

PRICE TAGS – Issue 5

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Another Day, Another Gushing Article ...

This time from Toronto. Globe and Mail writer Lisa Rochon thinks it's about time Toronto got in line and learned some lessons from Vancouver. Here are some excerpts:

Vancouver's street smarts

... Where Toronto once inspired the world, Vancouver has taken over as a model of urbanism. Urban planners and designers in Bangkok, Shanghai, San Francisco and Seattle are travelling to lotusland for lessons in city building.

Fools the lot of them, you say? Perhaps. But The Vancouver Achievement is hard to ignore. Written by British academic John Punter, the 400-page hardcover makes a compelling case for the wisdom of Vancouver. Anybody interested in remaking Toronto should sit down and read it.

"In the 1990s, Vancouver established a reputation as one of the best-planned cities in North America, a city where the design quality of development achieves a consistently high standard. It has become a place of pilgrimage for American planners and developers . . ." So begins the book by Punter, a professor of urban design at Cardiff University, Wales. ...

The 2003 Toronto Architecture and Urban Design Awards have gone to an exhilarating crop of built and visionary projects. Sadly, they represent a tiny fraction of what is being constructed in the city. "Business comes first a lot of the time in Toronto," says Paul Bedford,

Toronto's director of planning. "And if you get the product out and it sells, who cares what it looks like? Vancouver is the reverse of that."

The Urban Design Panel is something that Vancouver has which Toronto desperately needs. This is a 12-member advisory board comprises primarily the city's leading architects as well as landscape designers and engineers.

Co-directors (of Planning) Ann McAfee and Larry Beasley are regularly invited to travel the world to expose the secret of Vancouver's urbanism. Shanghai and Bangkok are partnered with Vancouver to fully investigate the city's urban design and the ways it delivers community services. Sao Paulo, a city with an unbelievable population of 20 million people, wants to know how Vancouver engages the public in its policy decisions. Sydney, Australia, is consulting with Vancouver for ways to effectively redevelop industrial brownfields using a contemporary language of architecture.

Wake up Toronto and take a number. It's time to get in line.

What makes the article particularly provocative is this assessment of how wards versus the at-large system affects planning:

In Vancouver, there are 10 city councillors who represent not specific wards but the city at large. The councillors, with the mayor, vote on the zoning of large areas in the city. But decisions about specific projects -- building height or the integrity of the architecture -- are left to the expertise of planning staff and advisory architects. In this way, the overall vision for Vancouver remains clear. In Toronto, city councillors pushing for the interests of their ward or local developers regularly weaken city-building ideas.

Read the whole article at:

www.globeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/TPStory/LAC/20030924/ROCHON24//?query=lisa+rochon

The Vancouver Achievement

If you're also interested in reading John Punter's new book referenced above, you can purchase it at:

www.ubcpres.ubc.ca/search/title_book.asp?BookID=2130

This book examines the development of Vancouver's unique approach to zoning, planning, and urban design from its inception in the early 1970s to its maturity in the management of urban change at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Vancouver Achievement explains the evolution and evaluates the outcomes of Vancouver's unique system of discretionary zoning. ... Subsequent chapters focus upon the downtown, waterfront megaprojects, single-family neighbourhoods, the city-wide strategic planning programme (CityPlan),...

Heavily illustrated with over 160 photos and figures, this book -- the first comprehensive account of contemporary planning and urban design practice in any Canadian city -- will appeal to academic and professional audiences, as well as the general public

I don't think any city has had its recent planning and development so well documented. *The Vancouver Achievement* is an extraordinary achievement – and worth the price at \$85.

More Good Stuff

Grant Longhurst, after noting the tag on Toronto's design awards, reminded me that local design gets due recognition from the Architectural Institute of B.C. You can see our best at

http://www.aibc.ca/pub_resources/aibc_outreach/gallery/awardslst.html

Cool Canada

Here's another one of those columns where an American looks north and is surprised at what she sees – this time, Samantha Bennett in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

Canada. It's supposed to be a cold, wholesome country of polite, beer-drinking hockey players, not founded by freedom-fighters in a bloody revolution but quietly assembled by loyalists and royalists more interested in order and good government than liberty and independence.

But if we are the rugged individualists, why do we spend so much of our time trying to get everyone to march in lockstep? And if Canadians are so reserved and moderate, why are they so progressive about letting people do what they want to? ...

Like teenagers, we fiercely idolize individual freedom but really demand that everyone be the same. But the Canadians seem more adult -- more secure. They aren't afraid of foreigners. They aren't afraid of homosexuality. Most of all, they're not afraid of each other.

I wonder if America will ever be that cool

The whole thing is at:

<http://www.post-gazette.com/columnists/20030730sam0730p1.asp>

Thanks to John Freyvogel for the link.

More Cool

Check out Chinatown this weekend – and bring your cell phone. [murmur] has come to town.

Via their cell phones, visitors and passers-by will be able to listen to histories, personal stories and anecdotes told by those who live in or are connected to the neighbourhood.

Signs placed in sites throughout the area will indicate the presence of a story and a number that can be dialled to access it.

[murmur] is three young artists - Shawn Micallef, James Roussel, Gabe Sawhney – based out of Habitat, the Canadian Film Centre's media lab in Toronto - with contributions by local story collectors Jason Lee and Doris Cheng.

Details and map at:

www.murmurvancouver.ca

Fade in, Fade Out

No doubt about it, the biggest reaction to Price Tags so far has been that link to the City's website where you can see how the False Creek basin has changed from 1978 to 2003.

Here's a recollection of that past from Silvia V:

I can definitely remember when False Creek was an active rail yard, and how impossible it seemed when they proposed to rehabilitate the lands after Expo 86. The whole area was full of toxic land fill. I saw the drawings, and it seemed too unreal to even think that they would be successful at putting up a few buildings. What a pipe dream!

The whole tract from Granville and Davie around the east side of False Creek, past Main & Georgia up and around to Main and 1st was a dark, industrial area where most people didn't go at night, and hardly during the day, either. There were clubs around Seymour and Davie but they were in a pretty dark area of town - prostitutes, and some gay bars.

To the north it bled into the Hastings, Pender and Main area which was still full of skid road hotels - lots of alcoholics (this was before crack, AIDS, and heroin), and biker bars at Georgia and Main next to the old CN terminal. Chinatown was both isolated and an extension of this area.

Now many of the hotels are gone, pushed out and upgraded for Expo, and then all the activity by DERA to make sure they were replaced so that the impoverished folk in that area still had somewhere to be. Unbelievable what exists today.

Very interesting to compare to the area around Union Lake in Seattle - different as it is still an active shipping channel - but they have turned the old industrial sites into large parks (you can see the old industrial pipes artfully sticking out of the ground). Certainly no large

scale redevelopment, money or plan.