

# Introduction: Urban Design as Public Policy in North America

The researching of a city's design achievement is not an end in itself but a means toward a broader goal of seeking to improve the design dimension of planning generally. For a planner/urban designer interested in critically appraising the system in which he practises or researches there are few exercises as revealing and rewarding as an extended study of how a different system of planning and design regulation works. It is not simply the prospect of finding exemplary, innovative practices, or resolution of the persistent problems that beset all planning intervention, but rather the sharper more critical perspective with which the practitioner/researcher returns to interrogate his/her native system. Such research has special difficulties and pitfalls. The effort required to understand the full complexity of another planning system is prodigious, and then it is necessary to explore its outcomes and to come to grips with the particularities of local politics, development practices, public values, and urban traditions. Then there are the potential pitfalls of uncritical cross-comparative research, and the perils of failing to appreciate why particular policies and processes have emerged and how and why they have actually been successful.

## **Why Study Vancouver?**

There are two particular reasons for studying Vancouver's contemporary planning and urban design practices. First it has an international reputation for achieving a generally high standard of design and for generally making the most of its superb natural setting. This reputation is founded upon a number of innovative practices, of which three are widely recognized. First, the Vancouver Urban Design Panel could be an exemplar for aesthetic advisory committees of the kind that are now being reformulated in the Netherlands and introduced in Belgium and Germany. Second, the citywide design strategy of CityPlan and its neighbourhood visioning has much to teach Britain and

other countries about how urban intensification will have to be negotiated with local communities if it is to be successful. Third, Vancouver's megaproject planning process offers valuable lessons, for both the United Kingdom and the United States, on participatory master planning, building public/private development partnerships and community consensus, and developing more inclusive communities that can afford quality infrastructure. Numerous other facets of Vancouver's planning practices will be of interest to national and international audiences, from the development of neighbourhood design guidelines for single-family areas, to the ways of managing permitting methods to increase applicant support and decision-making efficiency; from how to execute view and skyline studies to how to bring engineering, planning, and urban design together to create a high-quality public realm. The technical ingenuity and imagination of much of this work is of particular interest, especially to someone whose national and local planning system is almost bereft of such innovation, and unable to grasp the nettle of such issues as design panels, development levies, or statutory master planning.

Second, Vancouver, more than any other city, bridges the gap between the two traditions of discretionary versus administrative planning systems, which is the essential divide between British and American/Continental European planning practice. Vancouver has a highly discretionary development control/permit processing system similar in some ways to that which operates in the United Kingdom. But that system is also based upon an elaborate zoning system that is characteristic of North American and European planning practice and their essentially administrative systems based on clear rules of decision making. Vancouver's system of discretionary zoning sounds like a contradiction in terms, but it can offer important insights into the practice of discretionary design review now common in North America, and clues as to how to make discretionary control more transparent, consistent, and equitable, as well as more design literate.

To more fully understand Vancouver's particular system and to assess its achievements, it is necessary to situate it in the context of North American urbanism and its evolution since 1960. In this Introduction a general account is provided of the emergence of urban design as public policy in American and Canadian cities. Four themes are given particular attention. The first is the shift from modernist to postmodernist planning and design principles, and the emergence of much more place- and history-sensitive urban design, albeit at the expense of modernism's more utopian and socially redistributive goals. The second is the shift away from direct public intervention to shape the urban landscape (urban renewal) toward public regulation of private development (design review) in a bid to achieve some of the same, and some different, community goals. Third is the development of a range of critiques

of these regulatory practices and the emergence of substantive principles with which to both evaluate practices and to construct systems capable of developing better design outcomes. Finally there is a range of more socio-political critiques of planning and design practices that attempt to go behind the facades of the postmodern city to explore issues of social equity and the construction/destruction of community, and which question both the assumptions and outcomes of contemporary practice. Each of these perspectives can be usefully employed to frame a study of the design dimension of a particular North American city's planning practices.

So while the body of this book is concerned with Vancouver and its invention, construction, and implementation of a very sophisticated form of urban design as public policy, this Introduction situates the city within North American planning and urban design at large over the last four decades. Most importantly, it establishes an evaluative framework that can act as a structure for assessing Vancouver's practices and their outcomes, drawing on all the aforementioned themes, to develop a set of principles for progressive design review with which this study can be both launched and concluded.

