RAISE THE ROOF

Office developers are finding fresh, cost-effective and eye-catching uses for rooftops

NOA GLOUBERMAN

Like so many mechanical rooms and stairwells, rooftops have traditionally been considered unusable space. Today that is no longer the case, with more new office towers in British Columbia being designed to include functional, multi-purpose roofs. From green space to workspace, these buildings and their tenants are benefiting in a multitude of ways, from the top down.

The west expansion of the Vancouver Convention Centre boasts a six-acre living roof with more than 400,000 indigenous plants and grasses | MAX LINDENTHALER

Perhaps the most obvious benefits are environmental, and B.C. happens to house Canada's biggest (the world's 10th-largest) green roof. The west expansion of the Vancouver Convention Centre boasts a six-acre living roof packed with planet-friendly features like indigenous plants and grasses, honey-producing beehives and drainage and recovery systems that collect treated waste water from the facility's washrooms and use it to irrigate the roof during drier months.

PWL Partnership Landscape Architects Inc. principal Bruce Hemstock, who designed the centre's crowning glory, says the ecology of the roof is even making a positive impact on certain issues related to global warming.

"Green roofs are great heat sinks," Hemstock explains during a tour of the roof, which is not accessible to the public. "They absorb heat [and] they also cool the air. They also trap stormwater and release it very slowly … like it would happen in nature. Green roofs can do that."

As with the majority of large and demanding roofing projects in British Columbia, such green roofs carry the Roofing Contractors Association of BC's RoofStar Guarantee, which is often required with government and corporate construction.

A second green roof, this time at the Broadway Tech Centre business campus in Vancouver, delivers similar benefits. The site's 270,000-square-foot roof scape is planted with trees, shrubs, perennials and grasses that minimize temperature fluctuations in the structures below by shielding them from the sun, preventing heat gains and losses and reducing energy consumption throughout the year.

Randy Sharp, principal of Sharp & Diamond Landscape

RANDY SHARP | PRINCIPAL, SHARP & DIAMOND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE INC.

[The aim in designing the rooftop space was] to push this development beyond a generic office park, creating a healthy, sustainable and inspirational space for everyone to enjoy

Raise the roof

Telus Garden in downtown Vancouver will feature 10,000 square feet of green roofs with two "elevated forests" that workers can access | TELUS CORP.

The 50-storey 3 Civic Plaza in Surrey, a mixed-use project, will feature more than 5,200 square feet of rooftop meeting rooms and conference facilities | CENTURY GROUP

Architecture Inc., which provided ecological and urban design for the tech centre's roof, says the green benefits are also financial in nature.

Unlike the convention centre, the Broadway Tech Centre encourages tenants to use their rooftop, which includes North America's first infill sports field, café patios and tree-lined walkways. As Sharp notes in a separate press release, the aim in designing the space was "to push this development beyond a generic office park, creating a healthy, sustainable and inspirational space for everyone to enjoy."

While many high rise developers are rediscovering roof space for amenities, gardens and even fountains, Century Group may be the first to consider a commercial business operating from atop a tower.

The 50-storey 3 Civic Plaza, a mixed-use project by Century Group and Surrey City Development Corp. will feature more than 5,200 square feet of rooftop meeting rooms and conference facilities, set among gardens and water features on the tallest building between Vancouver and Calgary.

While designed by Cotter Architects as part of the hotel and condominium amenities, the roof space could be leased to a private operator, according to Century spokesman David Laulainen, who says the company is examining that option.

"I can see a business offering space for weddings, bar mitzvahs, corporate meetings and other events," while keeping the rooftop gardens accessible to tower residents, Laulainen says.

By commercializing the roof space, the amenity would not be factored into the tower's common areas, which would keep strata fees lower for residential tenants, he adds. The tower is to complete in 2017.

