

PRICE TAGS

Issue 17

January 24, 2004

How They Sold the Revolution



I knew the revolution had arrived when I saw the propaganda. It was a marketing brochure, promoting yet another downtown condominium project, one of dozens launched in Vancouver during the Nineties.

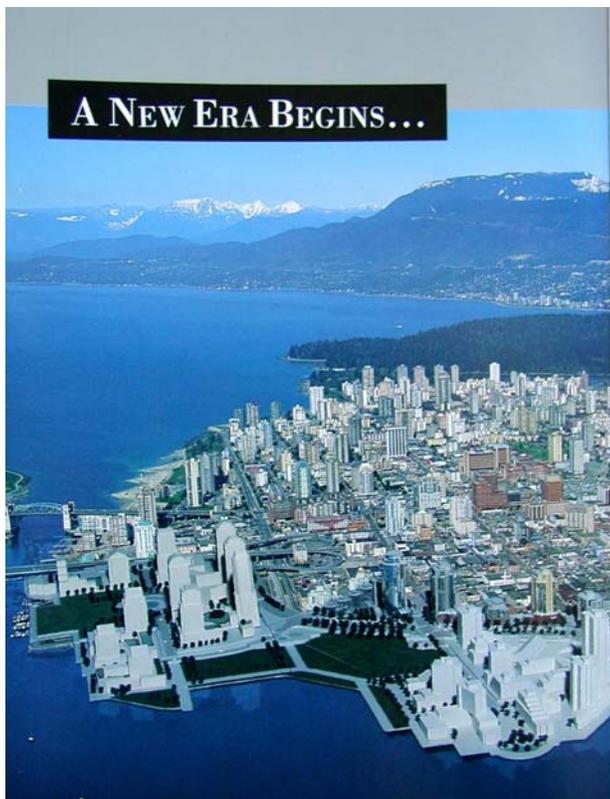
All the ads at that time were ostensibly pushing condominiums. But of course they were really selling lifestyle, and with the lifestyle a revolution in what was desirable.

The ad portrayed two yuppies in bicycle helmets: heads raised, eyes intense, anticipating a brighter future, a better way of life, a high-speed Internet connection. It was mock-Soviet Realism in service to High Capitalism, with music by the Pet Shop Boys: “Go West” – or at least to West Georgia - and (here’s the revolutionary part) go by bike!



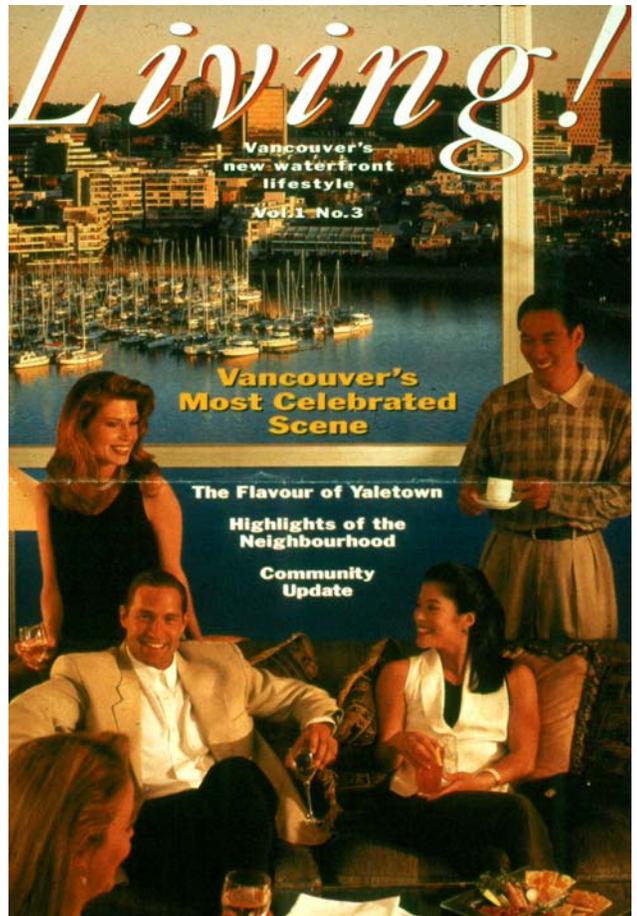
By appropriating the fashion of the northwest outdoors, the designers took cycling out of the alternative-lifestyle gutter into the mainstream traffic of contemporary living.