### **Urban Design as Public Policy**

So the Vancouver achievement can be situated within the context of design regulation and city planning at large, and the radical and rapid changes in the socioeconomic, physical, and cultural character that have taken place in urban areas in North America since the 1960s. Located close to the American border, arguably Vancouver has been more exposed to American practices than any other Canadian city, and it regularly exchanges ideas and experiences with the west coast American cities of Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco. The practice of "urban design as public policy" has been much debated in the United States but largely ignored in Canada. The phrase was coined by Jonathan Barnett in 1974 to describe his work in New York City in the late 1960s. For Barnett, it embraced new systems of design review, special district zoning and landmark protection, comprehensive design of the public realm, and participatory neighbourhood planning that built on the 1961 reform of New York's zoning ordinances. In that city and elsewhere, urban design as public policy grew out of the death throes of national urban renewal programs, and the shift in urban design practice away from large-scale public sector redevelopment projects. It was distinguished by a movement toward review processes and the safeguarding of the cities' interests in privately funded real estate development (Barnett 1974; 1982).

In San Francisco some of the last federal renewal funds allowed the city to retain leading planning and design consultants to undertake a series of as yet unsurpassed analyses of citywide design issues, and to develop the 1971

Urban Design Plan. This provided the basis for the rewriting of the city's zoning ordinances and codifying a set of design principles that could be readily absorbed into comprehensive plans and design guidelines (Punter 1999a: 106-11). Other cities developed sophisticated design guidelines and review practices, most notably Portland, Oregon, which created a proactive approach to urban design in its 1972 Downtown Plan, 1974 neighbourhood planning, and 1977 transportation and street planning (Abbott 2001). Twelve American cities had large-scale urban design plans by 1972 (Southworth and Southworth 1973) – by 1988, ten times that number were in existence (Southworth 1989). Over the 1960s, some one hundred design review boards had been established and, over the following two decades, 83 percent of US towns and cities had set up some form of design review (Scheer 1994: 1). In the United States, urban design as public policy had become more or less universal in its principal urban communities (Shirvani 1992; Habe 1989).

Public regulation of design was a recognition of the fact that the withdrawal of federal funding meant that cities could no longer directly reshape their form through publicly initiated downtown redevelopment, slum clearance, or highway schemes. Recasting a city's capital web of public infrastructure, as Boston had done in the 1960s, was also no longer an option because of budgetary constraints. Cities had to use such regulatory controls as zoning to achieve their public objectives (Lai 1988: 350-51).

### **From Modernist to Postmodernist Urban Design**

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a decisive break in the pattern of public and private investment in US cities that was intensified by the 1973 oil crisis and the subsequent economic recession that marked the end of the postwar economic boom. Use of federal urban renewal and highway funding had laid waste vast areas of inner cities and downtown cores, spreading “aggressive urban design and an impoverished version of modernist architecture” across the urban landscape and creating deeply unpopular “glass box derivations of Miesian exemplars, set in dreary Corbusian plans” (Larson 1993: 78-80). The citizen revolt against urban construction of freeways and expressways started at the end of the 1950s. Within the next few years, movements for neighbourhood preservation and heritage or landmark conservation began, reinforced by damaging critiques of urban renewal (Gans 1962, 1968; Fried 1963). By 1967, urban renewal had dispossessed 400,000 households in US cities – the highways program alone displacing 330,000. The more ambitious the city's plans, the greater the social damage (Frieden and Sagalyn 1989: 29). The Watts, Los Angeles, riots of 1965 and subsequent insurrections, the accelerated flight of business out of northern cities to the American south and west, the Republicans' reversal of the Democrats' “great society” programs, and the

withdrawal of federal funding from cities collectively deepened the urban crisis into the 1970s (Larson 1993: 80-82). Cities were turning into “a garrison state, ungovernable, out of control, unloved, unlivable, and frightening” (Frieden and Sagalyn 1989: 88).

Many cities went to the verge of bankruptcy in the property crash and oil crisis of 1973, deflationary economic policies, and drastic cuts in public expenditures by a neoconservative federal government. This forced municipalities to abandon many social programs and to concentrate on rebuilding their tax base by competing for commercial development and service jobs. A combination of “entrepreneurial cities and maverick developers” promoted major downtown redevelopment initiatives, frequently focused on reclaimed waterfronts with major “festival shopping” complexes or shopping malls (Frieden and Sagalyn 1989: 108-31). Generous federal depreciation allowances fed a massive office construction boom in the early 1980s and the development of new corporate centres. Hotels and convention centres pursued tourists, the attraction of which tended to justify the conservation and commodification of selected historic landmarks and districts. The privatization of public space became the norm, as developers created, furnished, and controlled the creation of urban amenities. James Rouse, the developer of Quincy Market in Boston and Harbor Place in Baltimore, spawned the “Rousification” of America, fusing historic conservation and Disneyland design and management, using public land and federal subsidies to create sites of spectacular consumption. Public/private partnerships and flagship projects were the first stage in attracting the surge of baby boomers and young urban professionals (yuppies) back to the city as a place of leisure and residence, in turn regenerating the historic and accessible neighbourhoods of the inner city, often through gentrification (Hall 1988: 347-51).