Back in downtown Vancouver, a new mixed-use development aims to transform an entire city block from the bottom up. Telus Garden, set for completion in 2015, will include a residential tower plus a 24-storey building with 500,000 square feet of office space for multiple tenants. The complex, bounded by Georgia, Robson,

Raise the roof

The rooftop of the new 725 Thurlow office tower will include a fully accessible rooftop patio and lounge area | BOMA BC

Seymour and Richards streets, will be topped by 10,000 square feet of green roofs that will include "sky gardens," where organic produce for local restaurants will be cultivated, and two "elevated forests" for employee use.

Telus president and CEO Darren Entwistle says the towers will integrate leading-edge technology with "environmental sustainability and tomorrow's work styles."

At 745 Thurlow in downtown Vancouver, Musson Cattell Mackey Partnership has planned two green roof spaces into the 24-storey office tower. This includes a rooftop terrace extending around three sides of the building, accessible to tenants from the third floor. As well, a rooftop amenity area will include an outdoor patio and entertainment zone with a gas fire pit and barbeque.

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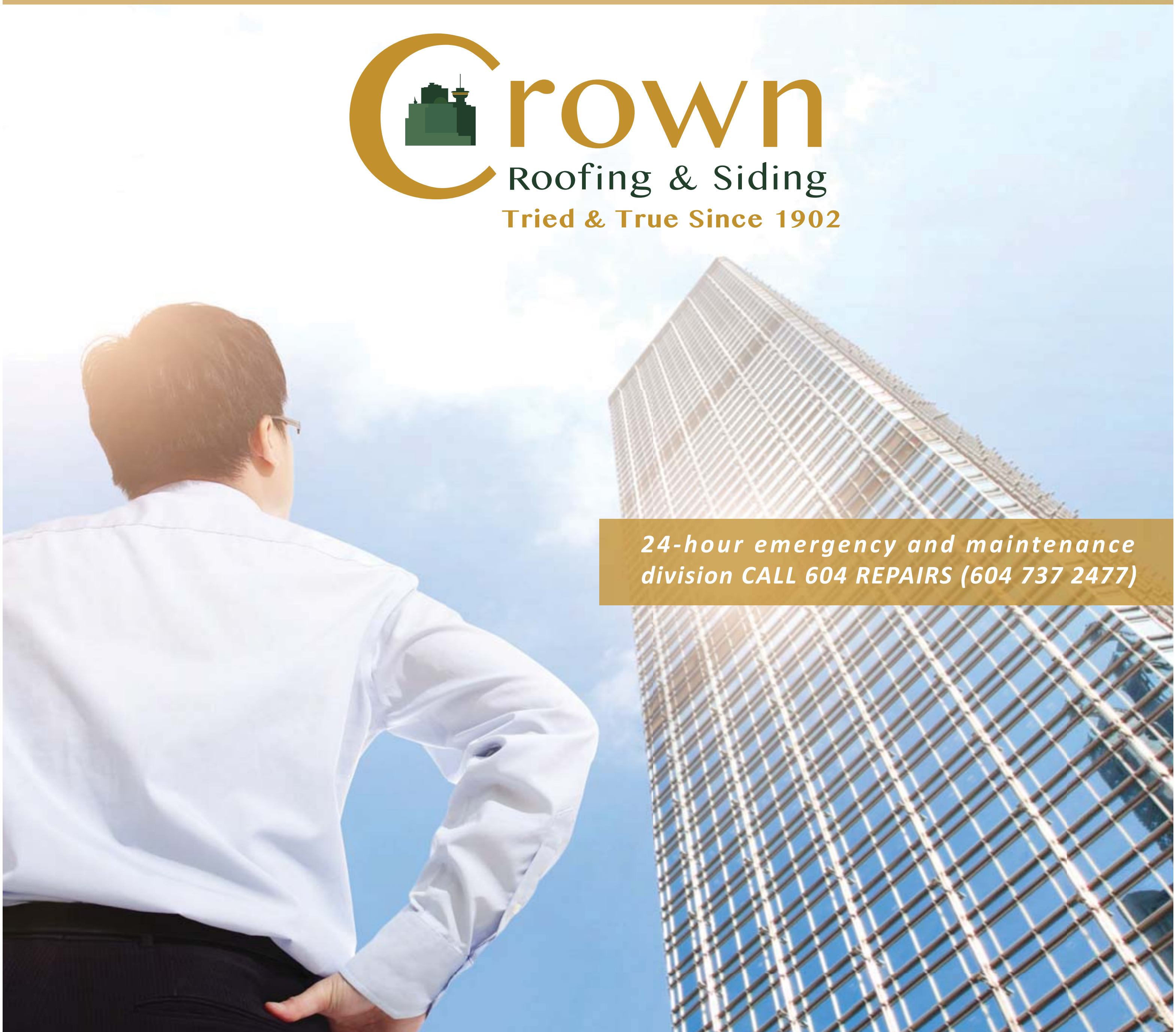

