

PRICE TAGS – Issue 3

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Hot off my e-mail, I just received this from Jarrett Walker, a partner in the firm of Nelson/Nygard, transportation consultants. (They're working on the redesign of Granville Street.) Jarrett was one of a group of San Franciscans who came up for a tour of Vancouver in mid-July sponsored by SPUR (San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association) that I was pleased to lead.

As you'll see from the review he wrote, he's been a periodic visitor and explored some of our more out-of-the-way spots. Like many, he was enamoured by our city, but his review is thoughtful and he has some cleverly astute observations.

You can find the complete review and comments on the web at http://www.epinions.com/content_107534978692 but here's the whole thing for your immediate gratification....

The Future of Civilization May Look Like This

Aug 28 '03 (Updated Sep 20 '03)

Author's Product Rating



Pros

Vibrant dense neighborhoods in a stunning natural setting.

Cons

Winter. (They're working on it.)

The Bottom Line

Stay long enough to pretend you live there, and you'll see why people do ...

Full Review

Highrises! Forests of them! And the traffic! The mountains are lovely, but how does anyone get there? And how can anyone live like this?

Well, you might just ask them. Many of them love it. They know that their city sings, just as its name soars toward the mountains. They know they have world-class parks, with seemingly endless bicycle/pedestrian promenades and more being built every year. They like the view from their highrise units -- even though it includes a lot of other highrises. They appreciate their short walk to Stanley Park (mature forest, seawall path, famous Aquarium) or to the region's best shopping and cultural facilities in the urban core. If they need wilderness, they know they can grab a ferry to a bus and meet a grizzly bear on its home turf, just couple of hours from their

elevator. Pick up Douglas Coupland's brief and richly illustrated ode to his hometown, **City of Glass**, its cover proudly festooned with those masses of glassy towers, and you'll get a hint of why people keep coming here, and not leaving.

They love it so much, they keep electing leaders who want more of it. More highrises. More waterfront promenades. More public transit, even elevated lines.

In fact, North Americans are so used to driving in cities that they may not notice, right away, what's missing here. They'll notice the traffic, but it's no worse than in Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, or any other city with lots of activity in a constrained, peninsular core. It's something else ... something we usually take for granted ...

What does every big city in North America have, except Vancouver? Hmm ... We'll come back to this ...

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If you had been at Vancouver's westernmost point on a very warm July afternoon in 2003, you might have seen these:

1. Water. Vancouver is a peninsula. Its westernmost point is the tip, jutting out into the Strait of Georgia. On west lie the gulf islands, then Vancouver Island (where Vancouver isn't) and finally the Pacific.
2. Sand, driftwood, seaweed. This is a beach.
3. Living Forest. Rising behind the beach, a forested bluff hides the campus of the University of British Columbia. You'd have descended a steep but well-maintained stairway perhaps 200 feet to get down here. It's the usual northwest forest -- Mainly Douglas-fir, some redcedar, some spruce, and against this verticality, the occasional seductive curve, peeling red bark, and screaming tropical leaves of the madrone ...
4. Crowds. Playing. Studying. Lounging.
5. Microcommerce. Impromptu tents and pushcarts (how did they get down that hill?) selling the usual beach refreshments.
6. Macrocommerce, or Dead Forest. A huge flotilla of logs stretches far out into the channel, bound in military rows, probably awaiting export to some country that treasures its every native tree.
7. A single pole formed of a single log, bare and grey like the flotilla of logs out at sea, rising vertically out of the sand to a height of perhaps 15 feet.
8. On top of the pole, a man, standing in balance, feet together, naked, hairless, his whole body a brilliant red. He faces the bluff, gazing east or maybe a bit south of east. His eyes open, but unmoving.

Of course, to have seen all this, you would probably be naked too, having observed the hand-lettered signs reading "Nudity Only Please." Everyone around you, the vendors and the customers, the studious and the playful -- all would be naked, though if someone in a group wore clothing nobody would think to embarrass them about it. And when you headed back up the trail, a naked but official looking man at the trailhead might ask you to carry up a bag of trash from the beach. Politely, you'd oblige.

Big cities don't get much more polite than Vancouver.

