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The State of Play in Creating a More Sustainable City

Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination

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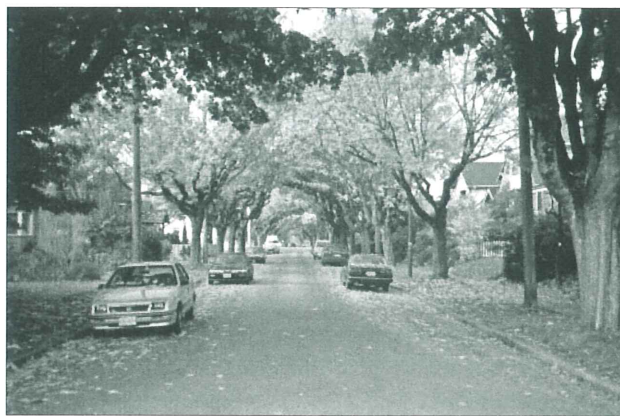
(Extracted and adapted from a presentation given at the World Planners Congress, Vancouver, June 2006.)

As Vancouver basked in the global spotlight while hosting the World Planners Congress and UN Habitat World Urban Forum recently, the City had some important success stories to tell, but also some sobering lessons to share with the world.

Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination, published in 2005 and winner of the City of Vancouver's Book Award, was my own way of telling some of those stories and sharing those lessons [see Planning West December 2006]. This article focuses on two of these stories – Vancouver's emergence as a model of contemporary urbanism and its true role in creating a more sustainable metropolitan region – and offers commentary about its future direction.

In recent years, Vancouver has become the poster child of urbanism in North American planning circles. The city has had several notable successes in urban planning. Downtown Vancouver has seen rapid urbanization with significant densification since the Expo 86 World's Fair. Certainly the residential intensification of its downtown core, with a doubling of the population from some 40,000 residents to more than 80,000 today, is a real achievement and one of the great success stories of modern North American cities. We have done this while adding a remarkably high level of retail vitality and public amenity to the downtown. And we have dramatically extended the public realm, with the opening up of the formerly industrial urban waterfront for public use.

Vancouver is modeling a form of smart growth and more compact urbanization that many other cities across the con-



A typical Vancouver single-family residential street.

tinents are now copying, with varying degrees of success. But trying to replicate what works in Vancouver in other societies with very different histories, cultural traditions, planning policies and market realities is very difficult to do beyond a rather superficial resemblance. So much of what makes Vancouver's urban form unique is informed by its physical setting, its unique geography and its mild rainforest climate. If those factors are not present in other cities, is the so-called

"Vancouver model" still valid?

Another troubling question – one that has been noted by several recent visitors to Vancouver – is why is so much of the new development the same? The "Vancouver model" is typically defined as slim high-rise residential towers set on street-oriented townhouse podiums, carefully spaced apart to preserve views of the surrounding mountains and water. These two condominium housing forms are the overwhelmingly predominant forms of housing and tenure that the market has delivered in recent years. More than 140 residential high-rise towers have been built in the downtown peninsula since EXPO 86. What about other models of urban development, other forms of housing which would contribute towards a more complete,

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Dream City (cont'd)

more flexible and more affordable housing mix, and which we have yet to deliver in any significant numbers?

There is a general assumption that Vancouver is leading the way regionally and that we have substantially slowed the flight to the suburbs that so many other city centres are struggling with. Yes, we have densified the downtown core, and that is a real achievement. But when you zoom out and look at the bigger picture, this rosy picture turns quite a different shade. Our urban region is facing many

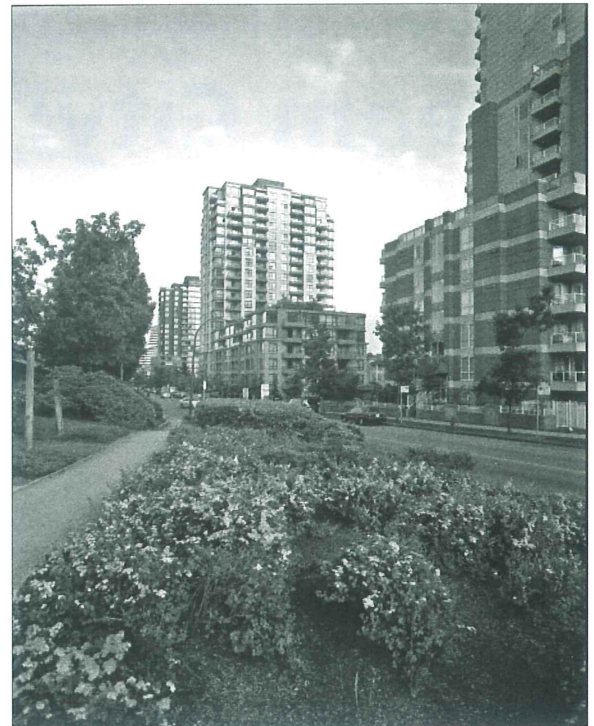
When Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan announced his EcoDensity initiative just before the World Urban Forum opened it was the first time in Vancouver's history that an elected leader was publicly championing the cause of densification and making explicit the link between land use intensification and more sustainable, less wasteful urban settlement.

of the same problems of unsustainable sprawl and suburban dystopia that other North American cities are grappling with. Our suburbs are no better than their suburbs. We just can't see them much from Vancouver. And we try not to talk about them in polite circles. But Vancouver can't afford to ignore the suburbs: they are our problem too. Re-engineering the suburbs is where the next real challenge lies.

