosed portion of the balcony would facilitate both (see Figures 8 and 9).

- (6) To facilitate emergency evacuation in the event of a fire, projecting balcony enclosure windows should be readily openable from inside, providing a minimum openable area of 0.50 m<sup>2</sup> (5.38 sq. ft.), a minimum clear width of 500 mm (19.68 inches) and a maximum sill height of 1200 mm (47.24 inches) above the balcony floor.

These openable windows should also be approximately uniformly distributed in area on opposite sides of the portion of a balcony projecting beyond the adjacent main wall of the building to permit cross ventilation for flushing out smoke and to facilitate rescue service in fire situations (see Figure 7).

- (7) A professional engineer's certification of structural design may be required to verify the adequacy of the proposed enclosure to withstand the force against, and suction of, wind on the enclosure.

In severe wind conditions, glass panels, particularly if easily removable could vibrate and shake loose if not properly designed and engineered. In such a case, serious bodily injury or death might occur if someone were struck by falling components.

Figure 8. Permitted Enclosure of a Recessed Balcony in a High-Rise Building (Note: 760 mm Setback Provided Between Enclosure and Railing)

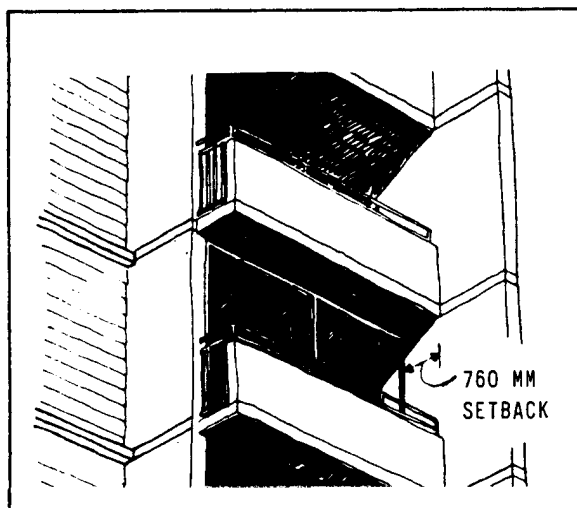
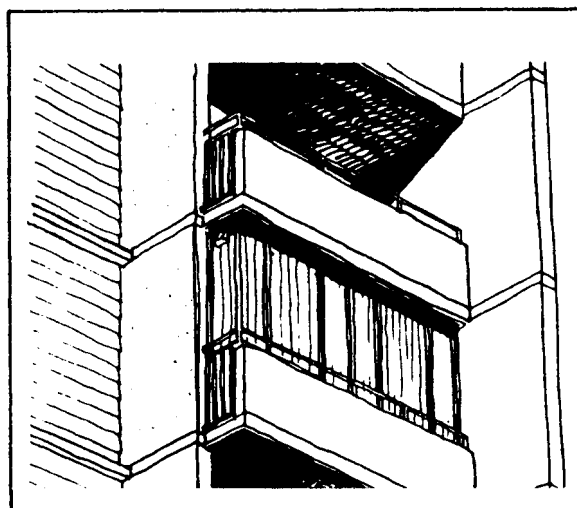


Figure 9. Prohibited Enclosure of a Recessed Balcony in a High-Rise Building



## Appendix

### Submission Requirements

#### 1. Combination Development/Building Permit Applications

Combination development/building permit applications for the enclosure of one or more balconies should be made in accordance with the normal application procedures and should be accompanied by a minimum of three sets of drawings, clearly indicating:

- (a) Statement of building statistics, including existing, proposed and maximum permitted floor and balcony areas;
- (b) Site plan, floor plan(s) and building elevations) showing the location, dimensions and details of all proposed balcony enclosures, having particular regard to exterior finish materials, colours and window frame finish and colours;
- (c) Statement of the smoke-control measure used if the building height exceeds 18 m (59.0 ft.);
- (d) In cases involving the enclosure of a number of balconies, or when the building does not already have some enclosed balconies, applicants should submit, in support of their applications, building elevation photographs in context with neighbouring buildings and a written rationale explaining how their proposal conforms to these guidelines; and
- (e) Details pertaining to compliance with the **Vancouver Building By-law** (refer to Section 5.4.3 of these guidelines or specifics).

#### 2. Preliminary Development Permit Applications

A preliminary development permit application is recommended in cases involving the enclosure of numerous balconies in existing building where it is necessary to establish a comprehensive idea of the future appearance of the building. Applicants may find this process beneficial with respect to finalizing an overall building theme and, upon approval, qualifying for a combination development/building permit, which may then be obtained for either all or individual enclosures. The submission requirements for a preliminary development permit application are generally the same as those for a complete development permit application described in the above, except that the floor plans and elevations only need to be conceptual drawings.

Generally, to obtain a combination development/building permit after receiving a preliminary approval, applicants are required to submit three sets of revised and complete drawings indicating compliance with any conditions of approval, and also indicating details pertaining to compliance with the **Vancouver Building By-law**.