



## **DOWNTOWN VANCOUVER A COMMENTARY**

*"Lay heavily upon him earth, for he lay many a heavy load on thee."  
(Alexander Pope on Sir John (Blenheim Palace) Vanbrugh's demise.)*

"World class." For a while the phrase fell out of favour but with winter Olympics imminent, it is experiencing a revival.

Applied to Vancouver the phrase is expressed far too readily. Indeed, one has to ask what is a world-class city: what are the criteria? Of course, every one needs to feel proud of home, especially architects and planners who are to some extent the city's creators: professional interests seems to over come somatic sensibilities, though.

When advertised as such by international publications the phrase becomes a marketing tool. Used too much it reveals a deep insecurity belying a feeling that *"the mountains are fine but ugly concrete stumps obscured them long ago and the noise and traffic is chaotic. But, hell, this is home and I'm struggling with anxiety."*

Civic officials use the term to distract from their, less than stellar, performance.

London is world class simply because it is . . . errr . . . 2000 years of history. *Buenos Aires* is by virtue of subsumed contiguous villages, *La Boca*, *San Telmo* and *Palermo Viejo*. *La Ciudad de Mexico* is for 12,000 recognized public spaces: particularly *La Condesa*; so, too, *Oaxaca* for its *Zocolo*, *Macedonia Alcala*, *Santo Domingo* and connected plazas.

Curitiba is! Montreal was!

Differences between the Latin and Anglo urban concept is explained:

<http://www.theyorkshirelad.ca/New.Nanaimo.Center/new.nanaimo.center.html>

World-class great cities grow incrementally. Cities, with large areas exploited by speculators over a brief time don't: FCN is a case in point.

After 2010, expect Vancouver to fall into a post Olympic malaise when rhetoric will attain *Goebbels-esque* proportions. Vancouver has the highest concentration of corporate media ownership in the country: expect lies!

Not to digress. Question: what do the United Arab Emirates and Afghanistan have to do with the ambience of downtown Vancouver?

Well, according to UAE royals the feverish development of, their once desert-mud-huts, is a hedge against the collapse of their only industry: oil. According to the Emir of Dubai, oil will be gone in fifteen years: he sees finance and tourism as the future. Of course the question arises: when oil runs out will tourism and finance also? For obvious reasons.

Still the UAE, Dubai and Abu Dhabi are indicative of globalization and the effect resonates the world over: including Vancouver, especially tourism and finance.

As for Afghanistan daily news media report, another unintended massacred of an innocent wedding party or mistakenly off-ed friendlies. Somber ceremonies at CFB's are becoming too frequent. Such spectacles have a way of percolating into our psyches.

Afghanistan and the UAE have a resonant message. And that message says: we are no longer the kind and gentle souls of legend and it shows in the semiotics of our cities.

So, what happened? Canada was the country of peace. Once Canada was a model of gentle cities, mountain views and productive commerce.

Have we become desensitized: myopically concerned with real estate and the price at the pump?

We endure bubble economics, swivel chair employment, cacophonous noise, noxious odors, chaotic traffic, and ugly streets: within a dearth of free public places. We evince a profound nonchalance towards the integrated city.

And horrors upon horrors no one notices!

