Vancouver has a strong sense of place, perhaps as a result of the city’s dramatic physical setting, located as it is on a peninsula between mountains, sea and river. Taken together, these powerful natural features give Vancouver much of its distinctiveness and contribute strongly to its physical identity. But these are natural factors. Vancouverites are not responsible for them, protective and sentimental as they may get about them. They were here long before the city was built, and they tell only part of the story.

The city’s constructed public realm—that is, the network of streets, formal spaces and buildings that make up the venue of collective urban life—is also an essential contributor to defining this sense of place. And it does not always improve upon the natural setting. Take away its setting, and Vancouver might qualify as one of the more banal architectural constructs of any Canadian city. Until very recently, many of its buildings and particularly its public spaces often have not seemed equal to its setting. Or, to put it the other way, perhaps its natural blessings have made Vancouverites lazy, smug about their environment, even as they ignore it in their city-making. It has been suggested that Vancouver gets away with mediocre public architecture precisely because it has such an overcompensating natural setting.

Nevertheless, there are some notable urban characteristics that contribute to Vancouver’s unique sense of place, though it is not always easy to identify these or to differentiate what is constructed from what is natural. But differentiate them we must in order to begin to understand the peculiar nature of this place.

A Waterfront Edge

Vancouver’s physical setting, edged by water, has resulted in a significant portion of the city’s public realm being located along the waterfront. From the city’s beginnings, this was always the case, though on a far smaller scale
historically. Most of it was inaccessible to the public, but the accessible waterfront was from the outset constructed as a space of civic leisure. Many old photographs offer evidence of an intensive community life on the waterfront, with infrastructure to support it: piers, bandstands, bath houses, pavilions and promenades graced the Edwardian waterfront of early Vancouver. English Bay was the principal locus of the waterfront as a zone of leisure, and later Kitsilano Beach as well.

With the decline in waterfront industrial uses in recent years, public access has been significantly expanded and enhanced. A growing proportion of Vancouver’s constructed public realm is now waterfront-related: formal seawall walkways and bikeways, lookouts and piers, beachfront parks (Vanier, Kitsilano, David Lam, Jericho Beach, among others), numerous smaller pocket parks overlooking the water, and several streetend access points. In many ways, these elements are a substitute for the more traditional centrifugal public spaces of older cities.

Another unique feature of the waterfront’s influence on Vancouver’s constructed public realm is how the orthogonal street grid is interrupted and distorted where it intersects with the waterfront. Streets either
terminate abruptly, as if they might plunge into the water, or they turn and
reflect upon themselves, bending to the shoreline to create serendipitous,
irregular, sinuous public spaces. The result is several distinctive curvilinear
scenic routes along the city’s waterfront. More than just streets, these routes
are used as places of leisure or at least non-linear movement. Harland
Bartholomew recognized this characteristic explicitly in his 1929 plan, in
which he identified a network of “Pleasure Drives” across the city. Some still
even have the signs identifying them as “Scenic Routes,” erected on street
lamp poles in an earlier, more innocent time when such gestures were not
too self-conscious.

The packs of cyclists who sweep along the curves of South West Marine
Drive, or the family taking their gawking out-of-town visitors for a slow
meandering drive along Beach Avenue, or the couple languidly walking
their dog along the uplands of Wall Street, are all participating in this
aspect of public life in the city by the sea, however dimly they may be aware it. Some people even have the good fortune to commute to work by such routes, though for them of course there is perhaps not much succour in this knowledge.

The Missing Centre
The corollary to the waterfront edge condition is that Vancouver really has very few of the more traditional public open spaces at the centre. It lacks the obvious centralizing grand space analogous to Old World cities such as, say, Prague's Wenceslas Square, London's Trafalgar Square or Venice's Piazza San Marco. Even New World cities such as Philadelphia, New York and San Francisco have such spaces, dating back to their origins, whose names act as a kind of shorthand, instantly identifying the city: think Penn Square, Washington Square, Union Square.

What central spaces Vancouver does possess have for various reasons very limited functions in this sense, and in any event they have been effectively overshadowed by the more compelling waterfront edge.