According to BC Statsⁱ, we have added about 25,000 residents to downtown Vancouver in the past decade. In the

same period, the City of Vancouver overall added about 47,000 people. This means that across the entire rest of the city, excluding the downtown peninsula, we added a grand total of about 22,000 people over ten years, or 2,200 per year on average. Not a very impressive record. During the same 10-year time frame, the Greater Vancouver Regional District added about 250,000 people to its population, growing to about 2.25 million. So, what this means is that the GVRD grew by about 13% over the past decade, while the City of Vancouver grew by about 8%. Vancouver is actually losing share of the growth within the region. Or put another way, the surrounding suburban municipalities are growing faster than Vancouver. Furthermore, more than half of the City's growth was in the downtown peninsula, which means that the growth rate for the rest of the City's land base was an anaemic 5%, compared to almost three times that level of growth for the rest of the region. The fact is that the substantial majority of people in Greater Vancouver don't live within the City of Vancouver's municipal boundaries and the gap is widening.

One of the main reasons for the widening gap is that approximately 70% of Vancouver's land base is zoned for single family housing and there has been strong neighbourhood resistance to densification in many areas. So Vancouver has concentrated its recent growth efforts where there were very few pre-existing neighbours to complain: the downtown peninsula's former industrial lands and rail yards. Vancouver, rather than being a beacon of progressive growth for the rest of the region, is actually a part of the problem and is, in effect, exporting a portion of its rightful share of growth to the outlying suburbs where the impacts are much more severe. This troubling



Collingwood Village: An isolated example of intensification in Vancouver's suburbs

trend needs to be acknowledged and we cannot be too judgmental about the low-density forms of residential development that predominate in the suburbs when we have created a kind of cordon sanitaire around most of Vancouver.

Only when Vancouver has begun to address the challenge of its own suburbs can it truly claim to be the leader in moving towards a more sustainable metropolitan region.

Despite more than 15 years of talking about itⁱⁱ, Vancouver still needs to come to grips with intensifying the City's low density, single-family housing neighbourhoods. The City has certainly tried, but it is slow and painful work, and staff

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ⁱ as provided by the Urban Futures Institute (Vancouver) in June 2006

ⁱⁱ Vancouver's CityPlan was approved in 1995 after several years of process. It provides a framework for deciding City programs, priorities, and actions over the next 20 years and is the closest thing that the City has to an Official Community Plan. The word densification is not used once in the document.

Dream City (cont'd)

have learned to become very cautious in advancing a densification agenda. There have been some isolated successes, such as Collingwood Village, the Arbutus Lands, and more recently the area around Kingsway and Knight Street, but by and large Vancouver's predominant single-family suburbs are much the way they have always been.

We need to address residents' legitimate fears while painting a compelling picture of why sensitive densification is in all of our interests and is crucial to creating a more sustainable future. This will take political leadership, which, until very recently, did not seem to be present in our region. When Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan announced his EcoDensity initiative just before the World Urban Forum opened, it was the first time in Vancouver's history that an elected leader was publicly championing the cause of densification and making explicit the link between land use intensification and more sustainable, less wasteful urban settlement. It was a watershed moment, since we have yet to make the case that residential intensification is not only the right thing to do for our future and our children's futures, but that it can be done in ways that preserve many of the qualities that make Vancouver's neighbourhoods so precious to people. There are many ways we can begin to do this without radically transforming the single-family residential characteristics of Vancouver's neighbourhoods. High density does not mean high-rise towers. But it will take a loosening of the tight grip that the City's zoning and subdivision by-laws and engineering standards currently have on permitting more flexible forms of housing. So much that is sensible is simply not permitted.

We need to encourage alternative forms of housing to the traditional detached single-family house or the hi-rise condominium tower. For example, we should be exploring those forms of housing that other cities have mastered over the centuries, such as the block-courtyard housing of Cerda's Barcelona Eixample or Paris or Berlin, the mansion blocks and adaptable

dress, by typically insisting on parking minimums. What if the use of the permitted so-called "Ancillary Building" which currently means a parking garage in most residential zoning schedules, can be a dwelling unit, or a workplace, or a studio, or indeed (if the owner wants it) a parking garage? What if a corner store or café could once again (we used to do

this!) have a home above or behind, in residential neighbourhoods? As with secondary basement suites – which were legalized in all zones by the previous Council – the sky will not fall in.

The more I travel to other cities, the more I am convinced that Vancouver is sitting in a very privileged position globally: it is one of the world's most attractive and functional urban environments, and its attractiveness relative to those other cities is only going to grow. I predict that Vancouver will become ever more desirable by comparison, as older, larger cities become increasingly polluted

and unlivable (think Osaka, Seoul, Beijing, Mexico City, Cairo, Sao Paulo). And with the shift from industrial production to lifestyle values, the advent of emerging technologies will make Vancouver's physical isolation less and less relevant to the means of production and wealth generation, even as the global environment deteriorates. So I believe Vancouver is very well placed to capitalize on its enlightened leadership to ensure the city is at the forefront of urban environments globally.

There is much to be done, but these are exciting times, and with the mayor's EcoDensity Strategy announcement, Vancouver's civic leadership has challenged us to do something about it. I look forward to seeing how the city rises to the challenge, and to helping turn these noble ideas into action. 🏡



Vancouver's post-war single family suburbs.

(fee simple) row housing of London, the semi-detached narrow lot and brownstone housing forms of North America's older East Coast cities, the garden court housing of Southern California, the gallery housing forms of Spain, Cuba and South America, cluster housing, carriage houses, zero-lot-line housing, and work-live housing.

And we need to use the city's existing patterns of suburban settlement more intensively. We should be optimizing the physical infrastructure, such as exploiting Vancouver's extensive lane system much more intensively for some of these alternative housing forms. A 6m (20 ft.) wide lane in Japan, Germany or Holland is a normal public street! In order to do this effectively, we also need to make changes to Vancouver's parking bylaws, which currently help perpetuate many of the problems that we are trying to ad-