

# New Urbanism: “The Vancouver Model”

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*[To pontificating jerk in movie line-up:]  
“I just happen to be Marshall McLuhan, and I heard what you said — you know nothing of my work.” — Herbert Marshall McLuhan, In Woody Allen’s Annie Hall, 1978*

While the San Francisco Planning Commission’s public hearings on December 4, 2003, had fewer one-liners than a Woody Allen movie, the meeting had — to my surprise — the same tone of angry ennui. At issue was the fate of four bulky highrise towers planned for the Rincon Hill and Transbay areas south of Market Street, near the western landing of the Bay Bridge.

As a visiting architecture critic from British Columbia, it seemed to me that all through that long afternoon, everyone who took to the podium had something to say about whether Vancouver-style, tall, skinny high-rise towers set on townhouse podiums were the best prototype for the city’s planned new high-density residential neighborhoods. And as each speaker rattled through their allotted three minutes, it occurred to me that landowners, developers, and the architects who work for them generally agreed the Vancouver direction would be a horrible mistake. Meanwhile, citizens, city planners, and San Francisco designers without pending commissions in the area all thought this direction just right, the bees’ knees.

After listening to a dozen citizens make both positive and negative comparisons between these proposals and recent housing in my own town, I just had to get up and say something. And as I got in the speaker’s lineup for my own three minutes, I flashed on the scene from *Annie Hall* in which Woody Allen casts my cultural hero, Marshall McLuhan, to play himself. Suitably ruffled and 1970s-mustachioed, McLuhan professorially corrects a pretentious pseudo-intellectual in a movie lineup, who is loudly spouting a Cliff’s Notes version of his communication theories.

McLuhan had developed his ideas on the power of contemporary media from the vantage point of Edmonton and Winnipeg — places of cultural consumption, not cultural production. As I considered how my Vancouver perspective might similarly contribute to the housing debate in San Francisco. Almost everything I heard San Franciscans say — on both sides of the issue — about Vancouver was wrong, or at least partially wrong. This, too, then, was to be the substance of my comments: “You, sirs, know nothing of our work.”

Shock value aside, my intent that day was not to discourage San Franciscans from applying the “Vancouver model” to their planned new near-downtown neighborhoods.



Truth be told, I believe our experience provides the best possible solution to many current issues of urban housing and livability there and elsewhere, and it would please me immensely if San Francisco could avoid some of our mistakes, and even do us one better to regain its traditional role as the West Coast’s most enlightened center of city-building.

## The Vancouver Innovations

As anybody in attendance at the Planning Commission hearing that day could surely attest, the block typology of small-plate high-rise towers on townhouse podiums is an extremely hot topic in planning and architecture circles these days. But this typology, which predominates on the downtown Vancouver peninsula, is the result of a particular inheritance that has yet to be adequately explained.<sup>1</sup>

To understand Vancouver’s urban design revolution, one must first understand something of the general climate of Canada’s tax, transportation and housing policies. In the urban design realm many of these have to do with expenditures the Canadian government has not made — virtues of omission, not commission. Many Americans find it hard to understand how their public treasury provides extensive subsidies to urban sprawl, partly in the form of tax deductibility for mortgage payments, unknown in Canada and nearly every other nation. Similarly, immense public subsidy initiated through the Department of Defense built the Interstate highway system.

Lacking these defense-driven subsidies, Canadian cities built freeways only where required. In global terms, the wholesale destruction of inner-city neighborhoods for highways is an almost uniquely American phenomenon, prompted by specifically American politics and notions of the “public.” Yet — even by the standards of Canadian



cities — Vancouver is unusual. Because of a citizen's revolt in the late 1960s led by University of British Columbia architecture professors, ours is the only major city in North America without a single freeway within its boundaries.

Vancouver's history and geography have also imparted some unique legacies. The city is hemmed in by the Coast Range to the north and Canada's most productive agricultural zone — the Fraser River delta — to the south (an area protected by enlightened legislation). Like San Francisco, it was also an "instant city," invented as part of a lucrative land development scheme by the Canadian Pacific Railroad when it located its western terminus there in the early 1880s.