Consider Arthur Erickson's 1970s-era Robson Square complex, which though a formally distinctive, even heroic piece of architecture, aptly symbolizes the point. Robson Square is an unlikely cohabitation of modernism and neo-classicism that helps neither and that fails to engage the surrounding
streets. Like a curtain-wall tower lying on its side, the complex straddles three city blocks, bridging over one street and burrowing under another.

Robson Square was carved out of three blocks in downtown Vancouver to become a hybrid of law courts, art gallery, terraced landscape and urban space. But this is a square in name only. There is no primary, substantial open space that is recognizable as a public square in the conventional sense of the word, but rather a diffuse series of interconnected platforms and token tableaux of nature in a labyrinthine sprawl. The closest thing to a square was an ice-rink-cum-plaza (now disused) underneath Robson Street and formerly serviced by a subterranean food fair reminiscent of the ubiquitous suburban shopping mall. The remaining open spaces are heavily planted in a kind of miniaturized recapitulation of surrounding nature, with landscaped mounds, mini-forests, winding paths and hidden spaces.

In the process of creating Robson Square, the old provincial court house was converted into the Vancouver Art Gallery. But most significant was what happened to the public square that fronts onto Georgia Street to the north of the former court house. This formal open space once gave access to the court house's main entry and had served for many years as the city's central square. Although it always had some limitations as a place for public rituals, being spatially weak at its corners and bounded on three sides by busy and wide streets, it nevertheless did have a sense of gravitas, a suitably civic function (the court house) as its focus and some fine facades surrounding it.

A remarkable historical photograph of the space at its height of public use shows Vancouver society out in full force to welcome a visit by Canada’s new governor general (HRH the Duke of Connaught) in 1912: the court house and surrounding buildings, including the old Hotel Vancouver, are decked out in flags, bunting and swags, people crowd at every opening, and the space itself is filled with officials, soldiers, cadets and citizens in their best finery. The photo illustrates how this space once functioned as the city’s main public square. This kind of public assembly is almost inconceivable in this space today, given its subsequent disconnection from the buildings—particularly the court house—that surround it.

As part of the Robson Square conversion, the main entrance to the court house on the north side was permanently closed in favour of a new one facing Robson Street to the south, thereby radically distorting the square's public function and downgrading it to a kind of backyard. The grand steps up to the former court house now lead to nowhere.
The old court house square has been further degraded by the addition over time of several physical elements that have reduced its effectiveness as a place of assembly: a large central fountain, heavy landscaping and planting beds, fencing, railings and so on. Around 1967 the space was officially renamed Centennial Plaza—to commemorate Canada’s centenary—a name virtually (and tellingly) unrecognized by Vancouverites today. This largely forgotten public space—by whatever name it goes—now has the air of an
orphans, surrounded by wide busy streets, isolated from the life of the city around it and disconnected from the buildings that front onto it. It is a space waiting to be reclaimed in the public consciousness.

And despite its orphaned state, the old court house square to the north is still sometimes preferred for major public gatherings. When Vancouver still officially celebrated New Year’s Eve downtown (it has been several years since the City has done so), the space attracted thousands for the year-end midnight countdown, with crowds spilling out onto the surrounding closed roadways. It was exciting, even metropolitan. This not-quite-square almost seemed to work as a focus for public life, in a way that Robson Square never will.

One other space that functions in this more traditional centralizing sense, Victory Square, is discussed in a later chapter.

The Implacable Grid

Overlaid on Vancouver’s physical setting is the implacable street grid laid out by the Royal Engineers and the Canadian Pacific Railway’s surveyors. Almost the entire network of the city’s public streets follows one or another variation of the cardinal grid. The grid is a mechanistic, brutally efficient, universalizing form of subjugating the landscape.

Vancouver’s street layout and design is an overarching grid of rectangular street blocks aligned (nominally) on the cardinal compass points. In most parts of the City the dominant (that is, longer) block direction is east-west, with the north-south blocks being shorter; thus, most property frontage faces either north or south. However, this grid orientation is sometimes reversed: then, the dominant block direction is north-south, with the east-west blocks being shorter, and most property frontage facing either east or west. And while there is no readily apparent logic to where the grid orientation changes or why, it is usually a reflection of the different timing of urbanization of various pre-empted land parcels.

Another factor responsible for variations in the street grid, both in its orientation and alignments, as well as in block proportions and dimensions, is the early development of Vancouver as a number of separate municipalities.