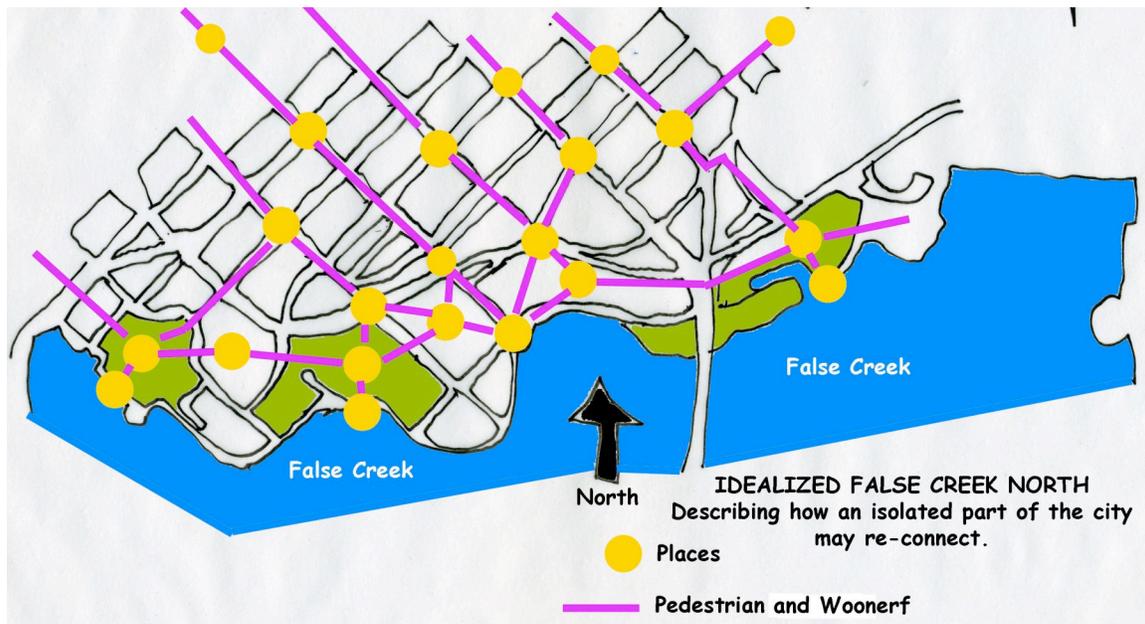
Well clearly what happened is that frenzied development has crowded out any sense of how we as a people wish to live.

Yes, local designers, planners, architects, academics congratulate themselves; preen their egos, dishing themselves out awards with abandon.

But, if experience speaks, *soi-disant* experts are impervious to their own observations. So best offer constructive remedies with hope some one notices.

Ergo, two brief case studies: one large and comprehensive, another, large, but covering one city site.

### **Comprehensive: False Creek North.**



*Intelligent remedial planning can re-connect FCN to downtown via functional urban places interlaced with expanding and contracting alleyways and Woonerfs.*

*But each place must have a reason: economic and social.*

*Down grade Pacific Boulevard.*

*Towers converted to composites can open up courtyards enhancing the pedestrian experience.*

*BC Place events reverberate across town: surround it with buffer buildings. Increase density.*

*The automobile must take second place.*

Our credulity is challenged when the words "families" or "neighbourhoods" are invoked: FCN is not a place for families, nor do its neighbourhoods have identifiable character.

FCN is isolated from the city. Pacific Boulevard could easily be eliminated releasing space for north south connections.

Pacific Boulevard makes a convenient escape route for FCN's 10,570 singles and empty nesters to drive off to Metro town to do "thu shopping." Urban Fare, across the street, could well be on the moon so far as convenience and pricing are concerned.

Those 10,570 are totally isolated, hemmed in: north, by Pacific and south by water. Scale and proportions are huge; ambience is, to use the word, brutal. Teams of youthful soccer players sometimes play the greens. But they do not live in FCN. Players come because of a dearth of play space throughout the city.

Pretty yellow and red, by-law induced, play apparatus appended to "podium" towers lay fallow: no kids within blocks!



What is this about podium towers?

There are no podium towers in FCN! There are high rises appended at ground level with rows of habitations whose residents have to close the drapes for privacy.

A true podium tower is, in fact, better described as a composite tower replete with ground level, accessible atriums, surrounding privacy courtyards and street level permeability.

<http://www.theyorkshirelad.ca/New.Nanaimo.Center/pudpn/Comparisons.pdf>

Processing FCN planners missed their opportunity. Consumed by the approval process they neglected to mediate the relationships between buildings: the primary function of a modern planning authority.