Often the vanguard of gentrification were artists, their pursuit of converting lofts for work and home providing the cue for developers and municipalities to promote gentrification (Zukin 1989; Smith 1996). Gentrification revived inner-city retailing and services, but transformed them into a sophisticated café and fashion culture. Urban design in the form of improvements of street and public space and conservation of the historic fabric led and followed the process, until the wholesale re-creation of “historic” districts or “urban villages” from scratch became a profitable activity, highly approved by city governments (e.g., Battery Park City in New York: Russell 1994). New urbanism had arrived and urban prosperity, at least in selected enclaves, was assured.

### Postmodern Design Theory

The deep unpopularity of the debased modernism promulgated by urban renewal programs and corporate America found expression in postmodern

theories of urban design. These theories emerged directly from critiques of downtown redevelopment and inner city renewal in the 1950s and 1960s. Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), the most telling of these, emphasized the values of traditional urbanism, advocating mixed-use, high-density, easily surveyed streets, active ground-floor front-ages, short city blocks, and "gradual rather than cataclysmic investment" (see also Berman 1982). The critiques were reinforced by the writings of Gans (1962, 1968) and Fried (1963), who stressed the potential for removing slums from many inner-city ethnic communities, as well as the value of advocacy and pluralistic planning to support community development.

Another seminal text, Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City* (1960), explored people's perceptions of places and their mental maps and way-finding techniques, which he described as legibility and "imageability." He reasserted the importance of strategic urban design, the historic character of the city, the identity of its diverse districts, and the need to deal sensitively with its assets. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Lynch added design methodologies and theories of equal importance, embracing site planning and sensuous form (1971), conservation (1972), citywide and regional design (1976), and performance measures for urban design (e.g., access, control, efficiency, and justice, as well as vitality, sense, and fit) (1981). Lynch's special interest in the sensuous qualities and meanings of urban form was complemented by a work that had less direct impact on design practice in the United States than in Canada, but which most clearly articulated the picturesque approach to urban design. Gordon Cullen's *Townscape* (1961) was a very British approach to urban design, encompassing such concepts as a sense of place, serial vision, and the virtues of contextualism that were to define postmodern design internationally (see Norberg-Schulz 1979; Brolin 1980; Rowe and Koetter 1978). Resonances were found in Robert Venturi's contributions to postmodern design theory, in his advocacy of complexity and contradiction in architectural design, pursuit of meaningful forms, and celebration of popular taste in suburbia and the commercial strip (Venturi, 1966, 1972; see also Rudofsky 1964; Scully 1969). Other theorists more directly addressed the design of urban space and the public realm, notably Christopher Alexander (1977) in his pursuit of cross-cultural, timeless rules of thumb for urban design and architecture. William H. Whyte developed design principles for small urban spaces (1980), while others looked at city streets, especially their management and redesign (Anderson 1978; Gehl 1987).

Theories with an environmental orientation were much slower to develop, not coming to the fore until the late 1980s. McHarg's *Design with Nature* (1969) had been seminal in its day, but his ideas were not positively reinforced until sustainable development became a policy and political issue in

the mid-1980s (Van der Ryn and Calthorpe 1986; Hough 1985). Meanwhile, the new urban, or neotraditional, design theory largely ignored the ecological dimension of sustainability, while espousing the ideas of pedestrian and transit orientation (Calthorpe 1993). It drew in part on neorationalist ideas and critiques of modernism developed in Europe (Rossi 1982; Krier 1978; Portoghesi 1983) and the celebration of indigenous vernaculars and pre-industrial settlement forms. The new urbanist design codes of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk regulated building forms and their relationships to the public realm, developing street and building typologies mainly, but not exclusively, for master planned upper-middle-income residential communities (Krieger and Lennertz 1991). The first Congress for New Urbanism in 1993 linked the movement internationally, although it thrives in affluent US suburbs created by private master plans (Katz 1994). New urbanism struggles to lose its *Truman Show* superficiality – and to achieve its sustainability credentials. But its policy relevance increases as it broadens its program to include urban intensification, urban villages, livable downtowns, and the retrofitting of suburbia. New urbanism, however, faces huge challenges from the realities of contemporary development practices and the processes that give priority to function, flexibility, affordability, marketability, and profit over any notions of urban or landscape design. Garreau codified some of these anti-planning impulses into “the laws of edge city,” which constitute the forces of darkness for most urban designers, although they largely shape the new landscapes of suburban and ex-urban America (Garreau 1991). While the design problems of “the fractured city” were tackled by Jonathan Barnett (1995), Soja (1996) and others focused on the new urban areas of “exopolis” with their theme parks, new commercial spaces, and “hyperspace” (Winner 1992).

