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Decoding Timber Towers: Urbanarium seeks innovative wood product solutions for affordable housing

International competition addresses climate change and construction challenges, offering \$50,000 in prizes and global recognition

MARCH 31, 2025 (VANCOUVER, CANADA) — **Urbanarium** is thrilled to launch **Decoding Timber Towers**, a global ideas competition with real-world impact and the largest of its kind in Canada. This marks the Vancouver organization’s fourth installment in its affordable housing competition series, which addresses the impact of climate change on housing and offers winners with international portfolio recognition and cash prizes totalling \$50,000. Registration is open now through May 2, with early bird pricing through April 11.

This year’s competition asks participants to consider residential and mixed use design solutions that use mass timber — an engineered wood product that is sustainable and low-carbon, but considered an expensive alternative to concrete and steel as the forestry industry catches up to demand. In recent years, mass timber construction has grown in popularity around the world, from France to Sweden.

“Urbanarium has always been a platform that fosters discourse around the urgent issues we face in housing, community building, and urban planning,” says **Amy Nugent**, executive director of Urbanarium. “As Canada faces US tariffs on steel, Decoding Timber Towers looks for innovative solutions with BC timber that will shape the future of low carbon construction, and stimulate the domestic construction market with design ideas that also maintain a high standard of comfort, livability and connection to land.”

The competition asks participants to design creative solutions to some of the challenges facing mass timber construction today: unfamiliarity with the resource, steep upfront costs, the requirement for specialized consultants, insurance coverage, and the design issue of creating all-wood balconies that have a high potential for trapped moisture and rot. The benefits of mass timber construction are manifold: In addition to being a high-quality and environmentally friendly resource, it is well-suited for pre-fabrication, which means more efficient construction. Watch the latest [About Here/Urbanarium video](#) for more context on pre-fab construction.

Registrants will be assigned hypothetical sites based on a fictionalized Transit-Oriented Area (TOA), or an area within close proximity to rapid-transit such as SkyTrain stations and bus exchanges. Four individual sites have been distributed across the fictional TOA based on typical BC conditions, and have been formed with the input of First Nations and Indigenous housing developers in order to increase the applicability and repeatability of proposal ideas.

There is one mass timber high rise in Vancouver: Brock Commons, known as the “Tallwood House” at the University of British Columbia, which was completed in 2017. Other projects in development or under construction include the 25-story residential structure at Main and 5th Street (to be completed in 2027) and the Main and Cordova rental building (to be completed in 2026) that will deliver 120 affordable homes for mixed-income families on the Downtown Eastside.

The winners of the competition will have their proposals showcased in a publication, on various websites, in the popular [About Here](#) series by Uytae Lee and in the upcoming international conference, Woodrise 2025 in Vancouver from Sept. 22–25. The biannual congress is hosted by three nations — Japan, France, and Canada — and focuses on mid- and high-rise timber construction. Urbanarium will host an exhibition and stage presentation on the competition results, sharing the winning designs with more than 2,000 industry professionals in attendance from more than 25 countries.

This is in addition to the cash prizes: \$15,000 for first place, \$10,000 for second place, \$5,000 for third place, and \$2,000 each for five honourable mentions. New this year is the \$10,000 Digital Award, presented for innovative use of digital technologies and processes in the team’s approach to repeatability funded by DIGITAL’s Housing Growth Innovation Program.

Competition registration closes on May 2 and submissions are due Aug. 25. Winners will be announced at an awards show on Sept. 15.

The competition jury includes:

- Andrew Lawrence, Structural Engineer | Arup Fellow, Director, Arup
- Brenda Knights, Housing Developer | CEO, BC Indigenous Housing Society
- Emilie Adin, Planner | President, Planning Institute of British Columbia
- Gary Hack, Planner | Professor Emeritus, UPenn, MIT
- Ian Boyle, Structural Engineer | Principal, Fast + Epp
- Mingyuk Chen, Architect, AIBC | Associate Director, LWPAC/Intelligent City
- Natalie Telewiak, Architect AIBC, AIA | Principal, MGA
- Norm Leech, Community Leader | Executive Director, Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House
- Richard Henriquez, Retired Architect, AIBC | Founding Principal, Henriquez Partners Architecture
- Sailen Black, Architect, AIBC | Senior Green Building Planner, Planning, Urban Design and Sustainability, City of Vancouver

To learn more about Decoding Timber Towers and register, visit decodingtimbertowers.com.

Public programs

To help encourage discourse around the competition, Urbanarium will host two CityDebates, in which experts present their arguments and audience members decide who wins the debate.

CityDebate #18: Mass Timber is Not Worth the Risks

Monday, April 14 at 7pm | Robson Square Theatre (800 Robson St)

Mass timber is widely touted for its potential for speedy, low carbon construction. However, market acceptance in BC remains elusive. Do the risks (cost, supply chain, trades, maintenance etc) outweigh the benefits?

CityDebate #19: High Rises are More Sociable Than Low Rises

Monday, May 5 at 7pm | Robson Square Theatre (800 Robson St)

Which form of housing development supports a stronger community fabric and greater sociability? Do low-rise housing forms make it easier for neighbours to get to know each other and build social connections? Or does being more spread out make it harder to stay connected? Do the higher population densities of condo and rental towers make it easier for residents to form tight social networks? Or does the high-rise form lead to residents being surrounded by people, but all avoiding eye contact in the elevator?

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About Urbanarium

Urbanarium was founded in 1985 by a group of planners and architects passionate about city making. A registered charity since 2015, the board-led organization's mandate is to motivate residents, government and industry to take informed action to improve their cities. Through a unique suite of participatory programming: competitions, debates and studios, Urbanarium inspires creative and pragmatic urban solutions for the urgent challenges of affordable housing and climate change. Visit urbanarium.org.

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Press kit and photos

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