

PRICE TAGS

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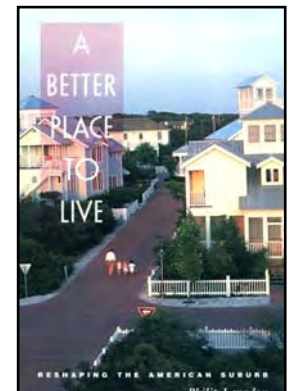
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A New Urbanist Comes to Vancouver

Philip Langdon is the senior editor of *New Urban News*. I had first read his work in *The Atlantic*, and later in his book *A Better Place To Live*.

Last month he was in Vancouver – the latest American coming across the 49th to see how we do things up here.

Apparently he liked what he saw. Here are excerpts from the latest issue of *New Urban News* – one of the best publications on urban planning in the U.S.



A Christmas Present for TransLink

Maybe it takes an outsider to admire a city's transit system. In the first of two articles, here's Philip Langdon's experience of the B-Line from YVR.

NEW URBAN NEWS

The virtues of Vancouver

PHILIP LANGDON

After a transcontinental flight to Vancouver, I carried my bags to the curb outside the airport and waited. To fully understand a city, you have to ride its transit system, and I knew that by taking Vancouver's TransLink buses, not only would I get a few slices of the British Columbia city's life — I'd also get to my bed-and-breakfast in the Kitsilano area near downtown for the grand sum of two Canadian dollars (\$1.54 US).

I arrived late on a chilly Saturday afternoon in November. The first of the three buses that would take me toward my destination didn't show up for 20 minutes, not an auspicious start. But when I dropped my \$2 coin in the fare slot, I was impressed that a machine dispensed a card with an electronically readable stripe, good for unlimited free transfers for the next hour and a half. It seemed so professional compared to the flimsy transfer slips that most buses in the US hand out.

MAKING BUSES COMFORTABLE

In hardly any time, we arrived at the Granville Street transfer point where waiting for us was a fast, semi-express bus with soft, upholstered seats — not the hard plastic or metal of US buses. Running through my mind was a quote from an American transit official in Joel Garreau's *Edge City*: "Show me a man over thirty who regularly takes the bus, and I will show you a life failure." The Vancouver bus system seemed geared for success; there seemed to be an awareness that buses must compete in comfort and convenience against private automobiles.

Major bus stops along several miles of Granville Street displayed electronic signs telling riders how many minutes until the next bus would arrive. Again I wondered: Why not in the US? At the busy intersection of Granville and Broadway, I transferred to another semi-express bus — after its driver had used a power-operated ramp to let a woman with a baby buggy and an old man on a motorized wheelchair exit easily. The Broadway bus filled with people, few looking like Garreau's "life failures."

Several minutes later, it was time for me to step down and walk the last three and a half blocks to the coming week's lodging. The only remaining obstacle, in a tightly built residential area, was MacDonald Street, a fast-moving vehicular artery. The sky by now was dark, so I pushed a "walk" button and prepared to wait. To my surprise, within three seconds the walk signal lit up and traffic halted. In all of North America, this was the fastest-responding walk button I had ever found.

The next day, Patrick Condon, who holds the James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Livable Environments at the University of British Columbia, explained that quick, pedestrian-activated signals are common in Vancouver and Canada. Where a traffic artery meets a side street, the city often installs a light that continuously flashes green for traffic on the major street. It turns red on the artery only when a pedestrian presses the walk button. On every such button I pushed in Vancouver during the next few days, the light changed in no more than five seconds. It felt powerful to be a pedestrian.

BICYCLE ROUTES WITH NAMES

Day and night, I also noticed people bicycling, an efficient way to get around in Vancouver. Gordon Price, who served 16 years on city council, pointed out that Vancouver's bike routes have *names*, which are posted on street signs. The names make it easier for people to assemble mental maps of the city's bike routes and incorporate cycling into their daily movements.

Vancouver, I discovered, is remarkable in its encouragement of alternatives to the automobile and in the sophistication of its efforts to make urban life civilized. Consequently, a report on Vancouver's urban design appears on pages 8 through 10, and more reporting on innovative ideas and practices in British Columbia will appear in the next issue. Canada often learns from the US's mistakes. What a pleasure it would be if the US started learning from the accomplishments of its neighbors to the north. ♦

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In this feature article, Langdon captures one of the essential (but often-missed) points about Vancouver: our combination of modernism and new urbanism

In central Vancouver, modernism and New Urbanism mesh

Modernists have the upper hand in shaping the architecture of the city's center, and the results fit into generally effective streetscapes.

