

Memorable experiences are directly related to places and time. There is a certain symbiotic relationship between the creation of memories and the influence of the physical environment, built or natural, upon human activity. It is therefore important, in the “creation of place,” to recognize this influence and understand how to properly shape perception and experiences through effective urban design.

Urban design excellence can appear accidental, as with many European cities, where places have physically evolved over many years, and layers, of intervention. The most memorable of these places usually perform well when analyzed for contextual quality, comfort and activity. The necessary ingredients of placemaking include a cogent ensemble of buildings that shape spaces through their form, scale, materiality and detailing, combined with an effective response to human comfort with respect to

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sun, noise and smell, and providing a theatrical backdrop for the observation and enjoyment of human interaction.

As designers, we observe and apply these recognized placemaking qualities in our contemporary civic context during a time of rapid urbanism. Yet, while we may understand and apply historic lessons, the question remains whether this is enough to “create place.” Urban design excellence may instead be best achieved by being purposefully incomplete, especially if the physical change is happening rapidly without the benefit of time’s patina (the establishment of “context”). Incompleteness, and related unpredictable opportunities for use and participation, may best lead to places that become memorable, because they will evolve towards something more authentic over time through ongoing intervention, programming and use.

Thus, a successful designer may set the stage, but it is the “theatre of the place” that is most important in creating meaning and memory. Placemaking can occur at many scales and under opposing political ideals. It can be active or passive, expressive of culture and ethnicity, historic or contemporary, permanent or fleeting – or any of these qualities in combination. Notwithstanding any such qualities, placemaking is only achieved if there develop individual and collective connections to, and identification with, the place through the creation of significant meaning and memory. The role of the design process is to understand these insights and leave room for the unpredictability of transformation over time.

Scot Hein
 Architect and Senior Urban Designer
 City of Vancouver

The intensity of the transformation of the area, from wet land to dry land, from natural to “man-made”... is significant for making us consider the meaning of progress.

Foreshore Lands Statement of Significance, 2004

Heritage elements are woven throughout SEFC development. Planned sidewalk medallions explore the relationship between SEFC’s ecological heritage (rich estuarial hunting ground and trade route for Coast Salish people) and its industrial heritage (shipbuilding, metal fabrication and salt refinery).



Every place is the product of layers of history, natural and human. Heritage advocates say these layers are critical. They create a unique identity, born of geography and circumstance, informed by knowledge of what has gone before. They tell us who we are.

Early planning for SEFC was heavily focused on the new challenge of sustainability – to the point, says Hal Kalman, where heritage was at risk. Kalman was Chair of the Vancouver Heritage Commission when planners Ian Smith and Mark Holland presented to it in the late 1990s.

“They were throwing around the word sustainability,” he says. “But in the process of planning

an environmentally sustainable neighbourhood they were going to demolish every trace of the existing neighbourhood.” The Commission agreed the community should be “brand spanking new” but “recognized as only the most recent of many layers of history.” The argument was accepted, and heritage conservation was enshrined in the SEFC Policy Statement.

In 2004, as Principal of Commonwealth Historic Resource Management Ltd., Kalman contributed to SEFC as a consultant, identifying the “character-defining elements” that give the place its identity. Some were tangible – a few

remaining industrial buildings, the zig-zag shoreline made of boat slips and storage sheds. Others were less tangible, such as retaining open space behind the Salt Building, in recognition that a boat landing once entertained a stream of traffic at that spot, as boats arrived and left with loads of salt.

“The only sensible way to march into the future is with a sense of the past,” says Kalman. “We learn from history. Those who don’t, make terrible mistakes.”

PROFILE

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An architect who studied and worked in the US, Scot Hein moved to Vancouver in 1981. When the prospect of inappropriate development loomed nearby – a plan for high towers on Vancouver’s Arbutus Lands in Kitsilano – it sparked his advocacy and call to public service.

“For five years, another architect and I worked collegially with City staff on behalf of fellow neighbours to say, ‘There is a different approach to placemaking that respects prevailing form, scale and character while still accommodating high density,’” recalls Hein. He laughs. “That experience seduced me to the ‘dark side,’ working with the City.”

Hein is now head of the City of Vancouver’s Urban Design Studio, which holds a variety of design, advocacy, planning and management roles. Hein is proud of the design excellence in Olympic Village, and the way the process fostered innovative thinking.

“Despite the aggressive timelines, there was a lot of discipline in the early phases of this project,” he says. “I’d like to think there was an art to shaping the creative process that allowed the designers to distinctively contribute their best towards a larger identity for the village.”

“I pinch myself every day because I probably have the best job an architect practising urbanism could possibly have.”

Salmon icons are etched into granite blocks at the amphitheatre to mark historic spawning routes.