

DESIGN FOR LIVING IN VANCOUVER

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[Note: This presentation was accompanied by a collection of slides to illustrate each point that was discussed. For more information and to access documents referred to in the presentation, visit the City of Vancouver's web site: www.city.vancouver.bc.ca]

CONGRESS
FOR THE
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URBANISM

Bio: Co-Director of Planning and Director of Current Planning for the City of Vancouver, Mr. Beasley has a B.A. in geography and political science and a M.A. in planning.

Formerly, as Director of Central Area Planning, he developed a new downtown plan for the city. He continues to lead new planning initiatives in Vancouver's inner city and manages major rezonings, large development applications and heritage planning throughout the city.

With over twenty-four years of civic service, Mr. Beasley has been the Vancouver's Senior Area Planner in charge of neighborhood revitalization.

He has advised Toronto's Royal commission on the Harbourfront, the City of Auckland, New Zealand, the cities of Xi'an and Tianjin in China, and various Canadian and U.S. cities. Recently, he has received awards from the Canadian Institute of Planners and the Planning Institute of British Columbia.

We in Vancouver are pursuing a very intensive residentially-based growth strategy for our inner city with a relatively unique built form. In this paper, I want to describe how this is coming together and highlight the design parameters and the processes that are recreating our city.

First, where and what is Vancouver? Suffice it to say, we are Canada's third largest City, located on the west coast of North America just north of the US border. We have about 2 million people. We are a typical Canadian city and an emerging Asian city. Frankly, as a city, we live on our wits and good looks - but we've become a "sanctuary community" in world terms and have enjoyed a massive inflow of people and capital as a result.

What is of interest to many people is our inner-city explosion of growth since the mid-1980s. I'm going to give you a few numbers which are put down on paper in the attachment, "Downtown in Transition," that I have provided (attached). Currently we have over 60,000 people living in the core - this having grown by 20,000 people since the late 1980's. We're on our way to about 100,000 people living downtown. Our growth curve remains very, very steep. We also have about 170,000 workers downtown, with 60,000 more expected within 15 years.

This is intensity with all the social energy and environmental benefits it brings. But to make it work has required urban forms new to the city. The trick has been to achieve the intensity but also the functionality, comfort, beauty - and, dare I say, the humanity - demanded by a very informed consumer and a very well organized public.

Vancouver has an interesting context that stands in vivid contrast to most American cities. Following, in summary terms, are some of the key aspects shaping urban growth.

- Our urban region is shaped by several overall containment measures - a farm land reserve, regional park system, sprawling watersheds and Crown forests.
- Of fundamental importance is that Vancouver's downtown sits on a peninsula, with a magnificent setting of mountains and water, but also with powerful growth constraints.
- From an American perspective, we have a unique approach to transportation. We don't have or want freeways; we are limiting auto capacity into the inner-city and are using congestion as a motivating factor for inner-city living; and we are depending on transit, bikes and even ferries in preference to the automobile. In Vancouver, we like to say that "congestion is our friend".

- Our somewhat revolutionary Central Area Plan, adopted in the late 1980's, is essentially shaped by a "living first" growth strategy, emphasizing housing and neighbourhoods in preference over all other inner-city uses. (By the way, we thank Alex Krieger, of Harvard University, for coining the "living first" description).
- We are blessed with a core-area open space system and a waterfront walkway/bikeway system which, because of the respite of the water and green they offer, allows our density to happen and then ties it all together for people on foot.
- We are starting to pursue a program for high-yield environmental sustainability at the neighbourhood level.
- On a financial front, our philosophy is to insist that development pay for its public costs, rather than the existing taxpayer.
- Of course, a powerful reality to living downtown is that we are a Canadian city. We have a tradition of safety and security on the street; we have widespread social diversity and tolerance; and we still enjoy a strong social safety net.

With this context, I want to focus on the form that our central city development is taking by laying out its key features and showing you an array of typical examples. I'm going to suggest that Vancouver represents an expression of a New Urbanism in its own right: Built upon local precedents; reinforcing the traditional relationships between the street, sidewalk, building wall, open spaces and among buildings; and tied to an innate respect for the way people want to use buildings and space to relate to one another as an urbane community. It's not, however, the mainstream brand of the New Urbanism: Some will find it shockingly modern; others shockingly dense, tall and crowded. But my message is that it works for the people who live and work there, it works for our ecological setting, and it works for our whole community.

So, what is our built form all about?