### Critiques of Postmodern Urban Design

While postmodernism enjoyed a period of grace from the critics, save for those who still subscribed wholeheartedly to the modernist project and its minimalist aesthetic, it did become the subject of vilification. Critics who saw it as a device to obscure equity considerations, promote social exclusion, and stimulate consumption, while selective in their targets, were vitriolic in their scorn. Michael Sorkin, the New York architecture critic, argued that

today, the profession of urban design is almost wholly preoccupied with reproduction, with the creation of urban disguises. Whether in its master incarnation at the ersatz Main Street of Disneyland, in the phoney historic festivity of a Rouse marketplace, or the gentrified architecture of the “reborn” Lower East Side, this elaborate apparatus is at pains to assert its ties to the kind of city life it is in the process of obliterating ... The architecture of [New York] is almost

purely semiotic, playing the game of grafted signification, theme park building. Whether it represents generic historicity or generic modernity, such design is based on the same calculus as advertising, the idea of pure imageability, oblivious to the real needs and traditions of those who inhabit it. Welcome to Cyburbia. (1992: xiv)

Numerous design critics, journalists, and academics have identified other persistent negative themes of postmodern urban design. These include the privatization of public space (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee 1998; Boyer 1994); dis-investment in the public realm (Sennett 1990; Pawley 1974); the social exclusion – even social apartheid – of gentrification (Smith and Williams 1986; Smith 1996); the preoccupation with the defence of property, citizen surveillance, and the creation of the fortress city (Davis 1990); the pastiche, facadism or “facodomy,” and Frankenstein effects of postmodern stylings (Huxtable 1976; Boyer 1994); and the over-decoration, over-furnishing, and over-landscaping of public space punctuated by corporately commissioned public art of dubious quality (Relph 1988). David Harvey summarized it thus: “Fiction, fragmentation, collage and eclecticism, all suffused with a sense of ephemerality and chaos, are, perhaps, the themes that dominate in today’s practices of architecture and urban design” (Harvey 1989: 98). Critics of postmodern design, however, generally ignore the positive benefits ensuing from the full range of planning and design initiatives, plans, policies, and review processes of the last three decades, which have been enjoyed by a large proportion of urban populations. Among them are:

- a concerted mending of the historic fabric of cities to restore a coherence to urban form
- a reclamation of city streets for pedestrian use, and the creation of new public spaces
- the reconnection of central cities to their waterfronts and their adjacent neighbourhoods – to create more possibilities for walking and cycling for community and leisure
- the restoration of historic districts and the protection and re-use of historic landmarks
- private development that is now more likely to respect the scale, grain, and character of the locality and to reinforce its positive rather than its negative qualities.

Some critics have tried to articulate “a postmodernism of resistance” against “a postmodernism of reaction” in a bid to reclaim the positive aspects of the movement as a basis for contemporary design practice (i.e., Frampton 1985).

They focus on resisting placelessness, reinforcing the public realm, and going beyond the purely visual preoccupations of design to reassert the values of community, multi-sensory stimulation, and sustainability.

Postmodern urban design theory was translated into new regulatory instruments and analytical methodologies as the focus of activity shifted from public sector urban design to the regulation of private development. Urban design plans became increasingly common, underpinned with image studies, view analyses, pedestrian surveys, public space inventories, and urban-form analyses (Southworth 1989). New plan policies and design guidelines were derived from syntheses of the urban design literature and refined through review experience, being extended from downtown to established residential districts. Zoning regulations were revised to accommodate urban design objectives, to respond to the diversity of urban forms in the city, and to replicate desired urban forms and architectural treatments (Wakeford 1990). Design guidelines were developed for public spaces, alongside streetscape and landscape manuals (Barnett 1982). The technical emphasis of these documents was variously matched by innovations in review bodies, procedures, expert and public involvement, policy evaluation, and the addition of design skills in the planning function (Shirvani 1981, 1992; Punter 1999a). The stage was set for thoroughgoing critiques of review processes and the development of clear principles to guide best practice. By the late 1980s such innovations were coming under strong scrutiny from academics (Lai 1988; Costonis 1989) and facing direct challenges from professional bodies and development interests, and more sophisticated and accountable approaches to design review were being sought (Scheer 1994).

### **Canadian Urbanism**

These changes have shaped Canadian cities in similar, but also quite different, ways. Of course Canada had a much “kinder, gentler form” of urbanism than that of the United States (Garreau 1991: 471) and a much more even distribution of affluence, better social and community services, and a better public school system. Its cities and neighbourhoods are younger and have not been riven by racial tension and ghettoization, not least because urban ethnicity is more diverse, social minorities are smaller and more affluent, and there is less crime, especially of the violent sort. The public sphere has been less eroded by neoconservative politics (Lemon 1985: 12), although this is changing, particularly in Ontario and Alberta. So Canadian planning and urban design are working in a much less polarized society where the social welfare safety net is still largely in place, despite the progressive retreat of the federal and most provincial governments from funding social housing. Canadian cities shared the general postwar North American boosterist, business-led

municipal politics of the 1950s and 1960s, and its drive to expand and modernize the city through infrastructure investment – especially downtown freeways – and large-scale commercial redevelopment.