What came to be downtown Vancouver was, at first, an island, but the salt flats connecting it to the rest of Canada were filled in (the reclaimed land becoming the focus of my nation's first zoning laws — mandating that "orientals and celestials" live there, and only there). More positively, the Presidio-like former military reserve of Stanley Park was

**Above:** The Downtown Vancouver peninsula. In addition to the older West End residential neighborhood, new highrise residential districts are being created along both shores of False Creek. Drawing courtesy of the City of Vancouver, Planning Department.

**Facing page:** Marshall McLuhan and Woody Allen, *Annie Hall*, 1978

dedicated to public use shortly after the city was founded. By contrast, it took San Francisco 150 years to bring true public benefit to its own edge-of-town military zone.

Since its founding, the morphology of Vancouver has been shaped by three important land deals: the amalgamation of municipalities to the south in the 1920s, which required a new city hall to be constructed south of False Creek; the construction of the Lion's Gate Bridge as a private initiative by Britain's Guinness brewing family to bring value to what is now called "The British Properties" in West Vancouver; and finally, the sale of 240 acres flanking the north shores of False Creek (originally assembled for "EXPO 86") to Hong Kong industrialist Li Ka Shing.

Other important local influences have come as a result of the fact that Canadian urban planning ideas proceed out of our constitutional need for "peace, order and good government" rather than the American "freedom, and the pursuit of happiness." The first influential urban design ideas in Vancouver were those of itinerant British City Beautiful planner Francis Mawson Rattenbury, who proposed a civic center at the entrance of Stanley Park just before World War I. This went almost entirely unbuilt, however, and between the wars the Bartholomew Plan rationalized land use and urban structure, and positively shaped the city to the present day.

In the 1960s a reform urban council initiated mixed-use, medium-density redevelopment of the south shore of False Creek. Nearby, the federal government also turned formerly industrial Granville Island into a cultural and shopping pleasure zone. These initiatives helped clear the way for then-planning director Ray Spaxman to apply to Central Vancouver some of the ideas of built-form control and mandated mixed-use development he had learned in his native England. Such an interventionist, prescriptive approach to planning and urban design only intensified under current Central Area Planning Director Larry Beasley.

Architecturally, the powers exerted by Spaxman and Beasley in the name of enlightened urbanism may have come at the expense of great individual building designs. The singular exception may be the late 1970s Robson Square development by Arthur Erickson. But while home to little "capital 'A' architecture," the near-downtown neighborhood of the West End did see the construction of many innovative medium- and highrise towers during the 1960s and 70s. Patterns of land assembly and local construction and development conditions also meant many of these had much smaller floor plates than residential towers in eastern Canada or the United States.

The result today is that Vancouver is different from every other major city in North America outside the Northeast, in that high-density apartment living has been established and popular for an entire generation. Amazingly, Vancouver is both the youngest and highest-density major city on the continent, confounding the pattern of such siblings as Calgary, Phoenix, Tampa or Seattle. The fear of highrise buildings and high residential densities that I heard in San Francisco in December is almost unknown in Vancouver, a city whose residents routinely get by without private automobiles.

By 1973 Vancouver's West End had become Canada's highest-density neighborhood (denser than any in California, and soon to surpass Manhattan). With amenities like the oceanfront and Stanley Park (the largest downtown garden and natural reserve on the continent), it first attracted divorcées and early retirees fleeing the harsher climates of the rest of Canada. Later, it became the epicenter of Canada's loudest and proudest gay community, which in turn fostered a stream of successful politicians who fought for urban amenity and a tolerant social climate.

More recently, the West End has become home to 1990s waves of Eastern European immigrant families. These ex-Sarajevo, ex-Belgrade, ex-Moscow new citizens knew and liked downtown high-rise living — and in the process saved the area's faltering public schools, which were scheduled to close for lack of enrollment.

The downside to such a pattern of development, however, has been the loss of the city's Victorian and Edwardian heritage (an Arts and Crafts house by Pasadena's Greene Brothers was even demolished in the 1960s with scarcely a murmur of protest). Ironically, British Columbia's gutless historical preservation legislation may have paved the way for the high-density "miracle" that is downtown Vancouver.

