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Mirage Metropolis: Vancouver’s Suburban Urbanism

Vancouver has become such a global model for urbanism that Vancouverism refers to the twin ideals of increased residential density and liveability in the city core. The article critically reflects on this approach which, despite its many failings, nevertheless creates new possibilities for landscape.
The snapshots running along with the article show some recent developments in Vancouver. These vignettes present a glimpse of both the shifting currents of Vancouverism and exciting alternatives to the model.

**ROAR_one: Metropolitan Realism**

ROAR_one, Lang Wilson Practice in Architecture Culture’s recently completed mixed-use residential building is the near opposite of Vancouverism. Here, the suburban ordering of landscape and its associated genericism is replaced by a performance-based response to the diversity and vitality of the city. The building maximizes its permissible volume while positioning circulation and private “live-around” patios within strategic subtractions—the exterior space. This move has implicit conceptual implications as it proposes the relative transformation and relocation of Vancouverism’s passive landscape to “inside” the building where it can engender a varied, flexible, and sustainable use-based environment. In effect, the project brings the landscape to its populace in a more direct and meaningful manner than the highly visible but unused mega-lawns. Its definitive street-edge and remarkable porosity allow the building to actively contribute to the public realm while satisfying the more private demands of inhabitants. Through this thoughtful calibration of interior/exterior, public/private, standard/varied, the project confronts the realities of our urban existence.

The forest of sleek condominium towers that has seemingly sprouted overnight on Vancouver’s downtown peninsula has generated a remarkable amount of professional and public interest. A veritable cottage industry has emerged to describe this newly important urban phenomenon. Esteemed publications print articles and books hit the shelves with titles such as “Vancouver’s Achievement.” The city’s planners and politicians circle the planet sharing stories of their success. Cities as far flung as San Diego and Dubai are emulating Vancouver. Utterly unthinkable until only recently, “Vancouverism” is now a new term in the jargon of those involved with city-making. Indeed, Vancouver’s urban form has been elevated to a concept, to an ideology. But like most miracle stories, the mythology of Vancouverism perhaps obscures more than it illuminates.

Vancouverism is fundamentally about two ideals: density and liveability. Density in this context amounts to creating large amounts of housing in the downtown peninsula with the goal that people live in close proximity to their work; thereby generating a vibrant and compact city. What is most unique about density in Vancouverism is the degree to which it is qualified by a set of criteria loosely grouped under the notion of liveability. These criteria include views to nature, a public waterfront, ample green space and access to public amenities. Together with density, the criteria have produced an urbanistic kit of parts whose sum is Vancouverism: a series of podium towers (a hybrid building type that positions a series of town homes in a “podium” from which towers rise) situated within green public and private space sprinkled with civic amenities such as community centres, all of which are neatly wrapped up in a ribbon of public waterfront walkway that is affectionately known as the “Seawall.”

A key component in all of this is the Planning Department’s ability to initiate policy that has ensured the success of this urbanistic equation. Vancouverism itself can be seen as a big public-private venture in so far as the Planning Department has succeeded in systematizing the leveraging of development capital into public amenities in exchange for greater density.

The savvy of Vancouver planners notwithstanding, it is important to note the role non-local forces played in the invention of Vancouverism, an invention that occurred on a specific piece of real estate at a very specific historical juncture. Vancouver’s 1986 World Exposition effectively primed a large portion of downtown waterfront for development. The 1984 Sino-British Declaration announced the 1997 transition of Hong Kong to Chinese rule and led to a mass exodus from Hong Kong, for which Vancouver would prove to be a major destination. In 1987 Li Ka-Shing, a Hong Kong developer, purchased the entire Expo lands and commenced planning...
Podium towers, situated within green public and private space, are part of the urbanistic kit which sum up “Vancou-
verism”: a series of town homes are positioned in the podi-
um from which multi-storey buildings rise.

Norman Foster, Jameson House –
The Historic Podium

For a city as ostensibly cosmopolitan and worldly as Vancouver, it is remarkable the degree to which it appears hostile to outside architects. Outsiders are

given access only if they offer expertise outside of the expansive domain of West Coast modernism. As an 

incredibly young city, one of these desired outsider domains is history. Robert Stern of New York, with 

post-modernism turned classicism, is a notable outside architect finding a niche of history-generation in new 

Vancouver. Norman Foster is a newcomer to this history position, entering as a modernist through the 

history back door with his “preserved base-tower top” formula. When one looks at Jameson House with its 
curvilinear floor plates rising from the preserved fa-

cades of the site’s former occupants it becomes 

painfully clear that this scheme fits perfectly with Van-
couverism. Indeed it exemplifies the role of the podi-
um in its purest form. The podium tower positions the 

podium as the location in which livability is guaranteed 

… where the scale of the tower is mediated by the 

more moderate scale of the townhouse. As Vancouver 

careens down its relentless development path, its al-

ready scant history is increasingly demolished. It can 

now be said that the sheer amount of newness threat-

ens the very ideal of livability. As history itself becomes 

another aspect of livability, there is no more perfect 

place to locate it than in the podium. What the Jame-

son House offers is the reading of the podium as a sort 
of livability sponge … soaking up whatever livability 
criteria Vancouverism spills.
Concord Pacific Place as North America’s largest urban masterplanned community. This process would mark the birth of Vancouverism, and it was within the particular characteristics of the mega-project that the Planning Department could leverage foreign capital into the density/amenity model that is at the core of Vancouverism. An achievement of local intelligence, Vancouverism is equally a manifestation of the immense power of remote forces within globalization.