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In a cramped room deep in city centre, Vancouver's Director of Planning, Larry Beasley, is explaining Vancouver's city planning system to a group of civic leaders from San Francisco. He and two other urban design professionals, sitting as a panel, have the authority to approve or reject proposed buildings, based only on the most general guidelines set by the City Council. The San Franciscans are amazed. "Why isn't every decision you make appealed to the City Council, and fought over in the media?" they ask, since that's certainly how it's done back home. Beasley sputters a moment, and finally says, "Well, first of all, that would be terribly rude ..." The San Franciscans erupt in laughter, finally assured that they are indeed in a foreign country.

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Just around the bluff from bright red man standing on the pole, you will find the UBC Museum of Anthropology, the definitive collection of art from the indigenous cultures of coastal British Columbia. Outside the museum, right on the bluff, is a great stand of totem poles, perhaps 10 or 15 in all. They gaze northwest, taking in the long, wet coast where the Haida perfected them.

Totem poles look religious, and they are, but they are also expressions of status. Part of the outdoor display is a photograph of the last Haida village, c. 1880. It shows a cluster of houses all facing inward in a semicircle, each with a totem pole built into its front. The symbols used on the pole reflected the identity and self-image of the family that lived there. If you translated that idea into 21st Century conceptual performance art, you might end up with a naked hairless man standing on top of a pole, gazing with compasslike certainty in a east-or-maybe-southeast direction toward something known only to him.

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Vancouver is the only major North American city that lacks ... what?

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Physically, why does Vancouver feel so different from nearby Seattle? Both cities are peninsular, occupying spectacular sites defined by mountains and water. Both are wet and green. Both have massively dense urban cores bounded by water -- a form comparable to San Francisco, perhaps, but to nothing else between Tokyo and Manhattan.

Here's a difference: Seattle is ringed by mountains, but its mountains are not as close as they look. Mount Rainier often looks as though you could touch it, but it is still over 50 miles away; only its hugeness makes it seem nearer. The mountains that ring Seattle hang on the horizon like ghosts, or gods, but there's a lot of suburbia, water, and gridlocked freeways between you and them.

Vancouver's mountains are more like the San Gabriel Mountains that rise above eastern Los Angeles: walls that soar abruptly from the edge of the city to immediate dizzying heights. Here they are green, of course, and their peaks are covered in snow even in midsummer, but like LA's San Gabriel Mountains they are appallingly huge and appallingly close. In the absence of traffic (about which more later), you could climb 5000 feet from sea level in an hour's drive from Vancouver. You can do this from Los Angeles as well, but not from Seattle or Portland, the cities to which Vancouver is usually compared.

The extreme relief of Vancouver's mountains is the norm from here up the Tlingit-Haida coast all the way to Glacier Bay in Alaska. Throughout this region, you'll routinely find 4000' peaks just a

few horizontal miles from the sea. I wonder if this geography, plus the abundance of trees, explains why the totem pole is unusual among Native North American creations: a soaring vertical expression with a purely symbolic purpose, created by the work of just a few hands, though probably erected by a few more. Not until the brief rise of the Maya and Aztec cultures -- quite recent in Native American time -- did anyone on this continent reach for the sky in such an intentional way -- and of course those efforts, like the pyramids, required masses of slave labor.

For the Tlingit and Haida the world was defined by a natural world that soared skyward on all sides, and plunged into the sea leaving the narrowest shelves of land on which to build a village. A totem pole looks miniscule next to a mountain, but by reaching skyward without leaving the mountain's shadow, a man would acknowledge his smallness and express his size at the same time.

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But what's missing, that you'll find in absolutely every other North American city of the same size?

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tick ... tick ... tick ...bzzz!

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... freeways! Or motorways, as Commonwealth countries usually call them. Big fast highways accessible only by onramps and offramps. There are barely two miles of freeway in Vancouver, and these are just a piece of Highway 1 en route from one suburb to another; this fragment is not really part of the city's mobility, and it's far from anything that a tourist would come to see. If you drive from the U.S., I-5 will turn into the Highway 99 freeway, but at the city limits the freeway ends, offering you the choice of bustling Granville Street or stately Cambie Avenue for the rest of your drive into town. Your bus from the airport will come this way as well.

Even the main streets aren't built for speed. Get going too fast, and you'll be slamming the brakes for the frequent crosswalks, where pedestrians know they have the right of way. But you'll get where you're going soon enough, and meanwhile, if you're a good traveler or even an open-minded resident, you'll enjoy what's in between. Like every prosperous city, Vancouver has as much traffic as it makes room for. They just don't make room for much of it.

