

**Mike Harcourt:
Vancouver's Offbeat Approach
Leads Back to the Future**

I got involved in urban development issues in the 60s, when I helped a citizens' group stop the freeway slated to cut through Vancouver's historic Strathcona neighbourhood. At the time, mainstream thought was that downtown was for working, not living, that you should be able to drive anywhere you wanted, and that oil would last forever. The "planned city" was big, tall and beautiful. Urban renewal advocates wanted to "clean out" old neighbourhoods and replace them with Stalinist-design social housing and fast roads to the suburbs.

The trouble was, the old neighbourhoods didn't want to be fixed up, and the freeway would destroy the ability of Chinatown shop owners to live where they worked. Vancouver said no to the freeway, and yes to a 24-hour downtown.

We've always had an offbeat approach to development in Vancouver, and it's why it's such a great city today. "Livability" – coined by Walter Hardwick – was the buzz phrase of the 70s and 80s. We retained local street shopping and invested in neighbourhoods – community centres, branch libraries, parks, neighbourhood houses, seniors' centres. So the community of Kerrisdale has a distinct flavour, as does Kits and Commercial Drive.

To me, developments like the new Olympic Village are "back to the future." This is the way we used to live – in apartments over shops, walking everywhere – it's the old medieval city. Most of us are social; we like interaction, the personal touch. True, some people want to live in a McMansion and go everywhere in their car. But with peak oil and climate change upon

us, the necessity of integrated sustainability practices is changing cities dramatically. Besides, I think in 20 years McMansions and Hummers won't be cool anymore. People will look at that lifestyle as crazy, with so much money squandered. Cost, climate change and a desire for community – these are the drivers shifting sustainable development from the fringe to the mainstream.

We're at a point now where there's a lot of awareness and acceptance of sustainability values. But we face a huge challenge: how are we going to rapidly shift so that all communities are built this way?

I see this challenge as two-fold: training, and marketing. Over the next few years we need to train thousands of architects, engineers, construction trades, developers, lawyers, accountants and others to be sustainability managers.

And we need to make sustainable communities cool, to market this lifestyle.

The 1950s car-oriented world came to a halt in Vancouver when we stopped the freeway. Livability came to the forefront as we strengthened neighbourhoods and brought life to the downtown. With leading projects like Millennium's Olympic Village, we're proving that we can integrate all aspects of sustainable communities into a single development. Now, we must meet our challenges, build on these successes and create resilient cities for a sustainable future.

Mike Harcourt
Vancouver City Councillor and Mayor,
1973-1986

British Columbia MLA and Premier,
1986-1996

"This is the way we used to live – it's the old medieval city."

**Scot Hein:
Following Context, Creating Place**

Vancouver's recent urbanism renaissance is recognized for the invention of high density/mixed use development that enhances streetlife by infusing residential energy. This strategy has proved successful in the downtown, where the West End and Central Business District are generally characterized by towers and podiums.

However, as attention turned to the southeast shore of False Creek, where much of the land is owned

by the City of Vancouver, it became important to determine whether form should follow finances (the creation of value) or follow context (the creation of place). City staff had explored this critical city-building question prior to the awarding of the 2010 Olympic Games. During that time, advocates from the design professions recommended new approaches to density and form as an extension of SEFC's industrial heritage – qualities that had not been

evident in the downtown peninsula. The design profession challenged staff, and City Council, to deliver urban densities while reinforcing the identity of the lower-scaled context prevalent on this last undeveloped tract of land on the creek.

Notwithstanding the challenging Olympic timeline, Council agreed, concluding that "authentic placemaking must drive design intent." The invention of new lower-scaled mid-rise buildings was

coupled with innovative approaches to public realm design. This has produced a distinctive Olympic Village neighbourhood centre (The Shipyard) whose identity will be reinforced by subsequent neighbourhoods (The Workyard and the Railyard) towards an honest and contemporary expression of Canadian West Coast urban life.

Scot Hein
Senior Urban Designer
City of Vancouver



The European development model (narrow streets, low- and mid-rise but highly dense residential spaces, inner courtyards, open public space and vibrant street life) has played an influential role in the planning and design of Southeast False Creek.



False Creek North boasts high-density, high-rise residential living and community amenities. SEFC's unique approach demonstrates a shift to low- and mid-rise density with a focus on environmental and community benefits.