Vancouver’s street grid is further characterized by a system of mid-block lanes that reinforce the grid and parallel the dominant east-west block direction. However, where east-west streets intersect with major north-south streets—such as Dunbar, Granville, Cambie, Main, Fraser, Commercial, Victoria, Renfrew and Rupert—the east-west lanes usually do not cut through...
but tee into a north-south lane system that parallels and supports the major north-south streets. This "T" lane configuration is a unique characteristic of Vancouver's street grid. It reinforces the built form continuity of the primary north-south arterials, key components of the city's public realm.

There are a few notable exceptions to the street grid, the most obvious being Kingsway, which predated the grid and linked New Westminster to Burrard Inlet. Kingsway's diagonal alignment, cutting across a large portion of the city, presents a striking counterpoint to the regular street grid. A small area of streets in the wedge between Kingsway and East 29th Avenue inexplicably follows the diagonal Kingsway alignment, running against the grain of the dominant grid. And of course there are the incongruous curves of Shaughnessy Heights where the regular street grid morphs into a constellation of wavy-line boulevards. And the post-Second World War Fraserview and Champlain Heights subdivisions in southeast Vancouver display their era's predilection for curving suburban street patterns.

Vancouver's rectilinear street grid, however, contains approximately 70 per cent of the total public space within the City. And "single-family" residential streets (that is, streets running through residential neighbourhoods of single detached houses) represent approximately 70 per cent of the total streets in Vancouver. These tree-lined neighbourhood streets, often
with grass boulevards and parallel parking on one or both sides, are a quintessential characteristic of Vancouver’s public realm.

A map of Vancouver’s street grid reveals several key streets that stand out as significant both historically and functionally:

- **Georgia Street and Burrard Street**: With their wider than normal rights-of-way of 30 m (99 feet) instead of 20 m (66 feet) and their direct connections to bridges, both function as major gateway routes into the centre and as pre-eminent ceremonial routes; also, Burrard Street defines a significant change in the street grid and block orientation.
- **Broadway**: The dominant east-west, cross-town spine, and the single longest continuous east-west street, it stretches from Boundary Road in the east to the University of British Columbia in the west.
- **Several other historically significant gateway routes into Vancouver include Hastings Street, Granville Street and Kingsway**.
- **Other key cross-town routes include Main Street, Cambie Street and Marine Drive.**
Sections of these special streets have been recognized as significant through approved special streetscape treatment (for example, downtown Georgia Street). For much of their length, however, many of them do not yet have a consistent quality of streetscape commensurate with their importance. They represent the key links and the city-wide, high-level network of routes by which people create their mental maps of the city. They are the locus of much of the city’s public life and most of its commerce.

In a further elaboration of the street grid as a defining characteristic of Vancouver’s public realm, the downtown peninsula represents a concentration of those special streets, a more intensive use of the street system, and an increase in the number and diversity of special public spaces.

**Shifting Grids and Reflections**

Vancouver spreads over a series of geographically distinct peninsulas and promontories, separated by water. As a result of this complex physical geography, another defining aspect of Vancouver’s sense of place is that striking views of the city are presented from different vantage points. The city is constantly reflecting on itself in a kind of narcissistic self-display. In addition, and fortifying this appearance of a stage-set city, water and mountain backdrops often terminate the axial views down numerous streets.

Reinforcing the city’s sense of place is the fact that the entire downtown is itself located on a small peninsula to the north of the much larger Point Grey peninsula that the rest of the city occupies, separated from the latter by English Bay and False Creek. The downtown peninsula is surrounded by
water on almost all sides, adding to its perception as an island. This physical separation clearly defines the geographic limits of the centre and sets it apart from the rest of the city.

In addition, the downtown peninsula street grid is rotated approximately 46 degrees from the dominant grid, thus intensifying its difference and presenting a unique visual aspect, with two frontages of most buildings being simultaneously visible from parts of the city outside the downtown peninsula. When combined with the reflections of downtown buildings in the water at their feet, these conditions further add to Vancouver's sense of place, its collective visual mnemonic.