And it wasn't just cycling: the marketing campaigns of downtown developers were taking many of the public policies embedded in the grim, gray text of Council reports and translating them into eye-catching images of unquestionable appeal. Above all, they were making desirable what was generally perceived to be politically unspeakable. They were selling Density.

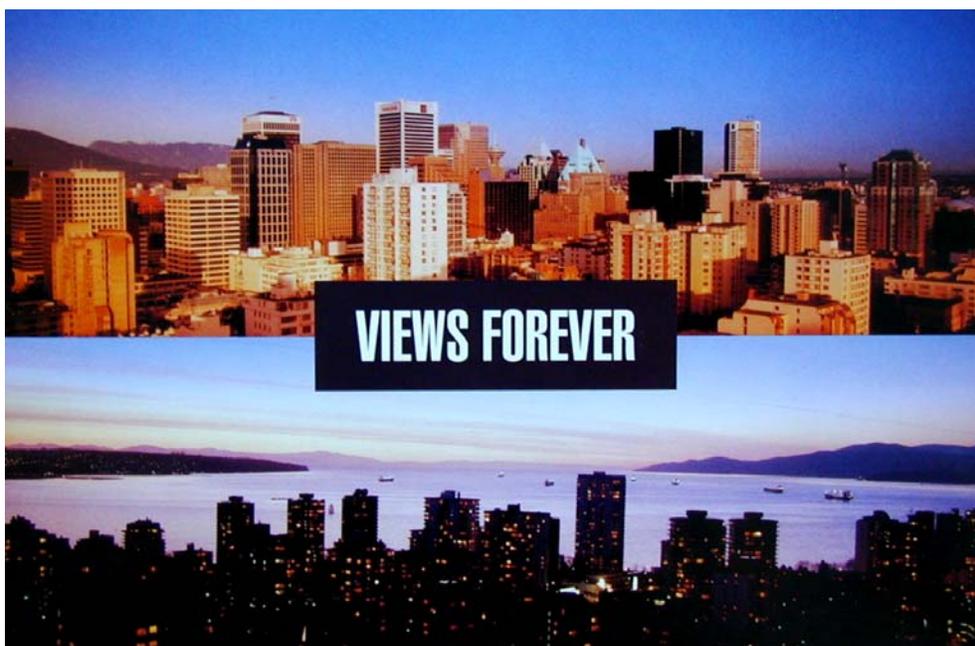


Indeed, the earliest marketing brochures at the beginning of the Downtown boom were almost indistinguishable from planning documents. In many cases, they *were* planning documents – renderings and photographs of models used to gain City approval for development permits.

But very quickly, the dominant images shifted away from buildings to people, and it became clear that the major developers, particularly of Hong Kong-controlled Concord Pacific and Henderson Development, were appealing to two markets simultaneously – one offshore and Asian, the other local and mixed. This was multiculturalism in action: never stated, always understood.



The people were as beautiful as the setting, and the setting was always spectacular. The developers knew right away that they were selling views, but it took them a while to understand that the attractions of public spaces and the urban fabric were as appealing as the granite countertops and designer faucets.





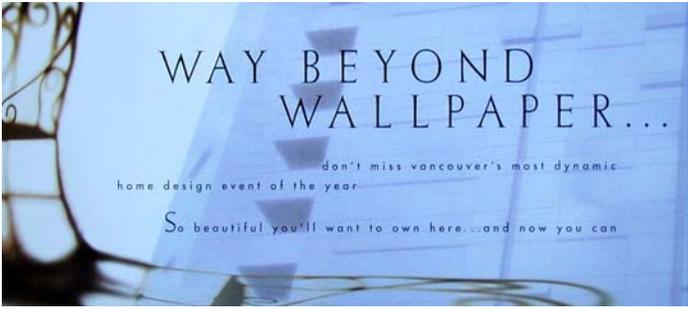
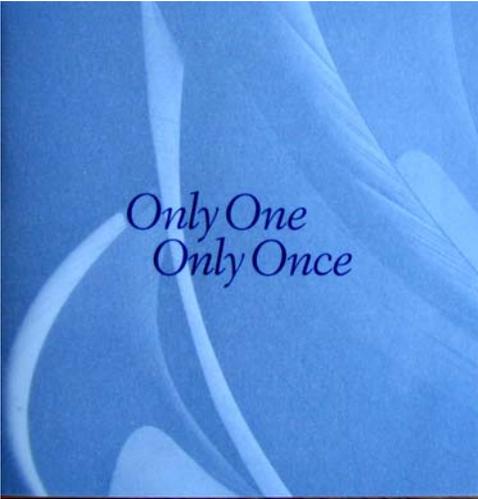
But not to get carried away, the advertising was usually littered with the E words: Extraordinary! Entitled! Exclusive!