PHILIP LANGDON

Probably the most stunning new skyline in North America is that of downtown Vancouver, British Columbia. In the past decade, a succession of "point towers" — high-rises with thin profiles, filled mostly with rental and for-sale apartments — has shot up within walking distance of the Canadian city's center.

Many new urbanists have an aversion to towers, seeing them as expressions of all that was anti-urban and inhumane in the ideas of early modernists like LeCorbusier. But towers may be indispensable in a region like greater Vancouver, where the population swelled by 24 percent between 1991 and 2001, putting increased pressure on a limited land supply. Since the 2001 census, the metropolitan population has surpassed 2 million, and it is expected to continue growing quickly.

The downtown core of Vancouver, which has gained roughly 38,000 residents in the past 12 years, has become an ambitious test of whether high-rise construction, architectural modernism, and new urban planning can all coalesce in a pleasing form. If this experiment succeeds — and so far, the results are encouraging — Vancouver could be North America's biggest demonstration of New Urbanism's ability to adopt a distinctly modern architectural expression.

To understand how Vancouver managed this unusual combination, consider the following:

- Population within the 44.3-square-mile city grew by 16 percent from 1991 to 2001, to 546,000. The city, in the past two decades, has emphatically reversed the population decline that began in the early 1970s.

- Vancouver gained many immigrants from Hong Kong, Singapore, and other cities where tall buildings are the norm and where people are accustomed to living close together.

- The region is hemmed in between the Pacific Ocean to the west, mountains to the north and east, and the US border to the south, limiting its ability to sprawl. Provincial decisions to preserve much of the region's farmland forever

are further restricting peripheral development.

- Land costs are high, giving developers an incentive to squeeze as much building space onto a site as possible. The metropolitan area is 50 percent more densely populated than metropolitan Portland and 100 percent more dense than metro Seattle, according to Patrick Condon, who holds the James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Livable Environments at the University of British Columbia.

During a downturn in the office market in the 1980s, Vancouver changed its zoning to encourage residential development surrounding the central business district. The city also seized the opportunity to redevelop two former rail yards — along False Creek just south of downtown, and along Coal Harbor on downtown's northern edge — as mixed-use areas containing thousands of units of housing.

"We have the fastest-growing residential downtown in North America," says Larry Beasley, co-director of planning for the city. "In the heart of our downtown we have about 78,000 people." Vancouver never allowed freeways within the city limits, so as traffic tie-ups in the region have grown, many people — including families with children — have concluded that it makes sense to live in or near downtown, where they can walk or bike to work or use the extensive system of buses, ferries, and SkyTrains. "Congestion is our friend," says Gordon Price, a city coun-



Buildings support pedestrian-friendly streets in downtown Vancouver.

PHOTO BY PHILIP LANGDON

cilor from 1986 to 2002.

What has resulted is a crisp, contemporary skyline punctuated by slim towers, many of them with tones of white and light green and an abundance of glass. The towers feature bays, recessed or projecting balconies, and other angles and articulation, melting away the buildings' mass. Some towers curve. Some become smaller toward the top. Large window expanses often are divided into segments, creating interesting patterns with consistently modern detailing.

"It is new urbanist in that it is intense, mixed-use, and socially diverse," Beasley says. "It's pretty consistent with the Charter of the New Urbanism." The city presses developers to set towers back from the street, behind two- to six-story bases frequently containing retail activities or townhouses. "Towers give density and financial viability to a project," he says. "Townhouses give the urbanism."

**MODERN STYLE,
TRADITIONAL PLACEMENT**

Though almost always spare and modern in their styling, the townhouses are positioned like urban townhouses from a century ago, with their entrances several steps up from the sidewalk, helping protect the inhabitants' privacy. At-grade access for people with disabilities is often provided at the rear or elsewhere. The townhouses usually stand a few feet back from the sidewalk, making room for tiny outdoor sitting areas overlooking the street. "About 1,000 rowhouses have been built downtown," Beasley says. "Every time there's an opportunity, we insert a rowhouse."