### The Hong Kong Connection

There is another important parentage for the Vancouver downtown revolution. This comes from Asia — Hong Kong in particular. With the influx of refugees from China after the 1949 Communist Revolution, Hong Kong created urban living densities unprecedented in human history. One of these was the notorious Hunghom housing project near the former Kai Tak airport. Hunghom was demolished in the 1980s, but not before Rem Koolhaas and others seized upon it as an example of the hyper-dense

urban condition. One of the most interesting of these writings is Vittorio Lampugnani's 1993 essay "Hong Kong: The Aesthetics of Density."<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, architectural culture (books, magazines and academe) took a Eurocentric turn toward classicism, and it is only recently that it has started to investigate urban forms and architectural patterns off the tired L.A.-New York-London-Paris-Berlin-Rome ant rail.

Hong Kong's building regulations evolved precisely to avoid the packing of inhabitants in the block-long high-rises found at Hunghom and other areas. To accomplish this, the British-controlled government evolved a building code that traded the discretionary urban planning controls common in Europe for a quasi-mathematical formula that would be common knowledge among landowners, developers and architects. In some ways the progeny of the 1916 New York building regulations that created the wedding-cake massing of Art Deco towers, the Hong Kong rules created tall, thin towers.

These built-form controls also enforced existing cultural biases. After the "Mid-Levels" of Hong Kong's harbor-side Central sprouted tall, thin residential towers, these were soon copied all over the Crown Colony. To succeed in this market, every new development desired at least a piece of a harbor view. There were no urban design view controls, just a building code. But even a slice of a view to water was thought to be good luck according to still-powerful Cantonese superstitions. Thus, an interest in variety of light and view are the simple human realities behind Hong Kong's, now Vancouver's, preference for tall, thin towers.

The Hong Kong building code of the 1960s may yet prove to be the most influential building regulation in human history, shaping how hundreds of millions of people live on many continents. Yet it is almost totally ignored by urban and architectural historians and critics, who would rather go on writing about Savannah, Bath, Barcelona and Rome.

In Hong Kong, entire architectural firms, like Wong and Ouyang, have built their business out of their ability to extract maximum density out of their city's building codes. Indeed, partner Leslie Ouyang is forthright in describing building code interpretation as the fundamental skill he brought to the firm founded by ambitious modernist designer Jackson Wong, the first Chinese graduate in architecture at Hong Kong University.

### The Portal City

With the return of Hong Kong to China planned for 1997, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw competition

**Right:** Hyper-dense housing on Hong Kong's Kowloon Peninsula. **Below:** Tall, thin apartment towers became the norm after passage of the new Hong Kong building code. Photos by Bill Hocker.



around the Pacific Rim for the city which would receive the bulk of immigrants and investment fleeing the prospect of what was then (at least nominally) a Communist regime. Sydney and Brisbane in Australia, and Honolulu, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle in the United States, all saw new arrivals in this period — but nothing like Vancouver. Since the late 1980s, Vancouver and Toronto have received 200,000 immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan between them (nearly as many as all six non-Canadian cities listed above, combined). Just as important, they received \$15 billion in real estate investment. Vancouver is to the Overseas Chinese exactly as Miami is to Latin Americans, a new global phenomenon I have labeled the “portal city.”

Leading this push was industrialist Li Ka Shing. Typical of Hong Kong’s elite in the 1960s and 1970s, Li had his children educated in Canada and take out citizenship here — safety hatches for family and fortunes both. In 1988, Li bought the 240 waterfront acres of Vancouver railway lands that had been used for the Class “B” transportation-themed World’s Fair “EXPO 86.” At the time, the provincial government insisted on selling the entire site as one piece, effectively excluding Canadian and American developers who did not think the site was worth the risk. However, the high cost of environmental cleanup — paid by provincial taxpayers — meant that Li Ka Shing got this spectacular waterside site essentially for free.

Li named the company he formed to develop this package Concord Pacific Developments. Since, the company has built tall, thin towers there that are homes to nearly 30,000 residents. It is these tall, thin towers on Vancouver’s False Creek that are documented in the San Francisco Planning Department’s Transbay and Rincon Hill plans as the appropriate model for that city’s new downtown residences.