Bridges
Where there is water there are bridges, and Vancouver has lots of both. The city's bridges are another defining characteristic of its public realm. In addition to being the city's key physical links, the bridges act as important places of transition, thresholds as well as public promenades. They are also deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the city, in people's mental maps.
Vancouverites have a store of meaning, images and historic significance associated with many of their bridges:

- Lions Gate Bridge: Gateway to the North Shore, guarded by cast-concrete lions, sculptured portal to Burrard Inlet and the harbour, narrow point of endless constriction, entryway to Stanley Park, object of ineffable beauty, metaphor for land speculation, Gracie’s necklace.

- Second Narrows Bridge: Also known as the Ironworkers Memorial Bridge for the twenty-five men who died in four accidents during its construction; though almost no one calls it that except history buffs and certain local radio traffic reporters. This is the other bridge to the North Shore, utilitarian, functional, fast (relatively speaking) and largely out of sight.

- Burrard Bridge: The painted lady, the grand dame of them all, guarding the entrance to False Creek and wearing its art deco styling elegantly, with its playful light towers at each end, its powerful tapered piers, and its curious central overhead structures, mysterious and inaccessible, which span the bridge deck.

- Granville Bridge: High-speed gateway to downtown Vancouver and its first quasi-freeway, with six broad lanes, soaring off-ramps and cloverleaf interchanges at each end.

- Arthur Laing Bridge: Gateway to the airport, escape route to the sun from Vancouver’s endless dreary winter.

- Oak Street Bridge: Perhaps Vancouver’s longest bridge; its southern end promises the open road, the forbidden freeway, the leaving of urbanity behind and the United States border just down the road. From here on south, it’s freeway all the way to Tijuana.

Traversing Vancouver's bridges is a rite of passage, each with its own features. The crossing is always eventful, whether it's a high-speed rush high above the water or an agonizing communal crawl across the tightrope. Negotiating the city's bridges signals a kind of transition from one sense of place to another within this most geographic of cities: you are either in downtown, or in the suburbs, or on the North Shore. The bridges make these transitions absolute; there is no gradual blurring. You are never in any doubt. And with this certainty comes different expectations as to the urban experience. There is no mistaking West Vancouver for the West End.

Residents have their personal favourite bridge routes around which they carefully construct their daily lives, arguing passionately about the...
relative merits of, say, crossing Burrard Inlet via Lions Gate versus the Second Narrows (locals don’t add the word “bridge”), like Parisians with their deeply held parochial loyalties to certain streets and quartiers, their preferred pâtisseries and cafés.

Each bridge has its coalition of fans and protectors. So, when a few years ago the provincial government proposed replacing the dangerously narrow, substandard and aging three-lane Lions Gate Bridge with a wider and safer new one, complete with dedicated transit lanes, the uproar was immediate, loud and sustained. When the dust had settled, Vancouver got to keep its old Depression-era bridge, and some $100 million later, the lanes are smoother and a little bit wider, but there are still only three.

Vancouverites can be very sentimental about their bridges. They cling to idealized mythologies about them, conflate them into phenomena beyond mere public infrastructure. Listen to Generation X celebrity and writer Douglas Coupland go on about his favourite, Lions Gate Bridge:

I want you to imagine you are driving north, across Lions Gate Bridge, and the sky is steely grey and the sugar-dusted mountains loom blackly in the distance. Imagine what lies beyond those mountains—realize that there are only more mountains—mountains until the North Pole, mountains until the end of the world, mountains taller than a thousand mès, mountains taller than a thousand you’s.

Here is where civilization ends; here is where time ends and where eternity begins. Here is what Lions Gate Bridge is: one last grand gesture
of beauty, of charm, and of grace before we enter the hinterlands, before the air becomes too brittle and too cold to breathe, before we enter that place where life becomes harsh, where we must become animals in order to survive.35

Whew! This is no longer a mere bridge but more like a portal to the netherworld. Such is the power of place.

Neighbourhood Open Spaces
Another defining characteristic of Vancouver's public realm is the significant number of small neighbourhood parks that are scattered all over the city. They range in size and scale from a single block simply left undeveloped to multi-block land assemblies. They are typically surrounded by houses. In the city's first hundred years of existence, these smaller spaces were significant nodes of neighbourhood life, such as informal meetings and gatherings, sports events, even concerts. Some have commercial uses associated with them (usually a corner grocery store). The example shown opposite is Oppenheimer Park in Strathcona, which served as a place of assembly and protest for Vancouver's working classes.

