

**“BUILDINGS, SPACES AND PEOPLE:  
MAKING A GREAT CITY BY DESIGN”**

**A Vancouver Case Study for the Sustainable  
and Liveable City**

**By**

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Today, I want to talk about the “city by design” and the formulas for buildings, spaces and people that are the artistry in civic design. After nearly three-quarters of a century when the art of designing cities lay fallow, I dare say becoming close to a lost art, we are now starting to see a revival of civic design efforts at all scales of the modern metropolis; big cities and small cities and towns - and this is very exciting.

Now, we can start by declaring that we want our city to be a complete, diverse and engaging economic, social and physical place - this is the underlying proposition of

sustainability and liveability that sets off the design process - but for any city this is a tall order. And, anyway, after years of not paying too much attention to all this, we really need to dissect what this is really all about.

So today, I thought I would look at the essential building blocks for a sustainable and liveable city - factors that will increasingly shape cities in the future - and I want to particularly focus on how open space plays into each of these building blocks as a facilitating feature or, more often in its own right, as a prime shaper of place. For almost a century we've been living in a world where architecture, and the whole city for that matter, has been seen as a "machine for living". This has been first and foremost about the design and productivity of buildings - the building is the machine, it is the icon - and, let's face it, this has not given us real, fulfilling urbanism. Ironically, real urbanism is shaped by open space as much as by any other single aspect - and yet, open space is generally not privately productive, as one expects from "the machine". It is benign. And yet, it is a public realm, a commonwealth within which we realize much that is sweet in our lives. It

glues everything else together. But, I'm getting ahead of myself...

I was in Madrid, in Spain, several years ago, conferring with a group of European city planners and a fellow guest was the great Brazilian urbanist Jaime Lerner. He said something that I think is a very good frame for today's topic.

He said:

“Every city has to have a design; a city without a design doesn't know where it's going; doesn't know how to grow.”

-This is a very profound statement for us all because it references everything that needs to be considered in future cities; and it references everything that has been missing in most cities since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

-This is also a profound statement for me because it zero's in on the key to what my city, Vancouver, has been trying to do for the last 30 years - urban design and quality of life - which is why I will use Vancouver

as a case study for the factors I want to discuss. I think Vancouver offers some good and practical ideas. But having said that, I'm not saying that I want other places to be like or look like Vancouver. In fact, I feel the opposite - we in Vancouver have worked too hard for too long to establish our own special character to see it replicated in other places. Besides, every place has different driving forces that should make for vivid differences from place to place even though the building blocks or underlying principles are the same. So, as you see these pictures of Vancouver, know that I profoundly know that Charlottetown is different, with a different scale and history and climate and setting and preferences of your people. Take the themes, not the forms, of what I will show you today. Everything I will show you today at the scale of Vancouver I know is relevant at the scale of Charlottetown.

By the way, I hope you enjoy the hundreds of images I have put together for you - as something of a freeform "photo essay" to parallel my words today.

Now, let's think about those urban building blocks. From the work I am doing all over the world, I asked myself several questions to start. What represents value in the contemporary city? What are the qualities, tangible and intangible, that attract people to live, work, play and visit in the city in harmony with one another and the environment around them? How do we find or create those qualities and how do we optimise them to assist a city in the world competition among cities and in the struggle for the hearts of our citizens, who are becoming more and more discerning and more and more critical and who have higher and higher expectations?

Well, the first thing is that we have to take hold of the basic urban structure of our cities - this is building block number one. We've got to get the regional land use and transportation arrangements right. The themes are to allocate land uses so as to get things people want to do close together; to offer a movement system that de-emphasizes the car but is still appealing to people; to preserve some space for uses that need to spread out and for the simple respite people need from intensive built patterns; and to motivate compact growth.

-Vancouver's regional plan picks up on these ideas. Our Provincial government has protected most of our prime agricultural land in a reserve; and our Regional government has secured the key green zones. This creates an effective growth boundary when added to the geographic constraints of the mountains and water. It gives us an effective, close by, food production capacity. And, as much as anything, these measures, by preserving over 50% of our land mass, offer a nearby escape that people need when they live within a massive population.

