

Vancouver's New Neighbourhoods

Achievements in Planning and Urban Design



City of Vancouver

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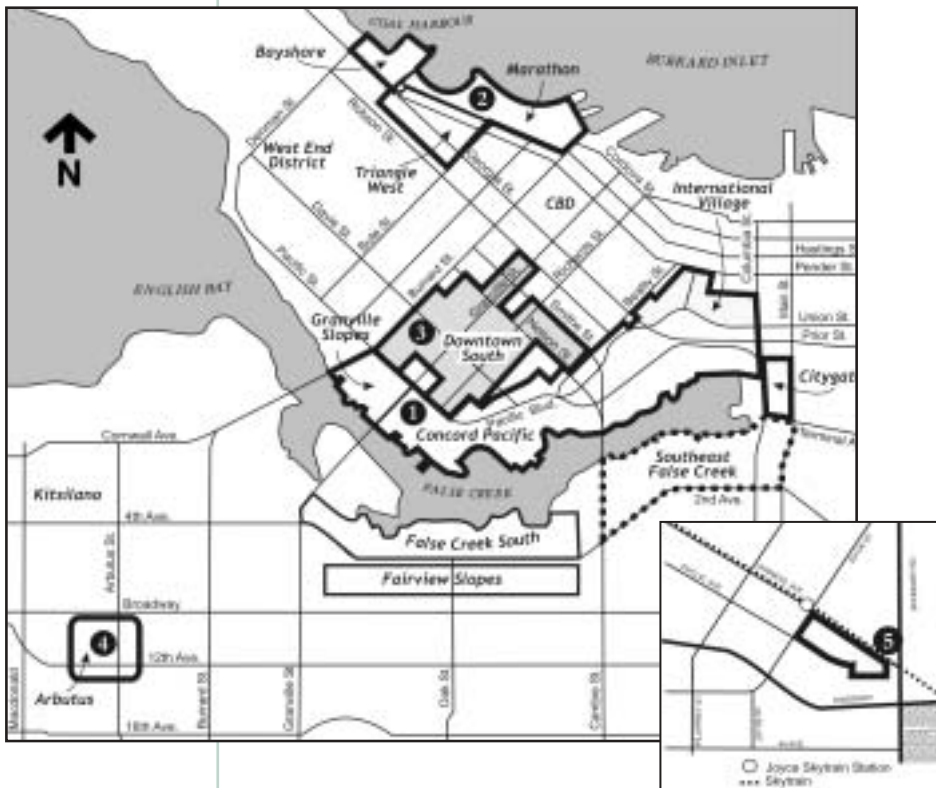
Foreword

Vancouverites have always preferred distinctive neighbourhood environments in which to live. This long, vital tradition was embraced in the mid - 1980s as the essential planned framework for a remarkable phenomenon of expansion that is profoundly redefining and differentiating our city. The results are now manifest and they are exciting!

Here we present not individual buildings or architecture but, instead, a broader view, offering examples of our best recent neighbourhoods. This illustrates our drive to build complete, mixed communities with housing density and choice, social diversity, including a front-row place for our disadvantaged, artful urban design, coherent urban structure and all the necessary commercial and public amenities. From many perspectives - designers', developers', planners', politicians' and citizens' - there is solid understanding of local ecologies and real prowess in conceiving and creating neighbourhoods and making them come alive in a sustainable way.

Our hope is not only to raise the bar for ourselves, but also to offer our experience to others and to honour those who have made extraordinary contributions. As much as anything, we want to declare our widespread optimism for a wonderfully urbane future for our unique city.

Larry Beasley
Co-Director of Planning
City of Vancouver



Case Studies

- 1 FALSE CREEK NORTH**
 - GRANVILLE SLOPES
 - CONCORD PACIFIC PLACE
 - CITYGATE
 - SOUTHEAST FALSE CREEK (Preview)
- 2 COAL HARBOUR**
 - MARATHON LANDS
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Collingwood Village



Introduction

Over the past decade and a half, since Vancouver hosted the Expo 86 World's Fair, a number of new inner city neighbourhoods have emerged out of the planning process and into reality, offering attractive urban alternatives to suburbia. Downtown Vancouver, in particular, has undergone a profound change as it has urbanized and densified, while at the same time gaining significant new public amenities. With almost 40,000 new residents being added in the past fifteen years alone, the downtown peninsula now is home to about 80,000 people and is set to double its pre-Expo 86 population to over 110,000 people within the next decade. While there is a long history of neighbourhood planning in Vancouver, the opportunity to create entirely new neighbourhoods within existing communities has fostered new planning, urban design and consultative strategies reflecting a true collaboration of the public and private sectors. These strategies combine the skill and vision of architects, urban designers, planners, landscape architects and engineers interacting with developers, local communities and other stakeholders.

