

# PRICE TAGS

## *Issue 11*

November 16, 2003

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## San Francisco in Vancouver

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Think of the picture above as the recipe for a tasty bouillabaisse, San Francisco-style. Toss together a combination of politicians, planners, lawyers, developers, community advocates, teachers, artists, architects – raise to 30,000 feet, transport a thousand kilometers and serve in Vancouver.

First formed in 1959, the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association ([www.spur.org](http://www.spur.org)) has been one of the City's preeminent public-policy think tanks.

Throughout the 1960's, SPUR worked to build support for land use, transportation and investment strategies that could support centre-oriented growth. Since then, it has been involved with virtually every major planning decision in the city.

In mid-July this year, SPUR came to Vancouver to see what we're all about. And here's what they said about us.


San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association
Newsletter Calendar
Report 422

# 11/12.03

## The Vancouver Style

*by Gordon Price*

**T**hey're cousins of the coast: two cities that share remarkable similarities. San Francisco and Vancouver are almost identical in area, surrounded by water on three sides, and sited next to the best harbors on the western Pacific. From the ocean, they're each entered through a



A1 photos by Jim Cheyford

The Vancouver style—illustrated at Concord Pacific—well-spaced towers, townhouses below, and public space at the water's edge.

natural and spectacular gate, symbolized by the suspension bridges that cross them and blessed by the parks—once military reserves—that sit astride them. They're streetcar cities, shaped by the transit systems their citizens simultaneously love and hate. They're cities of neighborhoods, to which their inhabitants sometimes give greater allegiance than the municipalities to which they pay their taxes. They're "built-out" cities with almost no undeveloped land remaining, which puts unrelenting pressure on their housing stock. And they confront similar social problems associated with the extremes of wealth and poverty.

They're dense cities, anomalies of the west, both surrounded by the same indistinguishable sprawl of the regions that dominate them, where the growth of jobs and housing has gravitated.

Vancouver and San Francisco, after experiencing the trauma of rapid change in the post-war period, were both warriors in the battle against Modernism. The word "progress"—in which they had both deeply believed—became separated from the optimistic spirit of renewal and turned into a cynical synonym for change without respect for any other value than the bottom line. The reaction was radical: citizen groups mounted savage fights against freeways, they fought to preserve their architectural heritage, they made neighborhoods the primary unit of planning.

In Vancouver, the planners and councils of the Fifties and Sixties who had zoned decaying streetcar neighborhoods like the West End for high-rise development were booted out. From the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, no residential high-rises would be built.

Vancouver lost population in most neighborhoods in the Seventies, and economic recessions deferred the pressures of growth. But when the next inevitable boom arrived in the 1980s, so did the excruciating pressure. The price of housing skyrocketed, rents escalated, and housing shortages created political crises at City Hall.

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Learning from Vancouver

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Actually, the first article is what I said to them about us. (If you're really – I mean, *really* - interested in the intricacies of our development-permit process in Vancouver, click here.) But if you want to know what they really thought about us, well, you might go directly to Jeannene Przyblyski's article on page 14.

## Sex, Planning, and Rock and Roll (in Vancouver)

Jeannene Przyblyski

*This way to your Dream 'House'.*” The billboard’s arrow is a little green “Monopoly” cottage that points invitingly skyward, a perfectly condensed signifier of the ultimate urban desires for privacy, prestige, penthouse-quality panoramas and a piece of the action.

Among the first things that strike you as you wander Vancouver’s waterfront are the number of brightly colored real estate billboards and the number of really tall construction cranes. Construction-site clutter is sometimes hard to overlook, but this is what real estate advertising does so well. It visualizes our dreams fulfilled—“unrivaled waterfront residences,” “spectacular lofts,” views that “start where others leave off,” a perfectly urbane equilibrium of “comfort” inside and “nature” outside.

And the pitch doesn’t stop there. On our first day in Vancouver, participants in the SPUR study tour gather at the Concord Pacific Presentation Centre, where another of the megaprojects for which Vancouver is becoming increasingly renowned in planning and development circles is taking shape nearby.



“Harbour Green,” a new high-rise housing development, hasn't even broken ground before its marketing begins. Preselling condos is illegal in California but allows many projects in Canada to get built.