-The tendency for sprawl is moderated by a pattern of regional town centres, each developing intensively, each with its own equilibrium of built and open areas, each with its own personality; and each meant to serve the lower density areas nearby.

-We've taken a counter-intuitive approach to transportation. We don't have freeways fanning out from our core, we're limiting auto capacity into the inner-city and getting rid of most of the one-way

streets that are designed to just facilitate auto speed to escape the city, we're connecting the emerging town centres with rapid transit and we're shooting for movement choices by focussing on more transit (buses and rail), more cycling and even ferries - but mostly building the infrastructure for people on foot - all in preference to the automobile. And doing this by seeing the street and road spaces as multi-dimensional spaces, not just for cars but also for other modes to share and even more as a place for people to use for many other purposes.

-Of course, the struggle is the deep cultural romance with the private car. Can we build the alternatives fast enough and good enough to compete with the car? The jury is still out but we have learned one fundamental thing: the best transportation plan is a good land use plan. For example, in our downtown, where we've created real density and amenity, we've seen a drop in car ownership and use. We have less cars commuting in and out than we had 10 years ago, even with major new development. Over 60% of trips in the core are now done by non-motorized modes,

mostly people walking, which are almost unheard of in North America.

Well, let's move on to my second building block: we've got to get it right in calibrating density with pervasive efforts for quality of life. The specifics will be different in every place because tolerances vary, but the themes seem to stay the same: bringing together development intensity, mixed use, useable open space, other community infrastructure and amenity values is the necessary chemistry - nothing can be left out here. Let's take the example of Vancouver's downtown.

-The most powerful policy that we have pursued is an intensive, residentially-based growth strategy that balances the natural inclination for commercial growth. We call it our "living first" strategy. It's based on the concept of coherent neighbourhood units because consumers make housing choices based on everything essential for their day-to-day living. This includes pedestrian scale, all the amenities and services at hand and a local shopping "high street" at the centre for basic needs and to provide the places

where a neighbourhood creates its culture (the standard amenities we require are listed here).

-Of course, open space is at the heart of this strategy  
- open space and the public realm must be used to contribute to neighbourhood identity and amenity. We've settled on the street as the focus of public life so we include grass boulevards and a double row of trees and lush landscaping to screen the density. We also push for ample private space in delightful enclosed courtyards and roof gardens where residents can escape the action outside for the safety and quiet of their own small garden. But ample public parks, accessible to everyone regardless of economic or social position, are also vital. We've added 65 acres of new parks downtown and everything is tied together by a wonderful waterfront walkway/bikeway system which, because of the respite of the water and green, allows more density to comfortably happen.

-Density is our goal - and we want the city to be as compact and dense as we can make it. But there is a problem. We have found that the impacts of large-

scaled buildings have to be managed and can not be left to chance or else there are some pretty unpleasant results. So we carefully regulate design (including quality materials) and preserve heritage wherever possible because heritage buildings give vital design cues for the austerity of modern architecture. We also cover the key impacts on daily life such as security and noise mitigation and protection of privacy and universal accessibility.

-And there does seem to be a formula of success with intensive development when density and quality are carefully tied together: the architectural and open space solutions allow the density to work; the high density generates enough value to carry quality construction, great on-site amenities and a very nice contribution to the neighbourhood infrastructure, including paying for the open space; and the supportive neighbourhood draws all kinds of people back to a truly urban lifestyle. For example, through these efforts, Vancouver has expanded its population living at higher densities in the inner city dramatically over the last decade - we now have just over 100,000

people in our core city, from about 40,000 when we started - and it's on its way to 120,000 people or more. The key is not to force people into this living circumstance but to make it a preferred choice for them - on their own terms.

Of course, civic design is also about social design - the next building block for better urbanism we must get right is social mix. The principle is that the city has to be accessible to everyone and the more diverse is the mix of people, the stronger and more robust is the civic economic and social culture.

- Vancouver has attacked this on several fronts.

- Our community plan targets a genuine economic mix of both non-market and market housing in every multiple-family neighbourhood (in these areas, 20% of all units have to be developed for low-income people).

