

Selling a Village, Building Towers

Arthur McInnis

Colliers International is currently marketing a development site in James Bay under the name One Point. Here are six points in reply.

The marketing materials for One Point perform a revealing sleight of hand. Page after page celebrates James Bay as one of Victoria's "most walkable and bikeable neighbourhoods". It's an historic, human-scaled "bedroom community" surrounded by water, filled with local shops, Fisherman's Wharf, Beacon Hill Park, and a beloved streetscape of Victorian-era homes. The brochure photographs are practically pastoral. Then the proposal arrives. It holds out two six-storey residential blocks totalling 123,624 gross square feet on less than a one-acre site with no commercial uses at grade and no community facilities.

The central irony is plain. The very qualities being marketed as the site's appeal are precisely what the proposed development would erode. It seems there is a fundamental contradiction here.

Height and the Official Community Plan

The planning overview section makes a curious move. It notes that the OCP's Legislative District designation supports high-rise development and characterises a "proposed 14-storey development" as a "strong fit within this framework". Some may recall that 14 has been described as similar to 12 by planning staff before. It then pivots to a six-storey proposal. Read charitably, this is contextual framing about the broader district. Read less charitably, it is teeing up a future upzoning argument, signalling to buyers that latent density entitlement exists beyond what is currently proposed. A sophisticated purchaser would read it as an option, not a ceiling.

The Legislative District designation is primarily associated with the BC Legislature precinct and the Inner Harbour gateway. This is a specific civic zone. Applying its high-rise framing to a residential street corner in James Bay stretches that designation's intent considerably. The OCP language about high-rise development being appropriate "where thoughtfully designed and appropriately sited" is doing a great deal of work here, and the brochure presents it as settled rather than contested planning ground.

Scale, Massing, and the Missing Ground Floor

One of the cardinal lessons of post-war urban renewal, learned the hard way, is that large residential buildings which sit inert at street level destroy the conditions that make urban neighbourhoods liveable. One Point reproduces this error almost by design. The brochure explicitly warns: "No daycare or commercial units are proposed as part of the development."

In a neighbourhood where street-level activation is both the primary amenity and a fragile social good, a fully residential ground floor represents a significant planning concession that the proposal does not justify.

A three-street confluence of this scale is exactly the kind of site where a corner café, a small grocer, or community space at grade could contribute to the neighbourhood rather than merely extract rent from it. Jane Jacobs' core insight that mixed uses generate the eyes on the street that make cities safe and vibrant is as applicable here as anywhere.

The 51% site coverage at six storeys also means this is a wide, ground-hugging block rather than a slender tower. In low-rise residential streets, this massing casts long shadows and creates hard street edges. A slimmer building at greater height, with a more generous ground plane, would likely produce a better urban result on this specific site though this observation cuts against the OCP framing discussed above.

Subdivision, Phasing, and the Long Game

The brochure repeatedly emphasises that the concept has been "thoughtfully designed for potential subdivision and phasing." This is presented as flexibility and prudence. It deserves a second look.

Subdivision means Building A (137 units) and Building B (59 units) could be sold and developed by different owners on separate parcels. This is not inherently problematic, but it does raise questions about long-term design coherence, shared infrastructure obligations, and the risk that one phase proceeds while the other stalls. If this occurs it risks leaving an incomplete development on a prominent corner site for an indeterminate period. Hello Bayview.

Parking and the Public Realm

The proposal provides 82 vehicle stalls underground and 267 bicycle stalls. The bicycle provision is commendable given the neighbourhood's 87 bike score. Underground parking is also the right solution. But 82 car stalls for 196 units is still a meaningful traffic generator, and the materials make no mention of traffic impact assessment, pedestrian realm improvements, or how the three generous street frontages (240 feet on Montreal, 239 on Kingston, 120 on Quebec) will be treated at grade. Street trees, cycling infrastructure, permeable surfaces, and seating are not mentioned. A site with this much frontage has an unusual opportunity to contribute to the public realm but the proposal does not appear to take it.

Unit Mix

The mix of 35 studios, 113 one-bedrooms, and 48 two-bedrooms skews heavily small. Only 24% of units have two bedrooms; there are no three-bedroom units. This is a market-driven choice, but it limits the project's contribution to family housing in an already constrained Victoria market and raises questions about what kind of community this development is intended to serve.

One Genuine Credit is that it's a Parking Lot

The strongest argument in the project's favour, and the one the brochure wisely leads with in its aerial photography, is that the current use is a surface parking lot. This is, by almost any urban planning framework, among the least productive uses of land in a dense, desirable neighbourhood. Redevelopment here is conversion from dead asphalt to housing. That matters. Victoria faces a genuine housing shortage, and this site can make a meaningful contribution to supply.

The question is not *whether* to build but *what* to build and *how*. A design that earns its place in the streetscape with active ground-floor uses, genuine family housing, a thoughtful treatment of three significant street frontages, and a massing strategy that respects the neighbourhood's scale would be both a better project and a more defensible one through the approvals process.