The Interstate system tore up every city in the United States, and the big cities of eastern Canada all followed its example. But Vancouver is a young city, much of it built in the last 30 years. It had time to see what freeways were doing, and say no.

Instead of freeways, Vancouver has planning. The leaders from San Francisco are in town mainly to study the spectacular achievement of downtown Vancouver -- the thumb on the north side of the mitten-shaped peninsula of the city. Many cities have downtowns made of glass -- office towers that disgorge huge floods of workers at 5:00 PM into massive traffic jams. In Vancouver, a core of office buildings is surrounded by a far larger mass of soaring residential towers. A few old ones are depressing, but most are spectacular at least in their massed effect.

The result may be the model of the 21st Century city. Not only will it still be livable when the petroleum economy crashes, but it is perfecting the art of high-density living, first by rethinking highrise architecture. The modern Vancouver tower is extremely thin, so that for all its soaring height it casts remarkably little shadow. In the winter, when sunlight is at a premium, the glass towers bounce the light around so that everyone can make the most of it, and the thinness of the towers ensures that when a "sunbreak" occurs, direct sunlight will penetrate to the street while its

reflections in the glass will cause the whole city to glow. See one of the new towers in isolation, and it might even remind you of the superthin, supertall structures that appear all over Earth in various scenes in **Star Trek**, some even visible from Captain Picard's vineyard in France. Or it might remind you of a totem pole, which in its own day reached skyward in the face of much higher mountains. Like the balcony-covered highrise, the totem pole too was a vertical composition of many different ideas, characters, selves.

Vancouver is an answer to a question that plagues all of humanity. There are more people coming. There is only so much land, and we'll need a lot of it for agriculture if everyone is to eat. The Vancouver answer is density made livable -- not just townhouses, but extreme soaring buildings full of surprisingly spacious homes, each with a face to the city where its owners can express who they are.

It is not perfect, but the process of perfecting it will make it even less like any other North American city, not more so. Vancouver needs more convenient and attractive transit, though what they have is as good as any city west of Chicago can offer. They need better wayfinding systems, though it's already an easier city to navigate than the mass of angled and obstructed grids that define Seattle or San Francisco. Locals need to stop calling their climate "Mediterranean" -- you'd never hear this term applied to nearby Bellingham, Washington, which has the same climate but calls it "temperate rainforest." Yes, this IS the Canadian Riviera, with the country's mildest climate. Yes, there is one palm tree that can handle the moderate winters here, a hairy beast called the Windmill Palm (*Trachycarpus fortunei*) that you'll find planted all over the city. But like the rest of this coast, Vancouver is glorious in summer but dark and wet in the winter ...

Embracing winter is the Next Great Project for Vancouver. The glass towers do conserve winter light, and many other details of design try to compensate for the cloudy gloom of a normal December day. But there's more to be done on this, and there's a deadline. In 2010, the world's attention will turn to this city for the Olympic Winter games, perversely inviting Vancouver to show itself off to the world in its gloomiest season. No doubt the networks will go there the previous summer to photograph the mountains and other grand vistas of the city, just in case the clouds never clear during the Games themselves. If the clouds do clear, revealing the mountains in blinding winter plumage, well, Vancouver will need no marketing.

But meanwhile, Vancouver should continue to explore how to express the pleasures of cold, gloom, and rain, because nobody south of the border is buying the line that this place is "Mediterranean." Perhaps there's a cultural ritual that could be refined, rather as Seattle refined and exported the coffeehouse (likely a winter invention). Vancouver is an athletic city, and we will all get a eyeful of beautiful people jogging in shorts and parka through the rain. We'll hear that rain is good for the complexion, and they might even bring in Nicholson Baker explain (from his essay "The Size of Thoughts") that "large thoughts are creatures of the shade." It a message that just needs to be pulled together somehow, and in this quietly inventive city, I'm sure they're working on it.

Recommended

Yes

Best Time to Travel Here: Mar - May

You can also find all of Jarrett's articles since 2000, including pieces on such diverse places as Sydney, Canberra, Portland, Fort Worth, and Juneau, at [http://www.epinions.com/user-urbanist/show ~content](http://www.epinions.com/user-urbanist/show~content) . You'll also find his "How to be depressed in ..." series, which currently has items on San Francisco and New York. Reviews of books and hotels are also interspersed there ...