

The City and its Public Space

This is truly a wild card submission. It does not contain specific graphics. By contrast it presents concepts and ideas which, I hope, will stimulate innovative images of a possible reality.

Vancouver's architectural quality will depend as much on the aesthetics of public space as on the buildings which relate to it. The design and use of public space has fundamental influences on the vibrancy and quality of living in the city. And that quality of living is an integral part of the aesthetics of the city.

From this perspective downtown Vancouver has some unique qualities. Because it is a peninsula it is like a self-contained island. There is broad access from the east. From other directions access is entirely by means of bridges. Many of the surrounding suburbs and municipalities communicate with one another *through* the downtown core. This places a strain on the available open spaces which are heavily devoted to roads and hence to traffic, at the expense of human interaction. This issue has dominated the architecture of public space.

Paradoxically the very geography which creates this situation provides a major opportunity for radical rethinking and redesign in which the objective will be to remove the blight of traffic, opening up new uses for the public space, uses which will enhance the city's quality of life and transform it to become an even more enviable city model. To explain this we must begin with fundamentals.

It is conceptually and practically straightforward to remove surface traffic from the city. Before we celebrate this possibility to re-energize urban space we must show how this can be achieved.

The geography makes it possible to block off the entry of surface traffic entirely. Clearly to the extent that this is done the present physical entry of traffic including through traffic must be replaced. Part of the answer has been suggested on various occasions. It consists of building a tunnel from the North Shore into the city, providing access for rapid transit as well as traffic.

Expressed like that, however, such a proposal merely provides another stream of vehicles. The idea needs to be extended to achieve the zero-surface traffic goal. The first stage in this is to extend the tunnel from the North Shore underneath the whole area of the city emerging to the south at the False Creek bridges. This is facilitated by the existence of a hump in the city centre with the tunnel exiting almost at bridge level.

From the central tunnel we would construct feeder tunnels to strategically located parking areas and to one major entry point to the east.

Such a scheme also facilitates the imposition of control measures such as tolls. It would be coordinated with a drive to improve perimeter transit especially along the North Shore.

The Vancouver streets would then be empty of vehicles except for transit and for specially licensed delivery vans of a limited size.

What then does this enable us to do with the public space opened up to alternative uses and designs?

All streets are now available for re-design and are devoted to pedestrians, in some instances lively meetings, and to bicycles.

We now create a network of boulevards, more parks, and walking streets as in some cities of Europe, but on a larger and more modern scale and design. We can envisage two types of space.

Lions Gate bridge, Georgia, Burrard, GFrerville and Pacific would have planted medians. They would accommodate newly designed and well separated kiosks, eating places, fountains, public art and art shows and entertainment stages. They would be available for celebration, parades and public festivities. Think of the *ramblas* of Barcelona but with a more open aesthetic.

Other streets such as Robson, Davie, Denman, Hastings, Seymour, Richards, Howe, Hornby and others would become lawn and garden areas. As far as practicable deliveries would take place on what are now side streets and lanes.

Naturally we would have to pay for this. While tolls might help with maintenance costs, the creation is a massive undertaking, requiring the same vision and determination that stopped the entry of a freeway into Chinatown, the creation of Staley Park, and the planning of the currently new Downtown, but on an even larger scale.

There are in fact two possible major sources of funds.

Some readers of this proposal may remember that in early discussions of the North Shore tunnel link one entrepreneur actually offered to pay for the then smaller proposal. He envisaged using the material removed for the tunnel to form an island in the middle of the harbour with a high rise village of condominiums and homes. Such a man-made interference with nature may be problematic but it should be studied.

The second and main source of income has fewer problems. Translink has sources of income which are simply not being tackled imaginatively. In London and Paris a few underground stations

have been designed to provide small service boutiques. Underground lines have severe limits to such use. But our above ground Skytrain stations have no such limits. They are natural locations for services for travellers in a hurry, from shoe repair, quick coffee, gadgets, flowers, take home delis to laundry and many other themes. The absence of such facilities makes the stations the ultimate dullsvilles. (The one attempt at something like this at Broadway station is an example of how not to do it.)

But the main source of potential revenue is quite different and could be a unique contribution to a futuristic skyline. Translink is the proud possessor of an extraordinary resource – the air space above the lines.

Take a deep breath and imagine what can be done.

Design a worm like building *above* the tracks, if necessary for the whole length above ground. Allow it to be two storeys. Place it in a noise resistant sheath of transparent material. There would be periodic access elevators and a side corridor, perhaps alternating the sides.

Inside there would be a mix of residential housing, offices and small workshops and community facilities. At one stroke there is an answer to the issues of the housing market, to possibilities of social housing, to the shortage of office space, and to the creation of a futuristic skyline. And underneath the present largely neglected gardens and bicycle lanes would take on a new life and a new meaning.

Let us put our skills together and create an even more spectacular Vancouver.