We are ushered into a nicely upholstered circular projection room and the lights dim. As music pulses and a parade of youthful and ethnically diverse faces appear onscreen, we are given the seductive (hard) sell: if we buy one of the townhouses, lofts, or condos at Concord Pacific, the video clips assure us, we will find ourselves not merely housed but “HERE.” Privileged inhabitants of a special urban place, we will dine impeccably and healthfully every day, we will dance with abandon at hot new clubs every night, we will

stroll through verdant parkways to great shopping and personally fulfilling jobs, we will exercise religiously but painlessly, droplets of water sliding in ever more impossibly decorative patterns over our taut bodies as we slice through the pristine water of the pool at the in-house spa facilities.

We squirm uneasily in our seats. We want to talk number of units and floor-area ratios. We feel much better when the city's Co-Director of Planning Larry Beasley strolls in wearing an understated dark suit and begins to speak earnestly and articulately about the everyday practicalities of long-range planning. But this moment of apparent cognitive dissonance is also a moment when I become even more interested in what a recently published book proclaims as "The Vancouver Achievement."

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VANCOUVER AND S.F. COMPARED		
	SAN FRANCISCO	VANCOUVER
Land area in square miles	46.7	43.6
Population	776,733 (2000)	545,671 (2001)
Percent increase in '90s	7.30% (2000)	15.60% (2001)
Jobs in city	634,430 (2000)	348,000 (2001)
Typical housing price *	\$536,260	\$236,868
Housing units added downtown, 1996-2001	4,544	16,225
Residential towers now under construction	5	18
Largest current development	Mission Bay	Concord Pacific Place
Land area	313 acres	204 acres
Eventual open space	49 acres	52 acres
Projected population	10,000	15,000

\* Bay Area median price, Vancouver region average price in American dollars.

Sources: S.F.Chronicle, City of Vancouver Planning Department, U.S. and Canadian censuses.





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One of my favourite pieces in the newsletter was written by SPUR President Jim Chappell. His comparisons of Stanley Park with San Francisco's Golden Gate Park are particularly insightful. Article is on page 9.

## A Walk in Stanley Park

*By Jim Chappell*

... I was anxious to spend a day strolling through Stanley Park to see what I could learn. ...

The first thing one notes that the location of Stanley Park in relation to the city is in some ways more like the Presidio National Park than Golden Gate Park. The Lions Gate Bridge, carrying Highway 99, crosses Burrard Inlet, and passes through the park under a park road—successfully grade-separating through traffic from park users, a major success in Vancouver and a major failing in San Francisco. Today construction is underway in Stanley Park to further grade-separate through traffic from park traffic.

One clear difference between the parks is their location relative to downtown and the population center—Stanley Park immediately adjoins the West End, which has been a relatively dense population center since Victorian times. Golden Gate Park, of course, was carved out of uninhabited sand dunes and today remains surrounded largely by short buildings.

This means several things. First, there are many more people able to conveniently walk to Stanley Park than to Golden Gate Park. Figure A shows a view from Stanley Park back over Lost Lagoon to the West

End with its residential towers. While insertion of these towers into an existing residential neighborhood led to a citizens revolt and subsequent downzoning of the West End, their construction has kept this urban neighborhood at about the same density it had originally. In San Francisco, where our older neighborhoods are becoming less and less dense as homes and flats built for families of four, five, six or more are becoming home to singles and childless couples, it becomes ever harder to support the corner stores, bus lines, and parks that once served so many.

Vancouver, subject to the same demographic forces resulting in smaller family sizes, has unwittingly addressed this problem in the West End by replacing large older homes with new apartment buildings containing many more smaller units, largely intended for singles and couples. Because of this, neighborhood commercial strips have remained vital without the need for parking, local neighborhood-serving businesses can thrive, and there is very little traffic in this dense, heavily populated neighborhood.

There is so little traffic, in fact, that one can stroll down the middle of most streets in the West End throughout the day.



Figure A. Residential towers in the West End adjoin Stanley Park, which has kept this a desirable neighborhood, with urban services nearby, at the same time allowing many people to walk to the park.

[Click to Newsletter to continue ....](#)



Ray Spaxman recommends the following site for “restoring perspective and sanity. Takes about three minutes - well worth the time.”