The Twindo Solution

Merging two condo units can be a viable option, creating larger units from existing housing stock

A small and growing number of urban dwellers merge two condos into one unit. Twindos (literally, twin condos) are adjacent units transformed into a single apartment. An opening in the wall between two units is sometimes all that's required to live twice as big. More elaborate renovations can turn an ordinary apartment into a custom home. Fuelling this trend is a desire for a vibrant urban lifestyle. For many, a twindo is a downtown housing option that overcomes cramped apartment living conditions and beats suburban living.

You might think that stars have to be aligned for the unit next door to be on sale just at the right time. Some owners simply ask their neighbours ... and discover they had been thinking about selling for some time. Realtors scan for ads in a desired neighbourhood and leap at listings for units 501 and 502 at the same address. Once a conditional offer is in place, prospective owners head for city hall and expect planners and building inspectors to give them quick answers.

Major building repairs often result in special one-time payments well in excess of regular strata fees. When many owners in a building decide to sell, side-by-side units become more readily available. A major retrofit project creates ideal conditions for a new owner to repurpose adjacent units. It is important that the municipality's housing stock be maintained and that chronic deficiencies in older condo buildings be fixed; investing in twindos can play an important role in that process.

Merging two condos can be an overwhelming undertaking for the uninitiated. Beyond plumbing and fire codes lies the twin challenge of dealing with strata councils and municipal officials. Staff at an enlightened municipality understand that twindos are a viable housing option.

Twinning Guide

Municipalities increasingly welcome the twinning of condos. Here is a quick guide to help municipal leaders become more enlightened about twindos.

- Municipal councils should adopt policies supporting the concept of twin condos as a flexible form of housing, subject to strata council approval and adherence to fire and building codes.
- Pre-sale phase of a project is the simplest scenario. Municipal staff should treat this as a minor floor plan adjustment. Density being expressed as a ceiling (e.g., maximum units per acre), twindos already fall within a project's approved density.
- Side-by-side units in existing lowrise, wood-frame buildings are
 technically easy to join. Merging
 units in concrete structures is more
 challenging; but, it can be done,
 as long as a door-size portion of
 the wall between the units is free
 of structural elements and utilities.
 Municipalities should streamline
 the process for applications and
 inspections where basic conditions
 are met and the project is little more

- than a renovation. Repurposing the extra kitchen is a pretty simple job.
- A kitchen's size and existing plumbing facilitate conversion to a practical bath/laundry room. Once appliances are out, a former kitchen with cupboards left intact can be a highly functional hobby room: painting easels and sewing machines can finally move out of the dining room.
- be given handouts summarizing applicable codes and by-laws. For instance, clarify the difference between a strata owner's premises and a strata's common property (hallways, structural elements, and the exterior envelope).
- If an application is bound to be denied, do it early. Two-storey twindos (units one above the other) are seldom worth the effort. Even a wealthy owner will be challenged to adequately resolve fire separation issues and guarantee the structural integrity of the building. Renovations that require access to another unit or common property should also be denied.
- Explain financial impacts. Renovations increase resale values and property assessments, so owners should not be surprised if the combined property taxes increase. In major rehabilitation projects,

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property tax revenues can increase significantly. If one of the two kitchens is fully decommissioned, an owner may apply to have utilities reduced from two separate fees to a single family charge. When developers twin several condos in a major building renovation, they are normally granted a reduction of utilities matching the reduced number of units.

In most jurisdictions, trying to create a single legal title for the two former properties is not advisable. There is no downside for the municipality or the owner to keep the units under two strata title registrations, as it provides more flexibility for future owners.

Twindo building permits call for flexibility and, in most municipalities, new rules. Staff are well equipped to meet the needs of single-family homeowners who frequently apply for major renovations and secondary suites. It is time for condo owners to get some attention from municipal officials.

For residents who stay the course and navigate through the required approvals, a twindo is well worth the effort. The result of merging two condos is a unique urban dwelling with breathing room. And, when they expand their own condo, the taxpayers' new home remains close to the public library, recreation centre, and neighbourhood they already love.

Twindo owners are young families with a second child needing a family room and extra bedroom. They are mature couples who downsized beyond their comfort level and decide to

acquire the bachelor unit next door as a guest suite for kids and grandkids, a bright artist studio, or a sewing room. They are young entrepreneurs needing office space for a home-based business.

Twindo Trends

Why is this happening now? Several trends appear to be converging at the same time as wildly different housing options (think conversion of containers into housing) are featured in the media.

1. Average condo is getting smaller.

New strata developments consist of smaller units. The average size of condo apartments and townhouses has been decreasing since 2008. This trend leaves growing families with fewer options.

2. Young families like the urban lifestyle.

Young families are increasingly willing to stay in downtown apartments, even with children. For many people, suburbia and manicured lawns evoke negative images of commuting and urban sprawl. Moreover, the reality of reduced job security and lower median income makes single-family home ownership far less attainable.

3. Aging stock of condo buildings.

A large number of condos are reaching the age when a major mid-life rehabilitation is required. Renovating a small condo may be a questionable investment; but, renovating two units into a larger twindo often proves to be a better investment. The cost of joining two units is minuscule when it is undertaken as part of a major renovation.

4. Demand for larger condos.

A larger unit is a common wish for families. Access to extra bedrooms and work/storage space is why most people consider purchasing the unit next door and creating a twindo in the first place. These are the features that will keep the unit marketable later on.

5. Reluctance to move.

For families who love their neighbourhood and local parks, for people who shop where the boutique owners know their name, the option to grow their space rather than move is extremely appealing.

The growing appeal of twinned condos is not about gentrification. Towers already offer luxurious penthouse apartments. However, larger units that are affordable are still extremely rare. In many markets, the only alternative to a condo is to purchase a single-family house – an option that has become out of reach for young families.

Beyond using the guidelines in this article to facilitate the merging of condos, municipal officials should give this housing choice more visibility. For instance, consider working with first adopters in your municipality to share their successful twindo conversion story with the local media. For residents aspiring to a more sustainable downtown apartment lifestyle, two condos merged into one can be the affordable answer to a question they didn't know to ask. MW

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