Since the 1980's, Vancouver's planning and urban design approach to accommodating growth in the inner city has focussed on a "Living First" strategy. The aim has been to create urban communities that are more sustainable environmentally, socially and economically. Lacking contemporary examples to draw from, Vancouver has framed its own urban model, based on a set of organizing principles for structuring and shaping diverse, integrated, adaptable and highly livable inner city neighbourhoods.

First among these principles has been to limit commuter car access into the downtown by giving priority to transit users, cyclists and pedestrians rather than to alleviating traffic congestion. Vancouver is blessed by the absence of a freeway system within the city. A conscious and profound choice has been made to not allocate major capital spending or additional space to the car while at the same time offering an urban lifestyle alternative that truly competes with that of suburbia.

The next principle has been to develop complete neighbourhoods at a pedestrian scale with a mix of mutually supportive uses and activities focussed on a commercial high street and providing a full array of amenities (schools, daycares, community centres, parks, etc.). Coupled with this is the principle of insisting on a diverse housing mix, including both market and non-market housing, mixed incomes, single and family households, seniors and special needs housing and unique housing choices such as houseboats, lofts and artists studios. In addition, strategies that bring security to low-income people who have long resided in the inner core are vigorously pursued. By seamlessly meshing this array of household types, Vancouver's new neighbourhoods have avoided the differentiated enclaves that appear in so many other cities.

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Neighbourhood high street



Neighbourhood childcare



Waterfront walkway

These principles are blended with Vancouver's distinct attitude towards urban design which is played out at the neighbourhood or precinct level, as well as at the scale of individual buildings. Urban design is the shaping of the city through careful choreography and design of all its built and natural physical components - buildings and the spaces between, public open spaces, parks and walkways, bridges and streets, bodies of water, trees and landscaping, etc. - to create a functional, safe, meaningful and beautiful urban environment. Vancouver's added challenge is the integration of the built environment with the city's spectacular natural setting.

A key urban design principle involves extending the fabric, patterns and character of the existing city into new areas, ensuring that its new neighbourhoods integrate with the surrounding city context. Active use of the public realm is promoted by focussing public life on the street and through its special treatment, including sidewalk beautification and street art. The principle is that sidewalks must function as the effective living rooms of the neighbourhoods. This insistence on the priority of the street as the centre-point of neighbourhood activity and socializing has prompted the complete transformation of many streetscapes resulting in increased public safety, convenience, amenity and beauty.

A related principle is that open space and green linkages are to bring both amenity and image to each neighbourhood. A generous park standard has led to 65 acres of new parks being added to the downtown peninsula inventory over the last decade, all of which are tied together by a spectacular waterfront walkway/bikeway system. The water's edge must be dedicated to the public at the time of zoning approval, and must be delivered fully developed for recreational use. This is Vancouver's single most popular civic initiative, now stretching over 20 kilometres out from the core. (Note: The City avoids burdening the existing taxpayer with the costs of such facilities and amenities by ensuring these costs are borne by the new developments being served.)

Supporting these organizing principles is the pursuit, with developers and their design teams, of building forms that achieve, even at high density, a truly domestic, livable housing environment with appeal to a wide range of households. Noise, danger, over-viewing, invasion of privacy, lack of sun access and insensitivity to the needs of children can limit the attractiveness of urban living. Among a variety of housing forms which have emerged, one unique to Vancouver places 2 to 3-storey rowhouses facing the street, with exceptionally slim, widely spaced apartment towers and landscaped private courtyards and gardens behind. The rowhouses, set behind

double rows of trees, are a viable alternative to the single family house, accommodating families with children, pets, or the preference for a private front door or the need for more storage. The slim apartment towers behind offer privacy and separation and highly valued mountain and water views for residents while minimizing intrusion on pedestrian scale and shadowing on streets, public open spaces and private gardens.



Downtown family living



Streetscape domesticity



Public consultation



Davie Street public pier

At the detailed level of architecture further design responses are pursued in concert with developers' architects and landscape architects through Vancouver's discretionary development review process to engender a sense of domesticity and livability that truly makes the residential city a reality, despite (many would argue, because of) high densities.