- It's about extension of the traditional urban patterns, fabric and character. This includes road grid, block size, open space network, building morphology, materials and even place names. Our new construction evolves from an aggressive heritage incentives program to save old buildings, foster character and provide design cues for new construction.
- It's about developing complete, coherent neighbourhood units with pedestrian scale, all the amenities and services at hand and with a local shopping "high street" at the centre to offer those "third places", after home and work, where a neighbourhood creates its culture. Our amenity standards are detailed in a document that is available on the City of Vancouver's web site.
- It's about genuine social mix and an intimate economic ecology. This includes non-market with market housing; building for seniors and children; requiring row houses for families; and fostering live/work and alternatives such as lofts and houseboats.
- It's about open space and the public realm being used to contribute to neighbourhood form and identity. We have settled on the sidewalk as the focus of public life, so we often set our streetwalls back 5 ft. or 10 ft. to "steal" more space for the public.

It's about taming the negative externalities of large-scale buildings. We have had to learn how to deal with danger, over-viewing, invasion of privacy, intrusiveness and especially noise. For example, we actually unmix some of the mixed-use to create "neighbourhood areas of tranquility" with lower ambient noise levels.

But to say all that is not to say enough. I want to zero right in on the architecture, at the level of the details. You might have a look at our booklet on recent architectural excellence that is featured on the City's web site.

- Our architecture is about tall, thin towers with very small floorplates that get people up where they want to be to capture the wonderful views, but allows them to see between and through a stand of buildings.
- It's about coherent, dominant streetwalls at the traditional scale, with the taller building

elements tucked behind, their bases shielded from the sidewalk. This cuts their powerful impact and allows them to float almost out of one's perception.

- It's about bringing active residential use right down to the sidewalk level as often as possible. We foster the shop-house form in many instances but just as often we push for rowhouses to truly domesticate the street. We don't tolerate blank walls. We force doors and porches and stoops and windows and almost any fascinating detail down at eye level.
- Our architecture is about grass boulevards and at least a double row of trees along the sidewalk to screen the density and soften the hard concrete and brick.
- It's about putting all parking, except the traditional short-term curb-side parking, underground; cutting parking standards; minimizing vehicular crossings of sidewalks; banning individual garage doors from the frontage; and even trying to fend off port cochers, except when they're accessed from the lane.
- It's about *not* having useless private plazas but, instead, shaping buildings to emphasize the respite of open public park spaces and squares that are an integral part of every neighbourhood building cluster.
- But, at the same time, it's about creating wonderful, enclosed private courtyards where residents can escape the action of the street for the privacy, security and quiet of their own small garden.
- It's about protecting public views and view corridors at all levels; brokering private view gains and losses; and managing sun access and shade like delicate calligraphy.
- It's about weather protection in our rain forest, but banning the above- or below-ground walkways that segregate people and prevent them from coming together on the public sidewalk.
- It's about quality of materials, pushing for the durable materials that weather well but also signify domestic use - and frankly, where possible, avoiding stucco, which simply does not wear well or age gracefully in our wet climate.

The formula works like this. These architectural solutions allow the density to work. The high density generates enough value to carry quality materials, great on-site amenities and a very nice contribution to the neighbourhood infrastructure. And the supportive neighbourhood draws all kinds of people back from the suburbs, which they thought was their only choice. The result, hopefully, is the competitive advantage of the urban lifestyle.

To close, I want to touch on process - the regulatory framework and planning process to introduce this level of change and foster the architectural quality upon which it is founded. Frankly, we've had to re-invent City Hall to make our "living first" strategy real. We call the result the "cooperative planning approach" where citizens, developers, politicians and staff interact positively to conceive and then build the residential city.

- We have a highly discretionary regulatory framework, emphasizing guidelines and incentives over hard regulation.
- We plan from the large and conceptual to the specific in stages - solving issues early, building consensus as we go, involving public consultation at each stage.
- We join public and private forces around a table in the actual design exercise.
- We let politicians do policy but development approvals are done by appointed officials, advised by a professional design panel and citizens' advisory panel. Of crucial importance, City decisions tend to be final, with rare appeal.

I dare say there is the New Urbanism in this work. There is certainly Jane Jacobs. There are the European and Asian traditions. There is the philosophy of the Modern Architecture Movement. But, most of all, putting aside the "isms" we have put together what works for Vancouver - for our designers, for our decision makers, for our consumers, for our people. That is the final test. If it works for them that's what really matters; that's what really will make Vancouver a very special and, more to the point, a beloved place.