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Dissolving Boundaries: Mixed Use and Functionality in the Sustainable City. Themes from Vancouver in Canada

Key propositions for a sustainable arrangement of future cities are proximity and diversity, a commitment to mixed use and multiple functionality. A new civic attention to quality, style and cost efficiencies can overcome consumer barriers to mixed use and diversity. Vancouver is used as the reference city.

Abbildung 1 Mixed use - Vancouver



In my view, there is one prime characteristic that will be the basic foundation for the arrangement of sustainable cities in the future – that characteristic is “proximity” – arranging our future cities to get lots of people and activities and places close together; dissolving the boundaries of modern life. Those who laid out and developed the 20th century post-war city, especially in North America, lost track of this necessity, in their deference to the automobile and everything that came with the “auto romance” – and if we ever want to achieve urban sustainability, we are going to have to fix that. I want to talk about the underlying components for urban “proximity” focussing on one contemporary case where these components have been aggressively brought together – and that is in the recent transformation of the core of my home city, Vancouver in Canada. In this case, the results are real, not theoretical: one can see and experience the resulting city and evaluate it on your own terms. What I think you will also find interesting is that Vancouver’s story is a very modern story; and, for North America, still a somewhat unique urban story – so much so that it has been given its own label in the literature – it is called “Vancouverism”.



Abbildung 2 "Vancouverism" - Vancouver

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But, of course, as Europeans, the inspiration for what I am going to show you is all around you. Surrounded as you are by the complex yet intimate patterns of your historic cities, you have all the features of sustainable proximity at your fingertips. Ironically, nothing we have done in Vancouver can surpass the effectiveness, as a sustainable arrangement of European cities over a hundred years ago. As the English say, this is a little like bringing coal to Newcastle.

Indeed, I would venture that Europeans know those features better than anyone in the world, even though I fully understand that your challenge is to discover how to apply the old lessons in contemporary ways that meet modern expectations and can be made available to all citizens. You know that urban proximity is achieved through a formula of density, diversity and connectivity. Density brings us close together. Diversity gives us a very sociable and efficient mix. Connectivity makes sure there are direct links between everything in a fine-grained network. All of this comes together through urban mixed use at every level and scale. It is a simple but profound formula for arranging our cities for future ecological success.

And, what fascinates me about this formula is that it seems to fix many challenges we face in modern life. It's certainly an environmental formula – that's what our subject is here today – but it is also an economic formula, generating business opportunity through interface; and a health formula, staving off the threat of obesity; and a social formula, motivating human mutual support and discourse; and a cultural formula, improving the probability of creativity; and a formula for quality of life – you could say all of these issues come to focus under the same city lens.



So, what is “Vancouverism” all about?

Well, it all started in the late 1980’s and in the short time since then, the structure and character of our city has been reconceived, starting first in our inner city where, because of industrial and rail relocation, we had over 500 acres to redevelop; and the pattern is now spreading to the suburbs in a much more incremental way. This was initiated with an explicit civic plan to change the whole downtown and new urban design schemes for the vast vacant sites, especially along our waterfronts. We called the whole thing our “living first” strategy and it really hit the mark – we went from 43,000 people downtown in 1986 to over 110,000 people today. This strategy has been shaped around a few basic propositions.

We arranged new development into identifiable and functional neighbourhood units – a real “local” emphasis with services mixed tightly with homes and workplaces, within a 5 to 7 minute walk – with the right array of amenities and very nice retail places with local character.

Useable open space has been tightly interwoven with all land uses at a standard similar to established communities – including dedicating the water’s edge for the public – and we diversified open space into private courtyards and on to green roof gardens everywhere.

We set special housing targets and guidelines for the less advantaged and for families. Intimately folding together lower income groups (20% of housing) and families (25% of housing) with the more wealthy young singles and empty nesters (that are more naturally drawn to the city) is essential for true mixed use. And, the return of families with children to the city centre, in my opinion, is the real bellwether of success in North America, where children are rare in downtowns. I am happy to report that we now have over 8000 children downtown, more than meeting our target.

Abbildung 3 Mixed community - Vancouver

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We did a big push with senior governments for transit diversification and reinforced that locally with massive investment for cycling and walking. We coupled this with aggressive calming of traffic, cut backs on parking requirements, narrowing and taming of streets and all kinds of caps on the growth of auto infrastructure. We have no freeways whatsoever but we have tightly linked the auto grid into a seamless web that disperses rather than focusses auto traffic. One non-negotiable rule has been not to support even one new lane of auto capacity into the inner city. For us, this was not about removing the car from the urban scene – we want to maximize the transportation mix – transportation choices – but it was about limiting the car’s pervasiveness and impacts. The inner-city results are heartening: a significant drop in car ownership and use; less cars commuting in and out than 15 years ago; and, over 60% of trips in the core now done by non-motorized modes, mostly people walking. These are almost unheard of numbers in North America.