Employing innovative and cooperative planning techniques, a comprehensive consultative process has engaged both public and private sectors at multiple levels. Ultimately, Vancouver's approach to urban growth has met the true measure of success: its new neighbourhoods have proved to be enormously popular with the broad spectrum of consumers. With their urban vitality, housing diversity, range of convenient amenities and lifestyle choices, Vancouver's new neighbourhoods offer a competitive alternative to North America's 50-year romance with the suburbs.

This publication celebrates Vancouver's recent achievements in reinvigorating and nurturing its urban environment, with the objective of fostering further excellence in planning and urban design. It also draws lessons from less successful results, and suggests how we may in future advance city building. Most importantly, it acknowledges the reality that the design of the city is a constant work in progress, acted upon by many players, reflective of a myriad of interests and priorities, and is never complete.

The selected new neighbourhoods range from Coal Harbour in the north, to the Arbutus Neighbourhood in the west, and to Collingwood Village in the east. Most are located in Vancouver's downtown peninsula. Neighbourhood projects completed prior to 1986 are briefly discussed in the context of their influence on subsequent neighbourhood developments, acknowledging that they represent compelling precedents.

Neighbourhood Planning Precedents

A number of neighbourhoods were planned and developed in Vancouver prior to Expo 86. These have yielded valuable lessons, both good and bad, for the current wave of neighbourhood planning. Some of these earlier neighbourhoods are discussed below with their key lessons highlighted.



False Creek South - Heather Neighbourhood

False Creek South Shore

The land surrounding Vancouver's inner city water body has been transformed over the past 30 years. The first part of False Creek to be recycled from waterfront industrial use into a residential neighbourhood was the south shore between the Granville and Cambie Bridges. First unveiled in 1973, the planning strategy for the south shore embraced a mix of housing types and tenure, clustered around a range of community amenities and park spaces. It also sought to reduce the impact of the automobile by limiting road connections to the rest of the city, and restricting vehicular access and parking within the project. Limited commercial and service uses were provided.

False Creek South Shore was a rapid success, and built out years ahead of schedule, providing a real alternative to suburban single family residential sprawl. The housing densities were also kept moderate, to attract people who might otherwise choose suburban housing options. However, while understandable for its time, the low densities have proved to be an underutilization of increasingly valuable inner city land, and have not fully created the level of intensity that has come to be expected of sustainable urban living.



Moderate density housing

The integration of mixed income families has been very successful and the reclamation of large parts of the south shore for pastoral park space has been well received. However, the lack of urban connectivity back to its surrounding context quickly became a concern and remains problematic. Poor public transit service coupled with the lack of convenient private vehicle access and parking also have proved problematic. In addition, while the overall economic viability of the development was assured by the direct involvement of local and senior governments through subsidized housing and land, the limited commercial services and low housing densities have constrained commercial viability and self-sufficiency.



Waterfront walkway along Heather Bay

In addition to yielding invaluable experience on appropriate densities for inner city development, South False Creek's key lesson was that mixed residential neighbourhoods can be successful living environments and are, in fact, essential to achieving truly diverse communities.



Champlain Heights Concept Plan



Woodland setting



Private access roads serve separate parcels



Housing disengaged from street

Champlain Heights

The Champlain Heights area, a 202 hectare (500 acre) tract of City-owned land in the southeast corner of Vancouver, was the first major new residential neighbourhood to be comprehensively planned and developed in the post-war period. Planning began in 1967, with approval of the Development Plan in 1968.

The plan provided for some 3,650 housing units with a population of almost 12,000 people located on 29 development parcels. Included in the development were a shopping mall, elementary schools, a community centre, and a number of small parks linked together by a walkway system. A variety of housing types was provided, mostly two to three-storey apartments and townhouses arranged in clusters around private driveways on individual development sites. Consistent with contemporary planning theory and practice, a discontinuous, curvilinear street system was laid out across the neighbourhood, with most of the development parcels accessed directly off these streets. The area lacks street-oriented buildings, as most development parcels are inwardly focussed with large landscaped setbacks from the street.

Champlain Heights attracted considerable interest during the planning stage, being considered at the time one of the most creative developments of its kind. Important guiding principles included the City retaining ownership of the land, exercising direct control over the type of development, and providing for a range of incomes and age groups. However, the suburban character of the subdivision pattern and street layout has led to security problems, with the lack of “ownership” and supervision of the public streets.