Although the City never allowed gated communities, insisted on accessible public spaces, and even bought the Yaletown docks to keep them in the public domain, the advertising would have you think otherwise.

Nor was there any mention of the non-market housing that had to be mixed into the megaprojects, next door to the million-dollar condos. Or to the family-housing that ensured kids would be as much a part of the community as the lean-bodied singles.

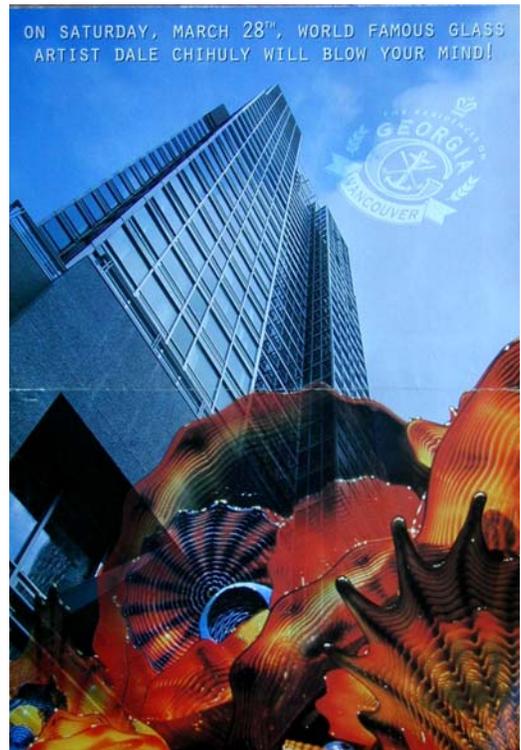
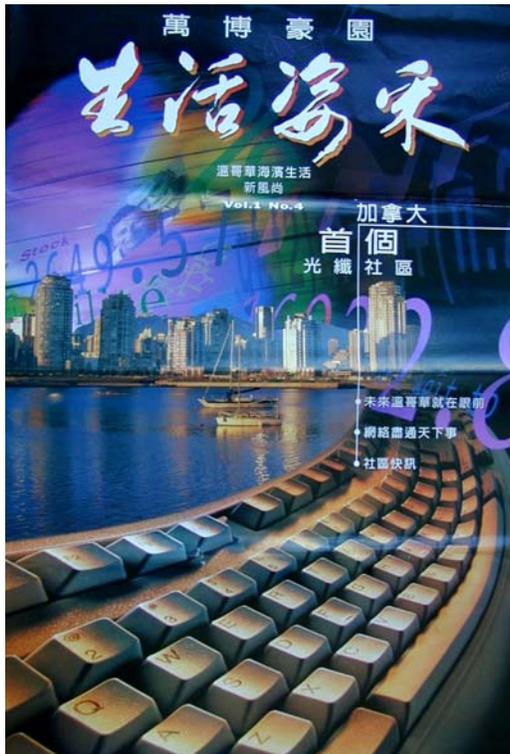
But the campaigns were certainly successful, at least measured by the number of condos sold. Within a square mile surrounding the central business district, over 150 highrises went through the approval process. And each had to distinguish itself.

The designers soon went into their Mannerist phase.