Many had ambitious urban renewal plans, hatched in the 1950s, that sought extensive clearances of nineteenth-century housing, but these were comparatively slow to start. The edges of the downtown core had not been extensively cleared for commercial redevelopment or ravaged by freeways, nor had they been plagued by disinvestment and large-scale abandonment of housing. Indeed, in the late 1960s they were in the early stages of being recolonized by middle-class residents filling the new service jobs in the private sector downtown and in the public sector (government, health, education) on its margins. These young childless couples, highly educated and predominantly employed in the well-paid quaternary services, were joined by large numbers of older families and empty-nesters keen to enjoy living in diverse neighbourhoods, preferably with a heritage character, in close proximity to downtown or midtown, which retained a wide range of social, recreational, commercial, and cultural facilities (Ley 1996; Caulfield 1994).

Opposition to large-scale unsympathetic redevelopment of the downtown developed rapidly in the second half of the 1960s (Sewell 1993). Resistance to urban renewal came from low-income residents who would be displaced, but was strongly reinforced by middle-class support so that, by 1969, the federal government had abandoned its renewal funding and, more regrettably, its public housing programs. By 1972 it had initiated instead neighbourhood improvement and residential rehabilitation programs, along with support for non-profit and cooperative housing. David Ley characterizes this change as “a new urbanism of participatory places supplanting the conventional shaping of authoritarian spaces” (1996: 224). Middle-class opposition was particularly focused on high-rise apartment redevelopment, the market’s response to the growing demand for housing downtown. High-rise apartment development directly threatened the better residential neighbourhoods and led to community demands to reduce density by rezoning (i.e., downzoning) to protect existing character and housing stock. Municipal councils found these pressures politically irresistible. Opposition intensified to any further downtown or cross-town freeways that would slice through such neighbourhoods, while the heritage lobby pressed for extensive designation of historic buildings or, better still, of historic districts.

By the end of the 1960s the ideology of preservation and neighbourhood planning, of the livable city and a socially mixed, compact, and diverse central area, had become a major plank of urban reform. This movement opposed business- and developer-led politicians from the old guard who had controlled cities in the postwar era and who advocated rapid development.

The introduction of reform politics into major Canadian cities in the early 1970s brought immediate changes in housing policy, planning policy, and zoning, and with it the rejection of modernist approaches to urban design and architecture, although it did not fundamentally affect the pursuit of commercial development (Sewell 1993; Hardwick 1994). The introduction of a much higher level of citizen participation in planning – as in many other areas of local governance – led to demands for heritage programs, carefully tailored zoning designations, design guidelines, neighbourhood improvement programs, new parks and greening initiatives, and traffic calming. Citizen participation transformed planning policies, processes, and procedures. Rapid gentrification of the poorer downtown neighbourhoods consolidated these initiatives but also began to reduce the social diversity and mix of neighbourhoods, even to the extent of preventing the insertion of sympathetically designed social housing units in some neighbourhoods. The conflict between neighbourhood livability and housing affordability became a major issue but by then, the reform movement was losing its commitment to social goals and its control over municipal governments (Ley 1996; Lewinberg 1985).

In the 1980s Canadian municipalities faced problems finding areas where major residential intensification could take place without incurring forceful citizen opposition. They did not need to embark on policy initiatives for gentrification as American cities did because it was already proceeding apace. The fringes of downtown and midtown offered important opportunities that were exploited, particularly in the late 1980s, when a deep recession led to the collapse of demand for new offices and commercial space. Older and declining but accessible industrial areas became the main target for high-density residential rezoning. Redevelopment of rail, port, and industrial lands was sought by entrepreneurial senior governments and municipal councils, in partnership with large-scale corporations and developers, to accommodate an affluent population. In Vancouver, Canada's selective immigration policy (in particular the creation of the "business" immigrant in 1984), insecurities in Hong Kong in the late 1980s, and citizen unrest in China in 1989 collectively stimulated in-migration and the high-rise condominium market in particular. Investment in housing accelerated the globalization of Canadian urban property markets, helping to defray the effects of a prolonged economic recession.

