



# RM-4 ROWHOUSE, COURTYARD ROWHOUSE AND STACKED TOWNHOUSE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

*Authority - Director of Planning  
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## Application and Intent

This bulletin clarifies how rowhouse, courtyard rowhouse and stacked townhouse developments can be accommodated within the existing RM-4 regulations, using discretionary relaxations in Section 5.3 of the District Schedule.

The RM-4 regulations anticipate a low-rise apartment typology. However, City of Vancouver's broader housing policies recognize the need to provide a greater variety of housing options, including the ground-related and larger, family-oriented dwelling units provided in rowhouse and stacked townhouse developments.

As rowhouse and stacked townhouses developments require significant relaxations to the District Schedule, applications will go through a careful staff review and neighbour notification process. Relaxations remain at the discretion of the Director of Planning. They are granted in order to achieve social and community goals, such as: the provision of increased housing variety and greater affordability, retention of a character house, and retention of mature trees. Not all RM-4 sites will be appropriate for this form of development.

### 1 Conditional Approval Uses

Rowhouses, courtyard rowhouses and stacked townhouses, as a form of Multiple Dwelling, may be approved as a conditional use, subject to Section 11.25 of the Zoning & Development By-law.

### 2 Minimum Site Area

Due to externalized circulation and larger, multi-level units, courtyard rowhouse and stacked townhouse developments require larger sites than other forms of multiple dwellings. Courtyard rowhouses and stacked townhouses will not be considered on sites less than 703 m<sup>2</sup> (7 565 sq. ft.). Rowhouses (i.e. without a courtyard) will not be considered on sites less than 550 m<sup>2</sup> (5 920 sq. ft.).

For sites larger than 560 m<sup>2</sup>, off-site parking should be provided underground or within the outermost walls of a building, per the District Schedule.

### 3 Height

Rowhouse or stacked townhouse development should generally comply with Section 4.3 of the District Schedule, with the following considerations:

- (a) If a rowhouse or stacked townhouse development is seeking a reduced front and/or rear yard setback, in a flat-roof scheme, substantial setback(s) (2.4 m or 8 ft.) should be provided at the uppermost storey, facing the reduced yard(s). In a sloped-roof scheme, the uppermost storey should be substantially contained within a steeply-sloped roof form;
- (b) Relaxations to the maximum height (10.7 m or 35.1 ft.) will only be considered on sites with significant slope and/or to accommodate a steeply-sloped roof form; and
- (c) Relaxations to the height envelope at the north property line may be considered if impacts to neighbour views are minimal.

### 4 Yards

Yard setbacks in this District Schedule anticipate a low-rise apartment building scenario, in which building massing is concentrated in the centre of the site. In rowhouse and stacked townhouse developments, building massing is moved to the periphery of the site, so some latitude to yard dimensions may be considered. The following are the maximum relaxations to yards:

- (a) **Front yard:** Front yard should be a minimum of 3.7 m (12 ft.), increasing to 4.9 m (16 ft.) within 4.9 m (16 ft.) of the side property line, measured to the building face;
- (b) **Side yard:** Side yards should be a minimum of 4.2 m (8 ft.). Side yards should be kept clear of development, including exit stairs and other structures. Stairs are permissible only if they follow natural changes in grade; and
- (c) **Rear yard:** Rear yard should be a minimum 1.8 m (7 ft.), increasing to 3.7 m (12 ft.) within 3.7 m (12 ft.) of the side property line. Entry landings may project up to 1.2 m (4 ft.) in to the rear yard.

### 5 Courtyard Dimension

In courtyard rowhouse developments, the central courtyard is critical to providing access to natural light and ventilation to both rows of units. It should be a minimum of:

- (a) 7.3 m (24 ft.) clear width on the first level, measured from the building face;
- (b) 7.3 m (24 ft.) clear width on the second level, measured from projections/bays; and
- (c) 9.8 m (32 ft.) clear width on the third level, measured from the building face (not from sloped portions of the roof, balcony rails or architectural appurtenances).

### 6 Floor Space Ratio

While the District Schedule allows a maximum conditional FSR of 1.45 for multiple dwellings, this FSR is premised on an apartment building typology, in which circulation is integrated in the building and counted in floorspace. In a rowhouse or stacked townhouse typology, circulation is often externalized and, in some cases, excluded from floorspace. These developments will thus not achieve the maximum available FSR under the District Schedule.

