

Do you actually use your condo balcony?

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Brad Lamb, Toronto's condo king, has a huge outdoor terrace attached to his condo, but almost never goes out there.

"It's over 3,000 square feet, it's got a tent and a fantastic view of the city and the park," he says. "It's like something from an amazing hotel, but I don't use it. Even in the summer, I'd rather cook inside than go out and barbecue."

Nor does he believe that the thousands of people to whom he has sold condos get much use from their outdoor spaces. The balconies that stud every new condo tower, he says, are "a pain in the ass" for builders, and a neglected item for almost everyone else.

"Most people don't use the balconies, but they insist on having them," he says. "People fantasize about what their lifestyle will be in a condo, but the reality is they come home, they turn on the TV and eat dinner, and they don't go out there."

Condo balconies are probably the most visible fantasy objects on the urban landscape, and often the homeliest. The standard minimum is a shallow concrete platform, just big enough for a couple of chairs and a bicycle. But even a small balcony costs money to build, usually drains heat from the interior space and may set its owner up for expensive repair or replacement in the future. Multiply those costs over thousands of units, and balcony love looks like an expensive and mostly pleasureless affair.

People demand balconies because they want to be able to get outside without riding the elevator, or because they're afraid their unit will be harder to sell without a balcony – a self-fulfilling fear, says Lamb – or simply because other people have them. Toronto architect Rodolphe el-Khoury lived in a condo tower where his unit didn't have a balcony, and he resented it. "I always felt cheated, and envied the other units that had one," he says. He moved to Radio City, a pair of towers on Mutual Street, and gained a bedroom balcony and a roof terrace, but doesn't use either. Nor does he see

his neighbours taking much advantage of their outside domains, except for storage.

“The balcony may indeed be the architectural equivalent of the NordicTrack machine,” says el-Khoury. You buy it because you want to see yourself using it, but seldom do; though at least an exercise machine is usable in winter. Balcony season in Toronto lasts only about three months.

Even with its rainy periods, Vancouver has many more balcony days, as well as a more outdoorsy population. “They definitely use them [here],” says Tracie McTavish, president of Rennie Marketing Systems, a major player in Vancouver’s condo market. “Especially when the deck space is coming off the living space, it’s used at a very high level.”

The notional value of a balcony may be particularly strong when you’re signing up for a building that doesn’t exist yet. Not many people are able to imagine how private or safe their imaginary balcony will feel, dozens of storeys above the street, adjacent to other balconies and buildings that are walled in glass.

“I know a lot of people who are fearful of standing on a wafer-thin slab of concrete that’s hanging off the edge of a building 40 floors up,” says Ted Kesik, a professor of building science at the University of Toronto. “And even if the weather is nice, the wind buffeting can be so extreme that you can hardly leave anything out there without the risk of the wind sucking it off.”

Kesik says that even an unused balcony costs its owner money and comfort, because most are extensions of the interior concrete floor, with no thermal breaks to prevent heat loss. They chill the inside floor in winter, he says, and can cause condensation to creep into ceilings and floors, spotting them with mould. The smallest balconies don’t even properly shade the unit below, and because they’re cheaply made and completely exposed, they will eventually have to be torn off and replaced.

Balcony safety became a headline issue in Toronto in 2011, when the glass fronts of several downtown balconies shattered and fell to earth. Changes to building codes have made that less likely with new balconies, but have also made them more expensive to build.

Brad Lamb estimates that for a 12-storey, 150-unit tower that costs \$30-million to build, balconies represent a cost of about \$2-million. Balconies can also diminish the sellable square footage, for a loss he estimates at \$4-million in revenue. "There's a huge financial advantage for developers and consumers not to insist on balconies," he says, even without allowing for heat loss and long-term maintenance.

Peter Clewes, an architect who specializes in condo towers, says that balconies are "kind of pointless" as outdoor spaces, but useful for shading and for building design. "We use the balconies as an architectural device to shape and sculpt the building, and give some sense of differentiation from one building to another," he says. ICE Condominiums, a two-tower complex his firm architectsAlliance is building on York Street, displaces the balconies from one side to the other about halfway up, to give "a kind of visual twist or torque to the towers." Half the units won't have balconies, but the project sold out anyway.

At a purely ornamental level, however, balconies can also make buildings more boring. "Wrap-around balconies can overwhelm and obscure the building articulation, and evacuate the building of character," says a report by 14 architects and engineers at a City of Toronto design review panel meeting held in April.

According to the Toronto planning department, nearly 50,000 condo units were built in the city between 2007 and 2011, most of which probably have balconies. That's a lot of fantasizing, and a lot of money spent on a commodity that's wasteful, often unattractive and seldom used. It's all part of Toronto's larger urban dream, that the city can will itself into habits more appropriate to other climes.

"People tend to idealize the notion of exterior space in Toronto," says Clewes. "But we don't live in southern California."