Fortuitously, the Concord Pacific developments came on the market at the same time as a huge surge of well-educated Hong-Kongers arrived to live in Vancouver. This Hong Kong cohort knew and liked small apartments in small-plate high rises, and the Concord Pacific prototype was an instant market success. However, Vancouver shares San Francisco’s questionable distinction of having among the highest housing costs on the continent, and soon the condos were being sold to new residents of many backgrounds. In the past few years a large swath of industrial and office-zoned land in adjoining Downtown South and Yaletown was also redesignated for optional highrise residential use.

As a result of these changes, the early 1990s city council, which included Gordon Price, and Central Area Planning



Director Beasley have come under increasing criticism for their decision to re-zone much of the downtown peninsula as “housing optional.” Because higher yields can be extracted from buildings for living than for working, this has led to a situation that might better be described as “housing obligatory,” critics say. Disturbingly, Beasley recently confirmed there is no downtown Vancouver office building under construction or at any stage of planning review or negotiation.

It is worth noting that developers originally resisted new design guidelines for Central Vancouver, marshaling arguments almost identical to those I heard in San Francisco. But today the area has become one of the world’s most desirable residential districts, its neighborhoods developing fast into forests of residential towers. Indeed, many now worry the downtown peninsula has become a splendid “resort” in danger of losing conventional business and commercial functions to competing suburbs and other cities — a worry many American cities with empty cores would love to have.

#### “Very False Creek”

The Vancouver prototype is now spreading rapidly around the world. In the United States, Vancouver developers and their architects using the Hong Kong/Concord Pacific prototype now lead the highrise housing market in Seattle, Bellevue (WA), and San Diego. A whole generation of Vancouver architects, planners and developers (myself included) is exporting our expertise around the Pacific Rim and to such more distant locales as Tehran and Bombay.

A full-scale replica of Vancouver’s False Creek is today even being carved out of the desert sands outside of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Having walked the seawall on visits to British Columbia, the Sultan of Dubai and senior hereditary princes adopted Concord Pacific as a model for a massive development near their Burj Al-Arabe,



the world's most expensive hotel — the famous high-tech tower in the shape of a Persian Gulf dhow. Today, the first of a planned \$2 billion worth of housing has been completed here, a series of thin towers on podium bases set beside an artificial body of water shaped to evoke Vancouver's inner harbor. The whole complex is a strange monument to globalism: "Vancouver al-Arabe."

San Franciscans are only slightly behind the Sultan of Dubai in their current obsession with Vancouver. San Francisco Chronicle urban design reporter John King has written of his city's "Cult of Vancouver," with Vancouver solutions currently on offer for every urban need. In North America the popularity of the Vancouver model has recently been given a tremendous boost by the promotional efforts of former City Councilor Price and planner Beasley.

Meanwhile, the small-plate Hong Kong prototype has spread all over Southeast Asia, where Overseas Chinese communities have embraced it enthusiastically. Thus, the hills surrounding Georgetown in Penang, Malaysia, are sprouting a new layer of high rises, like mushrooms after a tropical rain. A simplified version of all this is also the

urban housing prototype of choice in China, where one hundred cities of five million people will be needed in the next decade to attain the same rate of urbanization as Europe. Already, Shanghai has seen an astonishing building boom of tall, thin towers, which owe their forms to the Hong Kong codes.

A good argument can be made that the Hong Kong/Vancouver high-density revolution is the true "New Urbanism." It is already shaping the way more people live than any variation on early-twentieth-century American suburbia. Of course, the Vancouver model lacks the keen public relations touch of the other, more media-centric New Urbanism. But that may come. Within a matter of years, the Vancouver urban prototype will save more energy, house more people, and make finer urban neighborhoods than all the overhyped neo-nineteenth-century projects combined. Vancouver is the portal through which the twenty-first-century city is being conceived, for good, and sometimes, for ill.

#### Notes

1. On the academic front, 2003 did see the first book to document Vancouver's policy (if not architectural and urban design) innovations. This is John Punter's excellent introduction, *The Vancouver Achievement* (UBC Press).
2. In Vittorio Lampugnani, *The Aesthetics of Density* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1993), based on an exhibition of the same name at the Deutsches Architektur Museum.

**Left:** Vancouver's False Creek North residential area. Photo courtesy of the City of Vancouver, Planning Department.

**Above:** "False False Creek": The Vancouver model, re-created in the United Arab Emirates. Photo courtesy of author.