Many of these small local neighbourhood parks were called for in the famous 1929 Plan for Vancouver by Harland Bartholomew. According to that
plan, each 2.5 km² (1 square mile) of residential area was targeted to include four 0.4-ha (1-acre) play parks, one 1.2-ha (3-acre) elementary school playground, up to 2.4 ha (6 acres) of recreation fields and a large neighbourhood park of up to 12 ha (30 acres) in size. Many of the larger park spaces did not get built, but most of the smaller ones did.

Usually laid out with small playgrounds and undeveloped grass fields, these small open spaces will play an increasingly important role in the public realm as the city matures and is further intensified. Over time, they will likely take on more urban attributes, including more hard surfaces and structures. And they are beginning to be surrounded by higher density buildings and a mix of uses. They will, in time, turn into the equivalent of the European urban neighbourhood square. They are one of Vancouver's greatest assets: a network of small public open spaces right across the city.

**Granite**

A distinctive materiality is often a significant feature of a city's physical identity, its *genius loci*. Think of Jerusalem, built almost entirely of the soft pink stone quarried from the hills on which it stands, or of monumental Third Republic Paris, uniformly clad in its Île-de-France limestone. Such cities are inseparable from their physical materiality. If Sydney is rightly described as a sandstone city, then it might just as correctly be said that Vancouver is a city of granite. The distinctive local "salt and pepper" flecked grey-black
granite is found almost everywhere there are rock outcrops. Indeed, one of the world’s largest single granite outcrops is located not far north of Vancouver up Howe Sound: hiking the Stawamus Chief is a favourite local activity.

So it is no surprise that another defining characteristic of Vancouver’s public realm has been the widespread use of dressed granite stone. This local granite was quarried from Texada and Fox islands up the Sunshine Coast, and barged down to Vancouver.

Historically, dressed granite was widely used for Vancouver’s street curbs, especially for intersection radii curves, where its superior strength and durability prevented it from being crushed by the wheels of turning vehicles. These robust granite curbs have easily survived the hundred or so years of use since they were first installed, and still today, you can observe many of them all over the city, though the Engineering Department has an ongoing program of replacing them with poured concrete curbs. Whatever the reasons for this, these old granite curbs, if allowed to remain, will outlast their concrete replacements.

Another widespread use of granite in Vancouver’s earlier days was for street paving: rectangular cobble sets laid in a bond pattern. Today, almost all such stone paving has either been removed or covered over by asphalt. But here and there, in obscure corners of the city, the observant urbanist will discover remnants of this paving material that once carpeted the public realm. One or two short stretches of granite-paved streets remain (Hamilton Street along the west side of Victory Square, for example), and occasionally where patches of the now ubiquitous asphalt have worn off to expose the cobblestone layer below.

Granite was widely used for retaining walls, raised planting borders, steps, balustrades, pillars, gateways, bollards and other components of the traditional urban streetscape. It was also popular for cladding public buildings and the most expensive homes of Vancouver’s elite.

The local granite can be seen all over the city wherever the public landscape has been modified or required restraining, most notably in retaining walls on sloping topography. Prime examples include the extensive stonework along the Stanley Park seawall, and indeed dressed or rough-split granite is used along most other parts of the city’s waterfront walkway network.

Over the years, the local quarries were scaled back significantly as more economic sources of stone (often in mainland China) became available and...
the age-old stonemason skills died off. Although its public use has declined in recent years, granite, with its unique textures, colour, durability and strength, still contributes towards distinguishing Vancouver’s particular sense of place. Private developments use granite extensively for retaining walls, garden walls, entry gateposts, and even as building cladding.

The City of Vancouver has belatedly begun to recognize this distinguishing feature: several streetscape policies and design guidelines now call for the use of granite in private developments. To date, however, the City has not adopted these guidelines for public works. But that may be changing. In 2003 the City completed a major retrofit of several blocks of Georgia Street and the Stanley Park Causeway. As part of this project, all the new lamp poles have been mounted on custom-designed tapered granite bases, and granite is widely used in the new roadworks and retaining walls as the road enters the park. A case of back to the future?

These then—the city’s waterfront edge, its bridges, its shifting street grids, its “missing” centre, its widespread scattering of small parks and its use of granite—constitute some of the more notable features of Vancouver’s enduring sense of place.