In the 1990s the gentrification of Canadian central cities continued apace despite significant economic difficulties. Office development almost dried up in central business districts in the 1990s, but redevelopment for high-rise residential condominiums and rentals proceeded on the margins of the rezoned rail, port, and industrial lands, colonizing areas formerly zoned commercial. Meanwhile, social housing production was severely depleted by withdrawal

of senior governments' funding. The pursuit of affordable housing became a major planning concern – one difficult to achieve, given municipal budgets – and social exclusion intensified, resulting in a crisis in homelessness. Many commentators note that the critical politics that accompanied the reform movement and the planning programs of the early 1970s were supplanted by a much more individualized, consumerist orientation toward lifestyle, leisure, culture, and conviviality. Carefully linking politics, society, and landscape, David Ley notes: “The erosion of the redistributive arm of the state leaves an unmediated aestheticism paired with vigorous entrepreneurialism. The outcome of this liaison is the release of a forceful culture of consumption, the unleashing of the pleasure principle” (Ley 1996: 333). Affordable housing sites remained undeveloped, and the new neighbourhoods were socially exclusive, lacking the land-use diversity, varied activities, services, and incubating businesses that create a truly urbane environment. More positively, there was a heavy public investment in new parks, waterfronts, cycling and walking paths, greenways, and public art, which was matched by private investment in fitness clubs, cafés and bars, clubs, restaurants, art galleries, and boutique or festival shopping to create more convivial cities. For the critics, the contemporary urban preoccupations are consumption rather than community. Urbanity has taken on a particular aesthetic dimension through popular architecture, urban design, arts festivals, sports or cultural events, and local tourism (Ley 1996: 298-339; Berelowitz 1997, 1998).

Urban design policy and review processes have reached new levels of sophistication and achieved some striking and widely admired new streetscapes and largely private amenities. But doubt and disquiet remain about the kind of city that is being created. Participatory citywide planning efforts have attempted to negotiate an acceptance of nodes of denser service and residential uses and the intensification of development on arterial roads in the central city residential neighbourhoods, but many residents groups, representing mostly single families, remain resistant. Sustainability concerns, focused on air pollution, environmental health, water quality, and the retention and extension of natural areas within the urban environment have been incorporated into plans, but more radical policies to restrain traffic or promote energy-efficient building have been dropped or deferred. The Canadian new urbanist design agenda includes the drive for more compact suburbs and neotraditional settlements, but it is significantly different from its American counterpart in being focused primarily on inner-city and downtown, medium- to high-density residential development, rather than suburban master planning. The latter does exist, for instance, in the Greater Toronto area. The new urbanist agenda delivers the attractive living environments that existing homeowners want, but not the affordable environments that new households need.

### **The Pursuit of Better Design Review Practices**

These broader, more profound critiques of urban planning, urban design, and its resultant landscapes did not have a direct impact on urban design as public policy in North America at large. Some politicians and planners were aware of the dangers of the aestheticizing city planning, but most recognized their limited powers to influence the strong economic and social processes that were shaping urban form. The criticisms of design policies and review with which they had to deal were promulgated not by radical academics and architectural critics, or even aggrieved members of the public, but primarily by the development industry and frustrated architects. Developers and their designers objected to the delay and design costs incurred in review, the reviewers' lack of skills, and the susceptibility of the process to political and bureaucratic manipulation. There were objections to the interference of lay people in the design process and the dominance of personal rather than public interest in their protests. American architects saw design review as a violation of the First Amendment regarding freedom of speech and noted the tendency of review to encourage mediocrity, pastiche, mimicry, and facadism. They objected to the lack of clear principles and pre-established criteria for review and the lack of due process in review processes (Scheer and Preiser 1994: 3-9). Some architects considered design review to be a "good concept, but with serious flaws" (Gordon, quoted in Scheer 1994: 1), and others noted that it could be effective, substantially improving many projects but also raising costs (Schuster 1990).

The academic critique emerged in the later 1980s. Researchers systematically outlined the failings of design review and tried to reconstruct a set of processes that would not only be fair and efficient for applicants and effective for municipalities, but obviate the criticisms made of so much postmodern urban design (Lai 1988; Blaesser 1994; Scheer 1994). Richard Lai, drawing on detailed studies of New York City and San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s, recommended a set of principles as a basis on which future practices could be established. The more recent concerns of other researchers elaborate and extend these principles. Figure 1 sets out twelve principles that ought to guide the establishment of urban design as public policy. They have been recast here into four groups of concerns and require a minimum of elaboration.

Under community vision, good practice would seek to establish a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the many facets of design quality and environmental beauty as defined by a broad public. This might be expressed in some kind of design plan that had both public and development industry support and was regularly reviewed. For the design dimension of planning and zoning, good practice would establish a multi-faceted approach to design quality going beyond mere review to create incentives for good design

**Figure 1** Principles for progressive urban design review**Community Vision**

- 1 Committing to a comprehensive and coordinated vision of environmental beauty and design (Brennan's Law) (Lai 1988: 426).
- 2 Developing and monitoring an urban design plan with community and development industry support and periodic review (Lai 1988: 429).