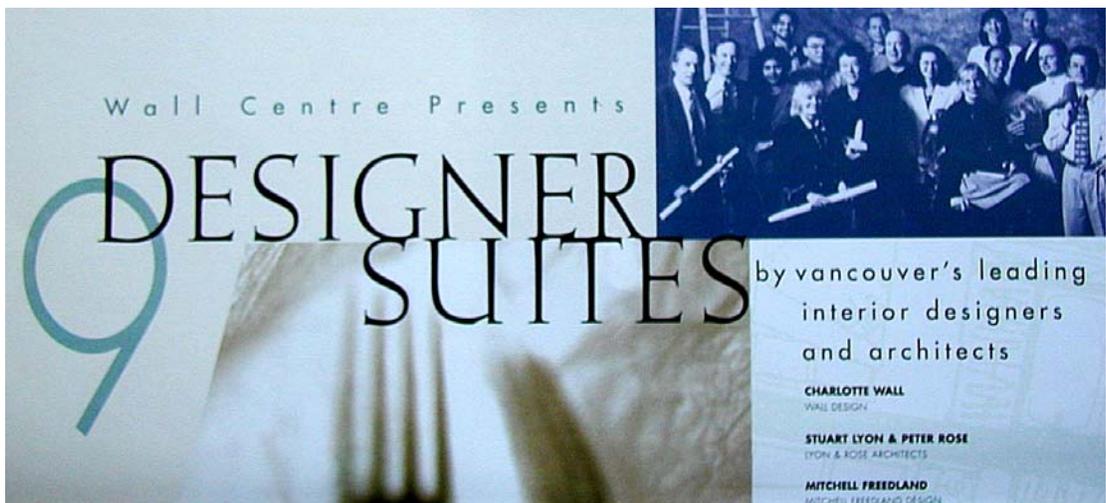


They took subtlety to the point of obscurity.

They sold the technology, they sold the art.



They even started selling themselves.



Ultimately, they sold the Sell.



By doing all that, they sold a way of life that a few decades ago would have been unthinkable.

Vancouver, like most North American cities, had rejected the excesses of modernism in the 1960s. No to freeways, no to urban renewal, no to highrises. The consensus had it that only renters lived downtown, and few by choice.

After the downzonings of the 1970s, it was difficult to impossible to build a residential tower in the City of Vancouver. What changed all that was the condominium act (now you could own that concrete

box in the sky), a shortage of land, a housing crisis and a development-approval process that ensured both public input and design control. Growth had to help pay for growth, and developers had to pay for the amenities that produced complete communities and public goods.

Even all that might not have been enough. Without a market, no product, no matter how appealing, will survive. While the marketing itself could not have sold something people really didn't want, it did neutralize the critics who claimed that such a dense urban environment, particularly in the form of highrises, was socially and politically unacceptable. The beautiful people were living there, after all, and you could see them for yourself.

They were on bicycles.

Reader Participation

Got an ad you like (or even designed).
Send it along, with a few crisp words of social
commentary, for other Price Tags' readers to
share.

LETTERS

From LANCE BERELOWITZ

Urban Forum Associates

Town Planning, Urban Design & Communications

I always enjoy getting your Tags, and as ever you challenge us to reconsider our built environment. So I hope you will permit me to say I don't share your enthusiasm for the Daon Building as an exemplar of good urban design.

I think the key difference is that you look at it from the perspective of what it might have been (much worse, I agree!), rather than simply from what it is today, which is how I look at it (not having been here when the battle was fought!). From this perspective, although it is far from being the worst offender, I certainly don't think it represents some

major shift in urban design quality that should be exaggerated. To me it is today pretty dated and there is much to criticize about this building:



The angled orientation you find 'respectful' is in my view simply wrong: it fights against the street grid, and does not reinforce the built street wall framing the Marine Building, but rather weakens it. The resulting reflection is not in my view an equivalent trade off, although it is 'nice'.

The stepped profile down to four storeys on Hastings Street is ok, although rather clumsily handled, and the end bay adjacent to the Vancouver Club is pretty mediocre in terms of its proportions and composition, although I agree it does at least not dominate its historic neighbour.

The way the building meets the ground/sidewalk is problematic at this key urban intersection: it is very indeterminate and weakly resolved, with a ground plane design program that is disconcertingly un-urban.

The sidewalk public realm is not reinforced by the setbacks and recessing of the lower floors, but rather weakened (especially along Burrard Street), and the ground floor building program, which could have ameliorated this condition, offers nothing to support active street level public life.

Furthermore, in my view the fuzzy landscaping is more appropriate for a suburban office park than for such an urban context.

The weakest part of the ensemble is along Burrard Street, where the sloping ground plane transition is poorly handled, and exacerbated by the parkade entrance throat. The stepped and angled outdoor terraces are disconnected from the street and in effect are sterile, largely unused spaces, while the north side of course was never designed to anticipate the filling in of the adjacent escarpment edge, and now suffers as a leftover gap as a consequence (no fault of the original architects).

You say that Vancouver, like other cities, finally rejected High Modernism. But this building is clearly (late) modernist in its functionalist expression, although some might well argue it straddles Post-Modernism in its fussy formalism, which if anything, has been even worse for urban design.

While it's a modest building, and relatively restrained compared to much of what has followed, I think the more important point you are trying to make is that historically its development represented a break with the past in terms of process, and this is a good thing. But to call it one of the best examples of architecture and urban design goes too far. Unfortunately it is not the best project to illustrate your main point.