Abbildung 4 European Mix - Rotterdam

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Then, we put priority and sustained attention to codifying and managing urban design because we discovered the unavoidable truth that you cannot mix uses unless the mix is a hospitable one in design terms. So Vancouver’s inner city form is not accidental.

At the level of public “placemaking”, building massing is shaped across whole areas; open spaces are linked into a pervasive network with careful management of sun and shadows and with lots of public art; street cross-sections are carefully modulated across public and private domains; details and materials and landscape are choreographed among building projects to engender unique area character. There has been a strong emphasis on the gentle domesticity of the whole urban scene.



At the private level, the mixed-use building is a cornerstone to everything. But the mix has to be a careful one. Mixes don't work when the negative outweigh the positive impacts. This takes close attention to what we call "neighbourliness". So management of noise transmission and privacy and territoriality and security have been vital concerns. In fact, we un-mix some of the traditional combinations that I learned in school to make sure we get a comfortable fit. But having said that, you will see all kind of mixes in our buildings and the "single-client" type of building is just a thing of the past.

This attention to urban design is how we invented the whole repertoire that has become our brand: the tower/podium morphology and a very modern "row-house" housing format and protected view corridors and the thin tower form and requirements for tower separations and the detailed landscape and animation requirements at grade and the street-tree arrangements. Taken together, these things have transformed the experience of the city – this was the first direct expression of "Vancouverism" – and it is admittedly of a taller, larger scale than would be comfortable in most cities, especially here in Europe, but that is a unique Vancouver response to the vastness of our mountains and ocean – even the Prince of Wales, a critic of "over-scale", has acknowledged that. But then, even so, we have diversified that morphology in the more recent neighbourhood designs to include lower-scaled streetwall forms and even narrower streets. This is a newest expression of "Vancouverism".

And, finally, we have increasingly been drawing in higher green infrastructure requirements. The "Athletes Village" for the 2010 Olympic Games, now a thriving new neighbourhood, has set the pace. We have found that you have to mix in infrastructure with urban form, rather than keeping it separate and hidden. This new neighbourhood pushes the boundaries in regard to alternative energy at a district level, water conservation and management right in the parks, urban agriculture and edible landscape throughout the public realm, integrated waste reuse and community-based disposal, and advanced green building construction standards.

Abbildung 5 Mixed Activities,
2012 Olympics Athletes Village Vancouver

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Of course, all of this collective choreography has required a different kind of civic leadership in terms of governance and growth management. This may be one of the most vivid uniquenesses of the Vancouver model.

We had to reinvent City Hall – to do business differently for better urban results. And with the complexity of cities, this is all about cooperation. In fact, in Vancouver, we call our new way of doing things the “cooperative planning approach” where everyone is motivated to collaborate; trying to transcend the confrontation that once pervaded our system. Let me describe this.

As I have already summarized, we had to articulate a strong vision and couple it with municipal proaction and planning prowess, sustained year-in-and-year-out. Public leadership and professionalism have been vital.

We found that zoning was essential to our strategy but it is a kind of zoning that is very different from traditional ideas of land regulation. Zoning and all the other laws – including those oppressive street standards and building codes and even health, fire and safety requirements – had to change from the conventional approach that specifies everything and separates everything. That’s the policeman’s approach and it doesn’t help very much in the complexity of the modern city. These laws and regulations, in and of themselves well-meaning, were forcing us into less and less mix, resulting in less and less humane environments and the trade-off just wasn’t worth it any more. For example, we had to make our new zoning able to manage complex mixed uses; it had to be discretionary to foster innovation; and it had to be heavy with incentives and bonuses for genuine wealth creation, so that we could share part of that wealth for public goods. In our system, almost all public goods are leveraged through the development approval process (paid for by developers) – but our laws and the municipal officials that administer them have to be smart enough about development economics to insure that public objectives do not compromise profitability.

We found that the intimate act of urban design had to be a joint venture. Developers, architects and planning officials cannot be fighting all the time – they must design together. This has allowed us to carefully broker hundreds of public/private trade-offs at a very great level of subtlety, for more balanced solutions.

Our whole system is driven by strong and sustained public involvement – the diversity of people involved is amazing. We do this in iterations, in many formats at all times. Balancing public involvement we take equal and separate advice from professional peers. We do this through an advisory Urban Design Panel.

So, that is the Vancouver picture. As in any other system it has its problems and, indeed, its very success has engendered its own special challenges. Perhaps the biggest one at the moment is housing affordability, which has finally started the city on a process of discovery targeted to housing security for middle income people, rather than just poor people. But that’s a big story in and of itself.

So, let me leave you with one final thought before I finish. There is another contradiction in the status quo of our cities that we also must tackle. We have to ask the hard question. Is the public really with us in all of this? Will they change their life patterns and habits to do what needs to be done to achieve the kind of ecological harmony that is necessary?