- It also includes building at high densities for seniors and children. I want to pause and concentrate on the issue of dense family housing because it's central to

our “living first” strategy. Our plan is to bring home and workplace close together so people will forego commuting in their cars. But without families this will fail because most workers come from households with small children. Also, there’s not enough young singles and older “empty nesters” to create a vibrant city. So we have special guidelines for family housing at high density and we require 25% of all new dense housing to be designed to meet these guidelines. This deals with the unit, the project, on site children’s play spaces, schools and public parks, childcare, other nearby amenities and the overall quality of the neighbourhood. And families are flooding back downtown in record numbers - we now have over 1000 row houses downtown, creating a housing option that simply didn’t exist before in our city. The number of kids in the inner-city is growing by leaps and bounds - we now have over 7000 children on the Downtown Peninsula at last count. And, there’s a spin-off benefit that we’ve discovered: if you design a city that works well for children, it will work well for everyone else.

-And the Vancouver mix goes further. It includes alternative housing forms such as live-work units and lofts and even houseboats; all to diversify the possibilities of households.

-Of course the parks and public spaces of the city had to be dramatically changed to accommodate such diversity. Yes, we need those ornamental greens that embellish any great city but we also have to think more than other cities about the functionality of space: facilitating active play, making places for dogs that are compatible with places for kids, having those quiet places for seniors, merging the schoolyards and the parks because space is at such a premium, including places so people can grow things, which is such a human imperative whether you're in town or in the country - I could go on but I hope you get my point.

Now, related to social mix and diversity, is another key urban building block and that is culture. Smart cities will find a way to express themselves through their great cultural institutions linking up with a network of world

culture; and through modest more avant-garde ventures that generate community culture. They will create the venues and public places to meet in mass and to celebrate - and occasionally to protest.

-Here, Vancouver is not yet the best model. While we have expanded our congress facilities on Coal Harbour and opened up major new gathering places, especially along the water, we are only now beginning to think about growing our Art Gallery and new music, dance and visual arts institutions, and creating what people call a “prime downtown meeting place”. Frankly, we have fallen behind. In this respect, Vancouver’s is, so far, a cautionary tale. Montreal and Toronto have much more to show us all on this score - or think of places like the new Millennium Park in Chicago.

But now to the heart of urban design: the next factor is getting the built form of the city right in the broad fabric of the city - not so much in the special places but in the un-special places that have so often been forgotten in cities over the last century. I say “built form” not “buildings” because this is a discussion about both buildings

and open areas; about both mass and space. The principle is that there is a natural built form that responds to the different setting and public tastes of every city - low rise or high rise; spacious or tight. Of course in Vancouver, there is no debate that the high rise is our form, but we've found that with this form of building like most others, you have to get the architecture right - success or failure for liveability rests in the details - which calls for careful design management.

-For Vancouver this has meant tall thin towers to get people up to where they want to be to capture the splendid views; and ample separation among towers so people can see around and through them. Of course this also means carefully brokering private views with every new proposal.

-but equally important is a coherent, dominant street wall at the traditional scale with the bases of tall buildings shielded from the sidewalk to cut their powerful impacts, allowing them to float almost out of one's perception. This is how tall buildings can be humanized.

-It's important to bring active residential use right down to the sidewalk level as often as possible - fostering the shop-house form where it makes sense but more often pushing for row houses to truly domesticate the street. We don't tolerate blank walls; we force doors and porches and stoops and windows and almost any engaging detail down at eye level. We insist on weather protection along public routes. Essentially, within the first six floors, we create the fascinating, intimate urbanism that engenders a strong sense of place, comfort, domesticity, civility, safety and vivid memory.

-We put all the parking, except the traditional short-term curb-side parking shown here, underground and parking standards are being made as low as practical.

-The shape and character of nearby open space becomes vital. We avoid useless private plazas and use buildings to give memorable form to public park spaces and squares - and all public places are embellished with public art. And it's also necessary in

our climate to carefully manage sun and shade to keep public places warm and comfortable.

-And then, we sculpt Vancouver's skyline to protect key public viewsheds and corridors and to shape it as a work of art against the mountain backdrop - of course, this includes all street-end views, which are so easy to protect.