While innovative for its time, Champlain Heights’ key lesson, in its abandonment of the traditional street grid and public realm, was in bringing to light the drawbacks of the suburban model of private, dead-end streets and inward-facing housing.

Neighbourhood Planning Precedents

West End

The West End, one of Vancouver's first residential areas, redeveloped in the late 60s and 70s as Canada's highest density high rise neighbourhood. While not fully anticipated or intended, the resulting model of high rise urban density has provided valuable lessons for Vancouver's evolution, particularly in the context of downtown densification.

The West End modelled a form of high rise residential urbanism which proved that high density and livability are not mutually exclusive. Most towers were slim and the happenstance of property configuration and ownership patterns often maximized the physical separation between them. It also pointed to the future importance of protecting distant views, sun access and privacy, all of which have become important components in the neighbourhood planning tool kit.

The West End also re-affirmed the value of cohesive streetscape design that provides "eyes on the street", combined with high quality ground level landscaping. A remarkable feature of the West End is that just metres from a busy commercial street, a walk through the residential side streets is a quiet, contemplative experience. This feature of a well groomed, lush urban landscape married to high density built forms is an endearing feature of Vancouver's sense of place. The West End also demonstrated the vital importance of rear lanes as a helpful element in the urban fabric, providing for overflow resident parking, service vehicle deliveries, utilities, garbage pickup, loading and parking garage access. A series of street calming mini-parks at strategic intersections has effectively eliminated disruptive through traffic as well as providing valuable pocket open space for area residents.

The West End, through its eclectic evolution in response to diverse urban development pressures, provides a textbook study in how to achieve a high density, high rise, highly livable residential neighbourhood.



High rises facing English Bay



The heritage Sylvia Hotel (at left) and its companion 'infill' tower

HENRIQUEZ PARTNERS ARCHITECTS PHOTO



Rowhouses stepping down the hill

ROGER HUGHES ARCHITECTS

Fairview Slopes

The Fairview Slopes area on the southerly escarpment overlooking False Creek is one of Vancouver's oldest neighbourhoods. It grew from the early 1900s as a mixed residential, commercial and industrial area. In the early 1970s the area became a focus for gentrification and higher density development pressure. Its attributes included proximity to the Broadway commercial corridor and Vancouver Hospital precinct, good transit service, and a steeply sloping topography that offered extraordinary views of the False Creek water basin, the downtown and the mountains beyond.



Rowhouses on Choklit Park

The area was rezoned in 1972 from industrial to mixed residential/commercial. The City undertook one of its first local area planning programs with extensive input from the local community and consultants. Major issues included the preservation of a broad housing mix, heritage designation and restoration of original houses and identifying community amenity deficiencies, parks and open space needs, and public realm improvements.

In 1976 a new role began for the area with the adoption of the Fairview Slopes Policy Plan, following a two-year planning program. Through the 1980s the area evolved into a highly livable, medium density residential neighbourhood, characterized by its diverse, human scaled, two to three-storey rowhouse streetscapes, and the high quality of both private and public realms.

Fairview Slopes' key lesson lies in its tightly woven street level diversity of fine-grain, pedestrian scaled porches, front doors, stoops, windows, terraces, courtyards, building details, and landscaping - all contributing to the quality and safety of the public realm.

Kitsilano

The inner city suburb of Kitsilano, once a mostly single family area, has emerged as a vibrant mixed use urban neighbourhood, built up in layers of development and infill, demonstrating the impact that time, and multiple interventions, have on urban form and neighbourhood livability.

Single family residences were converted to multiple dwellings. Residential intensification was achieved through incremental infill of duplex and larger housing types, narrow lot developments, and mid-rise apartments. Neighbourhoods have focussed on local high streets such as West Broadway and West 4th Avenue, where higher density forms incorporating housing, office and retail uses have developed, reaffirming the pre-eminence of the traditional street as the venue of public life. A high level of community amenities and services are scattered throughout the neighbourhood, including schools and daycares, community centres, movie theatres, museums, pools, parks, social services, local service retail and small businesses.

Kitsilano, with its regular pattern of east-west blocks, also demonstrates the enduring robustness and flexibility of a simple street grid to structure the basic building blocks of a city neighbourhood.



Kitsilano mixed-use development

The key lesson offered by Kitsilano is in its diversity of mixed uses and broad range of socio-economic groups all co-existing and thriving within an historically intact urban fabric.