Whatever ratio of Vancouverism can be attributed to local ingenuity or a chance confluence of local and remote factors, it is impossible to negate its successes. Vancouver is entirely anomalous among North American cities where the age of a city has a one-to-one correlation with density: the younger the city, the less dense, and vice-versa. It’s the youngest major city on the continent, yet Vancouver’s downtown peninsula is said to be the second-densest living area. This is a remarkable achievement. So too has Vancouver achieved its version of liveability. If
East Fraser Lands –
Vancouverism beyond the Core

In December 2006 the City of Vancouver approved the community development plan for the East Fraser Lands, 52 hectares of post-industrial ground at the south-eastern edge of the city. The proposed community is mixed-use with a two to three storey commercial podium creating the framework from which ten to twenty four-storey residential point towers rise. A foreshore park is to extend the length of the waterfront. Parks and greenways will connect three proposed neighbourhoods while providing a buffer zone for commuting and play. The project includes 671,000 square metres of residential use, 23,000 square metres of retail use, and over 30,000 square metres of office, commercial, and institutional uses. This marks the first time that the Vancouverism model is applied to an area of the city outside the downtown peninsula.
market viability is any indicator then Vancouverism is a hit, as condominium projects consistently sell out prior to construction. The podium tower/green space/public amenity triumvirate has proven liveable as residents enjoy privacy, order, and ample space for recreation in the city centre. Vancouver appears to be the apotheosis of what can best be called the Ecometropolis.

Despite its successes, Vancouverism, of course, has its deficiencies. Whatever its ambitions, Vancouverism is not a city-model. In actuality it is a phenomenon confined to a tiny corner of metropolitan Vancouver that houses roughly five per cent of the city’s two million inhabitants. More

The podium towers are wrapped up along the public walkway known as the “Seawall” running along the city’s waterfront. The photos show the recently developed Yaletown district (top) and the established West End.
importantly, it fails to seriously address the full spectrum of urban life. Indeed, one is tempted to think that it is outright hostile to work as its tenacious emphasis on liveability has led to a near stagnation of office construction on the downtown peninsula. The resulting imbalance between work and live space is a creeping problem that threatens the city’s viability as a place that possesses more substance than recreation and real estate investment alone can offer.

But in regards to what it does, Vancouverism may ironically announce the final victory in the long running battle between the suburbs and the downtown. Designed as a strategy to save the centre from bleeding to the suburbs, Vancouverism has taken the role of urban/suburban double agent. Ultimately it has operated as an ideology for the suburbs’ take-over of urban environments by engendering their metamorphosis into a new scale … their becoming super-suburban. This friendly takeover situates landscape architecture as the main protagonist and as such the role of the landscape architect is paramount.

At Concord Pacific Place, on the north shore of False Creek, podium towers are systematically separated from the street and sidewalk by a series of landscape treatments ranging from expanses of grass to elaborate water features. This unprogrammed and therefore underutilized perimeter effectively disengages the buildings from the city. Exacerbating this posture towards the public domain is the fact that large underground parking facilities service these buildings. The withdrawal from the streetscape and reliance on the car reveals the fundamental suburbanism of the Vancouver model and begs the question: “Is Vancouverism’s landscape strategy an urban-sized manifestation of the suburban lawn?”

The front lawn is, of course, a fundamental ingredient in suburban housing and acts as the territorial zone in which spatial practices counter to urbanity are ensured. Inherently unprogrammed, the lawn is a surface that reduces chance by mitigating the dialogue between public and private. The landscape surrounding the podium towers of Vancouverism act in a similar manner. As the suburban front lawn is a visual space that exerts its power through its resistance to use, so does the podium tower’s mega-lawn generate order through an emphasis on the visual. In a very literal sense, these mega-lawns mark a retreat from the public sphere in which the messy vitality of the city occurs.

In some ways one is tempted to think of the Vancouver mega-lawn in lineage with the shopping mall’s aspiration to order public life. Over time, however, the mall has proven ripe for subversion along the lines of Fast Times at Ridgemont High. At present, here in Vancouver, it’s exciting to imagine what teenage energy has in store for the mega-lawn. Surely it won’t have anything to do with liveability but it will probably be more liveable.

Urban Acupuncture: Living Lab’s Alternative to Vancouverism

Chinatown, located just east of downtown Vancouver, is the second largest Chinatown in North America and one of the Vancouver’s oldest and most unique neighbourhoods. It is the next logical location for redevelopment under the Vancouverism model as the downtown nears build-out. Living Lab (Inge Roecker, Kelty Miyoshi McKinnon, Sengsack Tsoi) is a multi-disciplinary research team that has developed a model they call “Urban Acupuncture”, a set of design strategies uniquely attuned to the specificities of Chinatown that offer a provocative alternative to Vancouverism. Urban Acupuncture is understood as a method to maintain and build sustainable and authentic communities. It focuses on the selective redevelopment of sites within the historic fabric, carefully removes what is not working, and inserts a contemporary, appropriate intervention to stimulate urban regeneration. By capitalizing on its unique cultural assets, Chinatown can differentiate itself and set an example for a sensitive yet contemporary approach to historic community regeneration.