-Well, you can guess the problem: how to balance the public objectives I've been discussing with the private market objectives that drive development. How much regulation will a developer tolerate? Can the amenity requirements be translated into developer profits? In our case, the answer seems to be yes - from the developers perspective business has never been better, even in these harder times, so developers are cooperative with the system; but I've found this is seldom the case elsewhere and this stands as an outstanding challenge to design-based development management.

And now to the new frontier in civic design: the unavoidable responsibility for the environment: getting it right on the key urban features that are currently degrading our world. We must create an alternative infrastructure that is compatible with the natural environment. Increasingly, citizens and consumers are demanding this but it's also something that every city must address because every city is endangering our world. There is no city in the world that is either carbon or waste neutral.

-In Vancouver we're trying to approach this in systematic steps. Here are some of our initiatives - the key one being to have all our buildings - public and private - into green construction as soon as possible.

-But I want to highlight one project in particular: a new community for 15,000 people that will give us a model of a high density, socially, environmentally and economically sustainable place. We will use it first as our Athlete's Village for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games but then as it's permanently occupied it will

show the way to change all future development in our city to be ecologically responsible.

The idea is to create a great neighbourhood but, then, to push the boundaries. This new community will have an aggressive energy plan, an advanced water management plan, an innovative waste management plan, green building requirements, an urban agriculture initiative, a diverse transportation plan and provisions for environmental stewardship and learning. And much of this work will be done by the public realm, the street and park space, in this community as they handle and clean gray water, offer edible landscape, offer recycling opportunity, accommodate movement choices on multi-use right-of-ways, support solar and wind facilities and act as the environmental classrooms for learning.

And, now, the last urban building block I want to highlight today for the future city is something that we must get right but is almost impossible to describe. I'm talking about a certain intangible appeal about the city; an ambience that excites or fascinates or causes awe; that brings on

that emotional response from people and builds their love for the place and loyalty to the place; that “brands” the city with a certain, hopefully unique, civic image. You know it when it’s there and you know it when it’s missing. Is it “grandeur”, as in Paris, or “the buzz”, as in Hong Kong, or “being sexy”, or “history and the water” as here in Charlottetown? Whatever it is, there has to be a quality of fascination, even mystery, and a magic about the thing. It’s the genius loci or spirit of the place. These images pick up on Vancouver’s mystique - and the first sense I have of Charlottetown’s mystique. You have to be careful that, in the mad rush to grow, this natural essence and appeal of the place is not diminished, wiped out or lost - but rather that it is reinforced and protected and nurtured. And this comes into play especially as you treat and embellish your public realm.

I hope I have shown that an explicit civic design agenda is vital for the future. But that will take a new kind of planning from that we have done in the past. This will be a planning approach based less on systems and the birds-eye scale of land use management. I call it “experiential planning” - creating the real, direct experiences within

each setting that people tell us they want. This means getting down to the human scale, at the level of the street, and shaping things in four dimensions to deliver the emotional side for people, not just efficiency and fiscal prudence and not even just environmental sustainability. We might take our cue from the little country of Bhutan. There, every year they carefully measure GHI instead of GDP - GHI stands for "Gross Happiness Index".

For all I have been talking about, the great forgotten resource in the contemporary city seems to be the interstitial spaces - the parking lots, the streets, the vacant sites. We've been so fixed on buildings for the last few generations that we have forgotten all the other areas that make up the fabric of the city. Yes, we have our parks and our private gardens, but think of all the other space that is out there. We need to take advantage of this forgotten space and we also need to better use even the spaces that we have from the past. So let me complete my presentation for today by offering several simple suggestions for the open spaces of tomorrow's cities.

I am not going to belabour each of these nor will I claim that this is an exhaustive list - but at least let me put a few ideas out for us to discuss. I have eight quick suggestions.

First, save the big spaces for the future. If you are lucky enough to have big open, undeveloped areas in your built-up city, don't just squander those on the next development idea that comes along. Preserve as much as you can. And especially preserve potential agricultural land. Cities without an agricultural capacity in the future are going to be very vulnerable. As the city grows and intensifies, it needs a few big places for green respite - for growing things, for recreation, to recharge the natural environment.