Essentially FCN replicates a mid 20th century auto-oriented cluster of unrelated towers.

Sustainability is just a word (second law of thermodynamics) in FCN: impossible to implement but used as rhetoric in real estate marketing.

Remedial planning, on the other hand, must be serious: integrating mixed use, reducing automobile dependency: with criteria providing urban amenity for small scale enterprises, close-by work, recreation and education, secure places and urban ambience, peace, colour, texture, affordability and families.

FCN densities, at 10,570+/- persons in 5,450 dwelling units are inadequate.

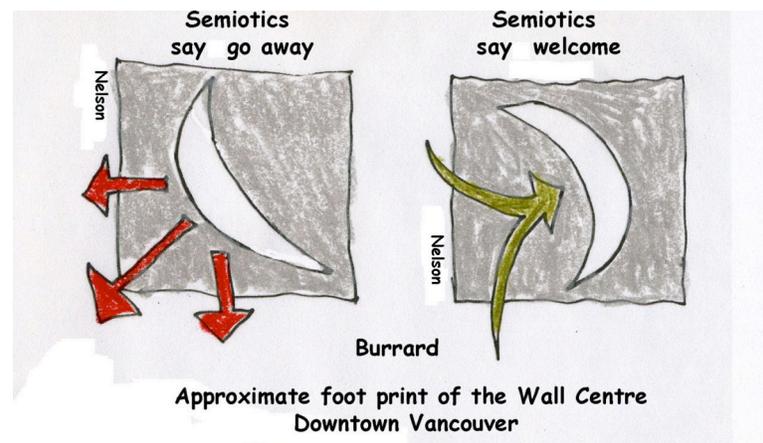
Healthy urban densities can double that and ameliorate the disastrous levels of un-affordability.

Some declare, hey it is exciting. Please, bland gray, inchoate, undefined shapes, emitting bruising street noise at 86 decibels, are not exciting . . .

But above all FCN, and indeed the downtown peninsular has failed big time in that it is populated by mortgage paying clients rather than wealth creating citizens.

Excessive speculation has wrought its damage.

### Large city site: The Wall Center.



Little can be said other than that the Wall Center seems to reject the city. Like so many, proliferating, glass towers it is impressive, looming above the horizon, but street level is problematic.

Wall offers the city, at Nelson and Burrard, an arbitrary open plaza without street reference. Foot print crescent shaped in plan, the tower could have embraced the plaza: an enclosing welcoming element, perhaps augmented with street activities.

Instead it is wind swept open to nothing. Design energy was directed on the tower.

The above two examples describe current civic development as leveled at us by too much hype and not enough thoughtfulness.

As such, sustainability becomes just *"another word for nothing left to loose"* assiduously ascribed to professional marketing.

There are exceptions: Barry Down's Alder Bay social housing, Norm Hotson's Caper's on Fourth, and Arthur's Waterfall at Granville Island's entrance: my own Mountainview Village on Kingsway. Good urban architecture!

Yet, among the cognoscenti incessant world-class, world-class, world-class still seems to be the mantra. Are they purposefully in denial? Or just afraid.

Clearly Vancouver has fallen victim, over many decades, to entrenched convention. Egregiously, it is indistinguishable from that international mass of speculation driven conurbations taxing the carrying capacity of this earth.

Vancouver badly needs sensitive, creative, reality-grounded guidance.

Time now to stop the distractions from all those charismatic speakers from "aways" with infallible solutions: all that feel-good entertainment that distracts from our ground level responsibilities. Lecture down to the peons from on high take the cheque and run!

Yes, Spanish Banks is a pretty stretch to walk the dog . . . those Kerrisdale residents who bought-in in the '70's are damn lucky. *Sin embargo*, Vancouver needs less world class . . . more reality . . .

Post Olympics will be wake-up time . . .

Do we care?

*"If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they don't want to hear."* (George Orwell)



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