Smaller and/or more constrained sites may achieve 1.2 FSR or less; larger, unencumbered sites may achieve up to 1.3 FSR. Developments proposing the retention of an existing character or heritage building may achieve FSR in excess of 1.3 FSR, subject to urban design performance.

## 7 External Design

- (a) **Building Width:** Rowhouse or stacked townhouse development may achieve the maximum building width for multiple dwellings in the District Schedule. Building frontages exceeding 22.8 m (75 ft.) will require a greater degree of architectural articulation, including substantial changes in plane and roofline.
- (b) **Building Separation:** Separation between buildings, whether on a single frontage or at a corner, should be at least 3.7 m (12.1 ft.). For courtyard schemes, one primary access of at least 3.7 m (12.1 ft.) should be provided from the street, either at the side yard or mid-site.
- (c) **Courtyard:** The courtyard is a shared amenity and, as such, should provide useable common space and gardens for the residents. In addition:
  - (i) The courtyard should be parallel, not perpendicular, to the primary street frontage;
  - (ii) The courtyard should be free of major obstructions, such as the underground parking ramp or exit stairs. Externalized stairs to individual units should not climb more than 1.5 m (5 ft.), so that they do not unduly obstruct the common space. In some cases, a portion of the stair may need to be internalized within the dwelling unit; and
  - (iii) Exterior corridors that are roofed over or overhung by the storey above are included in floorspace.
- (d) **Access and Natural Light to a Basement:** Lowered areas, such as window wells and sunken patios, may be used to provide natural light or access to a basement, provided that:
  - (i) They are modest in width and directly serve a unit entry and/or a primary window (i.e. not a continuous “trough” along the face of the building);
  - (ii) In a courtyard, they are carefully designed and minimized to preserve useable courtyard space. Where possible, guardrails should be eliminated;
  - (iii) They are screened with landscaping;
  - (iv) No guardrails are located in the front yard; and
  - (v) No lowered areas or wells are located in the side yard setback.
- (e) **Relationship to Finished Grade and Public Realm:** The establishment of floor elevations should be considered carefully to respond to existing site topography. Conspicuous retaining walls should be avoided. Wherever possible, protrusions of the underground parking garage should not be evident above the natural grade.

## 8 Internal Design

A high standard of livability should be achieved for all dwelling units, including those located at the lowest level.

- (a) **Unit Width:** Individual rowhouse units should not be less than 3.7 m (12 ft.), clear interior. Primary living spaces in stacked townhouse units should not be less than 4.3 m (14 ft.). (Fee simple rowhouses require a minimum lot width and frontage of 5.0 m (16.4 ft.), for site servicing and subdivision.); and
- (b) **Living Spaces Below Grade:** Principle living spaces (i.e. living rooms) should be no more than 3 ft. below grade. Habitable room shall be no more than 1.5m (5 ft.) below grade. A minimum ceiling height of 2.4 m (8 ft.) should be provided.

## 9 Landscape

- (a) **Courtyard:** The design of the courtyard should include a balance of layered plantings and paving. Plantings may include new trees, shrubs, groundcover and vines placed at grade or within planters to create separation between common and private areas. Wherever possible, place trees directly in the ground. If planting over structures, provide substantial growing medium volumes within irrigated planters (to meet BCSLA latest

Standard). Incorporate porous paving with drive aisles and pathways to slow rainwater runoff.

- (b) **Front yard:** A significant portion of the front yard should be landscaped with layered greenery to create an identity for the dwellings and an amenity to the neighbourhood. Screen views of lower level windows and patios with new small trees, shrubs and groundcover plantings. Front entry paths should align with entry porches. Wherever possible, protect existing mature trees.
- (c) **Lane:** Provide plantings within a minimum 3 foot wide landscape setback, to soften long expanses of bare fences and concrete walls. Underground parking structures should be set back to accommodate plantings at-grade. Protect at-grade plantings with a durable raised curb edge.
- (d) **Side yard:** Where elevated courtyards are proposed, exposed portions of underground parking should be clad with high-quality, durable materials and screened with plantings at-grade.