Second, work toward a clear hierarchy of place with many sizes of spaces in your city. You need the obvious park-sized spaces for organized sports and recreation that our Parks Departments spend so much time worried about because of the huge demands for these activities - but you also need tiny spaces for private use, and small spaces for shared use and to meet neighbours, and slightly larger spaces for community play and for allotment gardens and the like,

and large squares for public gathering and on and on. You need to define the hierarchy that is relevant for your city based on how people use spaces in your city.

Third, include all spaces in your plans, not just the obvious places, especially if they may be of collective use. Don't just think of space at grade or space on property or even on land. Roof gardens can be of spectacular benefits and we all know the merits to the environment of green roofs. Don't forget street rights-of-way. We need to scrape away a lot of that asphalt from our road space and use the resulting space for something other than the car. Think about reclaiming the centre of cul-de-sacs for planting and closing minor streets for neighbourhood greens and using space under bridges for play and all kinds of things like that.

Fourth, use all public spaces for many and multiple activities. Let's liberate streets for play and commerce. Let's let cars and bikes and pedestrians really share space - which will open up a lot of new space opportunities but will also calm traffic. I think of Granville Island in Vancouver where there is not separation of cars and people and, yet,

there has been a stellar safety record over thirty years. I think of the Dutch wernerffs, where cars access an essentially pedestrian realm. I think of all those sidewalks that the engineers reserve for foot traffic but that make great places to sit and watch people in outdoor cafes. I think of your Confederation Trail on an old rail bed. I think of open park spaces that could make perfect vegetable gardens if Park Departments were not so worried about “privatization of public space”. I think of environmental ecologies at work parallel to human use of park space - such as habitat support. And think of different uses of the same space at different times. I saw a wonderful Saturday market on a temporarily closed off street in Washington, D.C. a few months ago and it worked perfectly.

Fifth, maximize open space linkages and networks. This has many benefits. It allows natural ecological systems to work. It provides routes for animals to roam. It protects opportunities for transportation networks as a city grows - think of linear parks created from all those obsolete rail alignments.

Sixth, don't overdevelop spaces. This is one of the most common faults of landscape architecture. We tend to over plan and over furnish every space for all the ideas we ever had about space. Often the simpler designs are the better ones because they are flexible. Sometimes in cities it is better to let a space go fallow or wild for a time so it can find its own natural equilibrium and also so children can experience spontaneous places. Not everything has to be manicured and complete.

Seventh, go native as often as possible. I am convinced that it is better for our environment to use native species as often as we can. And this helps also to bring distinctiveness and uniqueness to a place.

And, finally, be gentle in how you judge an open space in your city. Don't assume success of a space is determined only by the number of people that use the place at any one time. Success really relates most of all to the quality of the experience in the space. I have seen government authorities alienate a space from the commonwealth of a city simply because they say it is not well used - or, at least, that is the excuse. Well, many public spaces are

best when they are not crowded. They do their job of refreshing people and recharging natural systems when the human presence is light rather than heavy. Sometimes it is better for a city for a space to be crowded with the plants or animals rather than the people.

Well, back to the bigger picture, who would have thought twenty years ago that a new equation would emerge in the economy of cities:

urban design = economic development.

It's not enough to manipulate the traditional economic sectors to insure an environment that will be rich in opportunities and fulfilling for citizens; and enticing for investment. A city that wants to be catalytic must do much more.

-In the case of Vancouver, the results so far are leading to this: this panorama shows what we have created - a city that is surely connected but has avoided the "geography of nowhere" that is sweeping the planet with globalization; a city that is popular with Vancouverites; a city that's working from a civic perspective, with 24-hour vitality engendering new

business and culture and lively street life; a city that's working for more people than in the past, leaving less behind with social or personal alienation; and a city now on a very solid foundation for the future, enticing many new citizens that are helping us build the robust diversified economic and social base that we need. You can make all of these things happen.

True greatness has to be in the city's very DNA - and that's where the civic elements that I have been talking about come into play. These factors - and especially how open space weaves through everything - create communities that people can relate to, embrace and even love. Because urban success is finally dependent upon peoples' individual commitment and dedication to the place; their investment; their contribution; their passion. Tomorrow's urbanism will be about happiness and contentment, the challenge of ideas as people come face-to-face with one another, the nurturing that comes as different types of people become acquainted, the economic dynamism that is the inevitable result of our concourse together.

Thank you.