**Design, Planning, and Zoning**

- 3 Harnessing the broadest range of actors and instruments (i.e., tax, subsidy, land acquisition) to promote better design (Lai 1988: 430-31).
- 4 Mitigating the exclusionary effects of control strategies and urban design regulation (Lai 1988: 430).
- 5 Integrating zoning into planning and addressing the limitations of zoning (Lai 1988: 431-32).

**Broad, Substantive Design Principles**

- 6 Maintaining a commitment to urban design that goes well beyond elevations and aesthetics to embrace amenity, accessibility, community, vitality, and sustainability (Scheer 1994: 9).
- 7 Basing guidelines on generic design principles and contextual analysis, and articulating desired and mandatory outcomes (Blaesser 1994: 50).
- 8 Accommodating organic spontaneity, vitality, innovation, and pluralism, and not attempting to control all aspects of community design (Lai 1988: 428; Blaesser 1994: 50).

**Due Process**

- 9 Identifying clear a priori roles for urban design intervention (Lai 1988: 425; Scheer 1994: 6-7).
- 10 Establishing proper administrative procedures with written opinions to manage administrative discretion, and with appropriate appeal mechanisms (Lai 1988: 427; Scheer 1994: 3-4).
- 11 Implementing an efficient, constructive, and effective permitting process (Scheer 1994: 5-6, 7).
- 12 Providing appropriate design skills and expertise to support the review process (Scheer 1994: 4-5; Lai 1988: 431).

or heritage or environmental conservation, by means of fiscal devices, public investments, and land acquisitions. Zoning would be carefully integrated with planning objectives to improve design quality and accommodate the necessary changes of form and use. Ameliorative measures would be taken to mitigate the tendency for urban design initiatives to gentrify areas or to exclude the less affluent. In terms of design principles and policies, good practice would not be preoccupied just with the external appearance of development and the control of elevations but would take a deeper view of environmental quality, embracing such concepts as safety, sustainability, and residents' amenity. Design policies and guidelines would be based on widely accepted generic design principles, but would be tailored to the locality through contextual analysis, and would clearly establish what was required as against what was advised. Such policies and guidelines would not be over-prescriptive and would allow design imagination, innovation, and pluralism to flourish. Finally, good practice would be based on due process with clear rules for intervention, proper administrative procedures to manage discretion, clear records of decisions, and appeal mechanisms. The permitting system would be efficient and positive, conducted by personnel with appropriate design skills and expertise.

Overall it is the exclusionary tendency of design review and postmodern design practice that deserves the most attention and that has most exercised such radical critics as Harvey (1989), Sorkin (1992), Davis (1990), and Lai (1988: 178). These best practice principles, based on widely researched critiques of American practice, provide a corrective to much existing practice, and a framework for the examination and evaluation of Vancouver's planning system and its design achievements that follows.

### **Using the Book**

This book is a study of Vancouver's planning and design review regimes: how they were invented; how they work; the new buildings, projects, streets, and spaces they have produced; and the broader changes they have induced in the urban landscape. It is a study of development pressures and political responses, of planning policies and the response of designers and their clients. It is a study in part of the roles, relationships, and interactions between politicians and bureaucrats; planning, engineering, and park staff; planners, architects, and developers; and journalists, design critics, and the Vancouver public. In short, this book presents an exemplar of urban design as public policy over the last three decades of the twentieth century, seeking in Vancouver's achievement lessons for Anglo-American planning practice and urban design at large.

This book is intended primarily for planners and urban designers who are interested in new ways to regulate urban form and urban design to create better cities, and are always on the look out for new exemplars. It may also be of interest to Canadian urbanists who to date have no comprehensive study of contemporary planning and urban design and its impact on the contemporary cityscape of a major city. They also have very little popular or academic literature on their urban design practices, despite the sophisticated controls that operate in numerous cities. Vancouverites at large, particularly members of residents associations and other urban activist organizations, may find the evolution and critique of the city's review processes of interest, and enjoy comparing their evaluations of contemporary developments with those of the author. Likewise, the city's development and professional design communities can compare their personal experience of working within the system with the broader assessment of the city's discretionary processes and their achievements offered in these chapters. Certainly local planning, development, and architecture students should find the comprehensive overview of city planning practices and the incorporation of urban design and architecture perspectives useful and a departure point for their own researches and projects.