Abbildung 6 Mixed housing - Vancouver

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Can you say the people here in Switzerland are naturally predisposed to the sustainable city? I certainly cannot say that about Canadians. After all, like my country, you live in a free society with guaranteed personal freedoms – people will listen but they can do whatever they want to. And people are wealthier than they have ever been so they can indulge their preferences and biases.

We have to face the fact that the mixed-use city, at whatever scale, has so far not proven to be popular among the great majority of modern people throughout the world. People generally hate density because most of it has been so bad; they think of mixed use as probably hitting them negatively and diversity as unsafe. To all too many people it's all just a bad joke. It seems to be a worldwide trend that, as people gain wealth, they switch from sustainable modes of transportation to the car. They switch for high density to low. They switch from inclusive to exclusive urban arrangements.

Abbildung 7 Choices - Vancouver

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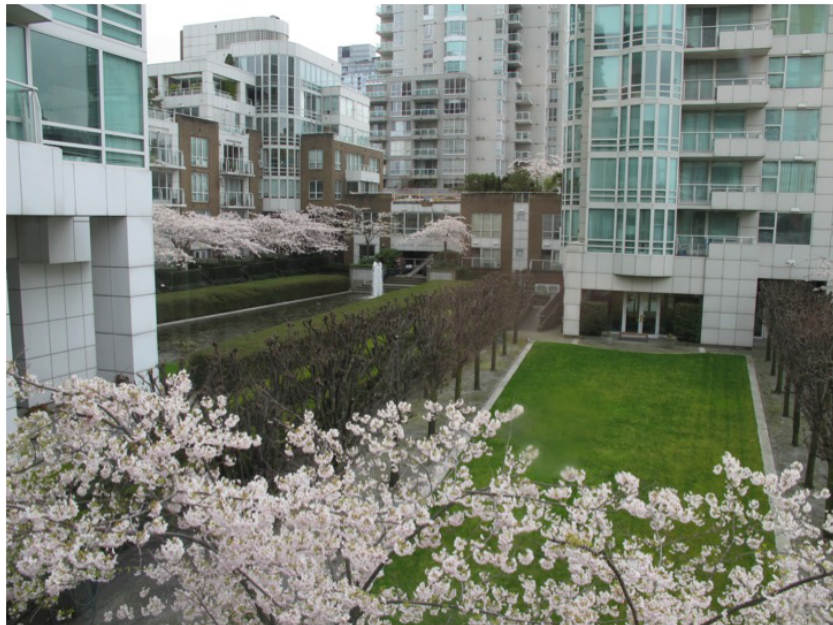


So how did Vancouver transcend that tendency?

Well, in large measure it is because we started taking a consumer perspective – we noticed that people act not just as citizens, as members of the body politic, as voters, but even more so as consumers, as elemental members of a mass market that, in a free society, determines almost everything about cities. The mass patterns of consumer choices shape our cities more than all the government policy and laws put together. We started looking at what consumers need and want and the way they view their world. We noticed that consumers are into “experience”, it’s what drives their consumption. They are into style and quality and convenience and efficiency and every aspect of urban products that enhance “experience” – these mean everything to the consumer. And this desire for experience is not just skin deep – it’s not just what people see. It facilitates their engagement with other people; it helps society be more inclusive; it is how human action might be reconciled with natural systems. So it has been from that angle that we have designed the new Vancouver – I have coined a phrase for this; I call it “experiential planning”.

Abbildung 8 A beautiful mix - Vancouver

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With similar intentions, the famous urbanist, Jan Gehl of Denmark, calls it the making of “people cities” with a “people scale seen at eye level and at 5 km/hr” – he, rightfully, takes us back to the fundamentals of the human dimension: learning about and carefully designing the community to deliver the direct tangible experiences that people tell us they want with the ambience they want. These become the individual incidents – the fragments – from which the urban pattern is built up, layer upon layer. In Vancouver, our hypothesis was that we could build up a desirable and preferred experience for people that also reflected the sustainable urban formula – we could make this a genuine attraction; we could make it “hip” and “chic”. And that is just what happened. The consumer take-up has been phenomenal.



I can tell you, just from my Vancouver story, that the mixed-use city where “proximity” is achieved through density, diversity and connectivity is a sure solution for urban harmony with nature. This is the science of sustainable city form. But the free, personal selection of that kind of city by the vast majority of modern citizens is a harder nut to crack. That is where the artistry of the city comes into play like never before. When we make the sustainable city also desirable – beautiful and hospitable and lovable – then it will become the massively preferred choice. And then, ladies and gentlemen, our cities will be transformed and, with that transformation, we really will change our world.

Herzlichen Dank unseren Projektpartnern



Medienpartner