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CIVIC INCENTIVES PUSHING OFFICE TOWERS HIGHER

Brady Fleguel | Has Vancouver's bonus zoning led to an oversupply of downtown office space?

As a consultant to many market participants, I am herein required to delicately consider the facts surrounding one of the hottest topics in the commercial real estate industry in 2014: City of Vancouver incentives. I think the best way to approach this article is to consider the question in two parts: (1.) Is there actually an oversupply of office space in downtown Vancouver? and (2.) Is the city policy providing excessive incentives to developers to build office space?

In 2007, the city adopted the Metropolitan Core Jobs and Economy Land Use Plan. Hot on the heels of a number of office buildings being converted into residential condominiums, this plan was designed to ensure that there would be enough development capacity to accommodate future job growth and economic activity in the metro core. Residential uses were discouraged in the area (and subsequently removed from permitted uses within the zoning bylaws) while allowable densities were increased by a 2.0 FSR (floor space ratio) in the central business district (CBD). This policy essentially "saved" CBD sites from being developed with condominiums.

Six years after the metro core jobs study was approved, we find ourselves with seven office towers under construction in the CBD. These buildings stand to add roughly 2.25 million square feet of office density to the downtown market, an increase of about 9.2 per cent to the total inventory. More than half of the space under construction is pre-leased. The first three buildings are expected to be complete by 2014 with the remaining space scheduled for 2017 completion. If we consider the historical absorption rate, there could be five to 10 years of Class AAA inventory available by 2017 – assuming that none of the seven additional proposed office towers in the CBD enter the market during this time frame.

Most brokerages have been forecasting an increase in vacancy from current record lows of two to three per cent (Class AAA space) to as high as five per cent to 10 per cent by 2016-2017. My cautious conclusion: increased vacancy levels will lead to a more sustainable market and slight downward pressure on rental rates. Those building the new space are well capitalized and control a significant percentage of the total office inventory downtown. This adds stability to the entire market.

It is often mentioned in the industry that the city is "giving away office density for free" in order to spur job space in the core. Yet a close look at the approved office projects shows that the majority of sites were not heavily incentivized to build. Some sites used unbuilt density under the existing zoning bylaw or official development plan (MNP Tower, 725 Granville Street and 800 Griffiths Way), while 745 Thurlow and 980 Howe gave up the opportunity to build residential uses in order to gain additional office density. 520 West Georgia was rezoned in combination with the residential tower at Robson and Richards streets and the Telus office building at 775 Richards Street. The land lift associated with this project was subject to the city's Community Amenity Contribution Policy with significant funds used to acquire and build a park at Smithe and Richards street and for tenant upgrades to city-owned space at the CBC building. The developer of 475 Howe Street proposes a $15.1 million heritage renovation of the former stock exchange b`uilding, at a cost of $47.50-per-square-foot buildable, for the incremental density increase

Overall, it would appear that the new buildings underway are playing by the same rules as everyone else.

The current construction boom is a result of a handful of factors of which land cost only forms a portion of the equation