Following the first chapter, which introduces Vancouver, the book is structured in three parts, examining the emergence and refinement of the city's planning and design practices over the period from 1970 to 2000. Part 1 presents pivotal reforms of planning in Vancouver that occurred in the 1970s. Part 2 explores four essential aspects of Vancouver's achievement: the conservation of single-family residential neighbourhoods; citizen participation in the creation of a citywide, then neighbourhood, vision; megaproject developments on False Creek and Burrard Inlet waterfronts; and strategies for a livable downtown. Part 3 presents an evaluation of permit process and development reforms and a detailed analysis of the operation of design review. The book concludes with a four-part evaluation of Vancouver's urban design and planning achievement.

**Chapter 1** sets Vancouver's physical, socioeconomic, environmental, and political contexts in relation to urban planning and design.

**Chapter 2** describes the changes in Vancouver politics in the early 1970s that ushered in the vision of a "livable city" and associated reforms by a new local party. It explains how discretionary zoning and permit processing were reinvented, alongside a range of policy and practice innovations that laid the foundations for the Vancouver achievement. The development of False Creek South as a model residential community is examined in some detail as the embodiment of the ethos of the "livable city."

**Chapter 3** explains the completely discretionary 1975 downtown plan for renewing the central business district and its design controls. It illustrates federal and municipal initiatives in neighbourhood planning, with ensuing conflicts between the goals of livability and affordability in rapidly gentrifying neighbourhoods and tensions between public participation and council decision making. The rise of residents associations in neighbourhoods on the margins of downtown coincided with the availability of federal funding for neighbourhood improvement.

**Chapter 4** shifts the focus onto Vancouver's single-family neighbourhoods and the invention of new forms of zoning demanded by residents to protect neighbourhood character. The fierce defence of residents' sense of place and heritage resulted in a privatization of public planning to create neighbourhood-determined zoning. This clearly exclusive initiative threatens the city's ability to intensify residential neighbourhoods in a rational manner and creates a time-consuming permitting process that cannot be maintained. However, it proved to be effective in improving the design quality of new housing.

**Chapter 5** describes preparations in the early 1990s for Vancouver's first city-wide plan, with an emphasis on thoroughgoing public participation and community visioning. This process teased out a consensus vision of a city of neighbourhood centres and integrated a range of policy initiatives supporting focused intensification. The initial stages of the implementation of neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood visioning and management are discussed and their tensions highlighted.

**Chapter 6** focuses on the largest of Vancouver's residential megaproject developments on the north and east shores of False Creek and on the south shore of Burrard Inlet downtown. Several key planning innovations emerged through these megaprojects, including a system of high-quality public facility benefits, a park and seawall path network that now encircles the downtown peninsula, and the tower and townhouse urban form. In these projects, the cooperative planning model was invented, in which a developer and design team works in partnership with a city corporate team (planning, housing, engineering, and park staff) in an integrated process that includes extensive citizen participation and detailed design review.

**Chapter 7** returns to downtown and its margins to examine the aftermath of the 1991 Central Area plan. It looks at the high-density residential intensification of Triangle West and Downtown South upslope of the waterfront megaprojects, and the revitalization of adjacent neighbourhoods. The challenges in the Downtown Eastside dramatically illustrate the processes of social exclusion operating despite policies to protect low-cost housing in this part of the city. A pernicious concentration of health, welfare, and public safety issues obstructs regeneration initiatives. In the downtown core, conflicting

visions for the public realm pose challenges for city planners as much as for developers and their designers.

**Chapter 8** is a detailed account of the pressures to reform permit processing, and the department's response, over the last twenty years. How the city administration developed a fair and efficient system of permitting through a sequence of reviews is discussed, including the current review of development and building regulation. Parallel concerns over the financing of infrastructure and the extension of development levies and community-amenity contributions to pay for a range of basic services and quality neighbourhood facilities and amenities are discussed. These are two areas where new processes are being invented to sustain the "livable city."

**Chapter 9** explains the current operation of the Development Permit Board and the Urban Design Panel and their inputs into improving the design of development. It reveals the checks and balances that have been introduced into the discretionary processes and illustrates how the various experts and specialists involved collectively work to achieve high design standards. It considers the verdicts of the Urban Design Panel on potential design outcomes in some depth.

**Chapter 10** offers a synthesis of how Vancouver has accomplished its urban renaissance and urban design achievements. A set of principles of good practice for urban design policy (see Figure 1) is used to evaluate the city's current processes and practices. The book concludes with a look at the planning and design challenges ahead.

Most chapters in the book have a specific geographical focus, as development and planning activity shift toward particular neighbourhoods. But most also explore a specific set of themes that relates to the preceding discussion about good design policy practices, the evolution of particular built forms, and the variables that explain policy and development outcomes. Issues within and between each chapter are explored in a broadly chronological account. To assist the reader, a chronology of key planning initiatives, policy documents, major developments, and local and senior governments' politics can be found in Appendix 2. Organization charts of the planning department, identifying key individuals and departmental roles, can be found in Appendix 3.