One of the finest examples of the combination of towers, townhouses, and coherent street space is the mixed-use area that has grown up between False Creek and the center of the business district in the past several years. Many tower complexes have courtyards — either open to the public or, more often, secured for residents' use. Beasley notes that by providing much of the housing in tall buildings, more ground is freed for use as private and public open space than would be the case if all the housing were low- and mid-rise. Many of the open spaces are spectacular pieces of landscape architecture.

Condon thinks the tower idea has been used too much and that some of the tall



PHOTO BY PHILIP LANGDON

A typical Vancouver block: a grocery store at the base of soaring towers meets a wide sidewalk.

buildings are overpowering. Some of the high-rises overlooking Coal Harbor do come awfully close to the dubious Corbusian ideal of the "tower in the park." In the Coal Harbor area, the emphasis has been on keeping sight lines open so that people farther away from the harbor can look past the towers and see the water and the mountains. Condon points out that the proliferation of open spaces sometimes erodes the definition of the streets and public spaces. He also suggests that too plentiful open space drains vitality from streets.

A portion of the new downtown housing is reserved for people who can-

not pay market rents. The city has detailed guidelines on how to make developments family-friendly. "To me, this is a family neighborhood," says Colleen Gold, who lives in a ninth-story condo near False Creek with her husband and their six-year-old son. "There's a community center, a park, even a school." Initially, she says, "we weren't sure about the kid aspect. It couldn't have turned out better."

If the new developments on the edge of downtown Vancouver are compared to those near the center of Chicago — another northern city undergoing an impressive housing boom — Vancouver

In Print: *The Vancouver Achievement*

For an in-depth examination of how Vancouver's approach to planning, zoning, and urban design has advanced since the early 1970s, an excellent source is *The Vancouver Achievement: Urban Planning and Design* by John Punter, published last July by the University of British Columbia Press (448 pages, hardcover \$85 Canadian, paperback \$29.95).

Punter, who is with the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cardiff University in Wales, says Vancouver is worth studying because "it has an international reputation for achieving a generally high standard of design and for generally making the most of its superb natural setting." Its citywide design strategy and neighborhood visioning have much to tell other countries "about how urban intensification will have to be negotiated with local communities if it is to be successful," Punter writes.

Vancouver has made extensive use of an Urban Design Panel, half of whose 12 members are drawn from the Architectural Institute of British Columbia, the rest being engineers, landscape architects, a representative of the development industry, and a representative of the Vancouver Planning Com-

mission. The advisory panel issues critiques of approximately 25 to 30 major rezoning or permit applications a year. Its recommendations have resulted in improvements to many major projects. Rarely are the panel's suggestions ignored.

The advisory system is aided by the fact that in Vancouver, city planners enjoy broad discretionary power over development and design. Politicians leave many decisions in the hands of professional planners, and there is a highly collaborative relationship among planners, developers, and designers. Patrick Condon, a Massachusetts native who has been on the faculty at the University of British Columbia for nearly 12 years, thinks it might be hard to implement such an approach in US cities. With its high degree of discretion and collaboration, "it feels like a different culture," he says. Certainly, though, the system has resulted in more intelligent development in Vancouver. The city has dramatically increased the number of people living near the center, greatly improved the character of some of the neighborhoods, and set a high standard for urban design in North America. Punter examines the accomplishments in an admirably organized and readable way.

comes out more spacious by far. Recently developed neighborhoods south of the Chicago Loop, such as Dearborn Park II, seem cramped — their three-story buildings packing the land. Cafes and stores are scarce. Vancouver's False Creek area, by contrast, offers many amenities, including restaurants, cafes, and an upscale supermarket called Urban Fare.

"People confuse height and density," says former Councilor Price. "They think lower is better — more in touch with the ground and with nature." But handled well, a combination of towers and townhouses may actually deliver a better balance of ground space and amenity-supporting density. The "Vancouver style" of development, Price believes, will be seen increasingly, not just in Canada but in the western US as well. "Seattle is looking at it," he says. "Portland is looking at it. About once a month there's a delegation coming here to see how it works." ♦

Townhouses in Vancouver with towers in the background.



PHOTO BY PHILIP LANGDON

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