

**VAN
COU
VER
ISM**

**LARRY
BEASLEY**
WITH A
PROLOGUE BY
FRANCES BULA

point
PRESS



*To all the men and women of Vancouver who
gave their hearts and souls, their energy and
creativity, to the reinvention of our beloved
city – all are colleagues, all are friends, all
are personal inspirations to me.*

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Vancouverism is the story of many hands inventing the city in concert.

PART 1

WHAT IS

VANCOUVERISM?



1.1 Vancouverism is the way that one city, Vancouver, on the west coast of Canada, decided to transform itself to be attractive, competitive, and resilient for the future. The result, shown here along the north shore of False Creek downtown, will be your adventure to discover in the following pages.

SETTING THE STAGE

VANCOUVERISM – HOW COULD the name of a town come to be identified with a whole way of building cities? Well, in fact, it is not a new movement, as popular lore suggests, but it is a unique way that one city – Vancouver, in Canada – reinvented itself (see Figure 1.1). It is a concept that this one city crafted from its own roots, from many sources, and from the creative thinking of its own people. As a result, modern Vancouver turned out differently from almost any other city of its time. It followed a trajectory that was actually counter-intuitive to the common wisdom of the day. I want to tell the story of this place and this people and this time. That is what this book is all about.

This book presents an insider's view. It describes the unfolding of events, the shaping of new ideas, their application on the ground, the continuing challenges, and what the city may aspire to in the future – all from the perspective of a person who lived the drama and holds an undiminished passion for the place. These events and ideas redefined the urban culture of what has become a pacesetter city in Canada and North America. Vancouver is now an exemplar for cities around the world, which are in their own quest to find new forms, meaning, relevance, competitive edge, and environmental peace. This book will not be a history, although I will offer a perspective on the precedents that became the foundation of Vancouverism. This will not be a policy guide, although I will describe the policy framework that composes Vancouverism. This will not be an evaluation, although I will offer commentary on, as well as a critique of, the various tenets and oversights of Vancouverism. This will not be an individual memoir, although I will chronicle my personal experiences in order to make the story

come alive, as only an insider could do. After all is said and done, what I offer most of all is just a fascinating urban story, which I hope anyone might find interesting, of a city that faced the unknown, seized its destiny, and created the future it wanted.

Partly, this story will record what happened during the frenetic years when Vancouverism emerged, to separate truth from fiction, at least from the perspective of one person who was on the scene from the beginning to the end, and who feels that his own fictions may be closer to the truth than those of total outsiders. Partly, this story will describe a way of doing things in city building that other planners and citizens elsewhere may find useful, although I would be the last person to recommend that ideas be exported in whole to another place. I do not think that works. But good ideas can be retrofitted to a new setting, and cautions can certainly help others to avoid a bad idea that may look good at first glance.

The purpose of this opening chapter, following on from the historical essay by Frances Bula, is to outline the conceptual framework of Vancouverism – a definition, a geography, a time frame, a summary of its challenges and focus, and several of the key attitudes that give Vancouverism its own special flavour.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR VANCOUVERISM

No one knows for sure who first coined and used the word “Vancouverism.” Some credit John Punter and his seminal work *The Vancouver Achievement* as ground zero.¹ Others say they first read it in the media, perhaps as a pejorative. Some say it was an architect’s shorthand for the simple notion of a building composed of a thin apartment tower sitting on a podium of townhouses (see Figure 1.2). That is surely an iconic image of Vancouverism that is special to this city, which I will talk about later. But it is only part of the picture – not the whole picture. Perhaps the origin of the word matters less than what it has come to mean, both for the general strategies of modern city change and perhaps even more so for the people who worked on it and lived through the trials and tribulations of its invention.

In essence, Vancouverism is an ethos for how to think about a livable, sustainable city, a formula for how to craft that vision on the ground, a process for how to determine the specifics of the vision, and a model for how to replicate the components over and over again to become the very image of a place.

The ethos of Vancouverism embraces deliberate planning, with the local government in the driver’s seat, for a result that meets not just developer business needs but also the dreams of all the people who share the space. We were proud

1.2 The tall thin tower rising from a rowhouse podium extending along the street is the first vision most people have of Vancouverism. This story will illustrate that our mission has been so much richer. From this typical example on Beach Avenue downtown, we will unfold a picture of many dimensions.



of our declaration that “the City plans the city” – it is not determined solely by the development sector or special-interest groups or powerful individuals or companies. Policies and design solutions have been adopted through the hot drama of local democracy.

The formula for Vancouverism is all about livability and, more recently, sustainability, with hundreds of moving parts. It is a formula for how buildings, open spaces, movement, and character come together with services, facilities, and infrastructure to satisfy users – a physical design expression. It is a formula for how a society can be mixed up and diversified to yield unexpected benefits and pleasures – a social-policy expression. It is a formula for how land can be used more efficiently, with densification tied to high quality – an economic policy and design expression. More recently, it has become a formula for retrofitting an urban system to stop diminishing its natural setting – an environmental fix. And there are compatible mindsets behind this formula that I will come back to.

At its heart, the process of Vancouverism is inclusive. To pursue its objectives, it is necessary to cooperate; it is necessary to be multi-disciplinary; and it is necessary to embrace wide and incessant public engagement. Partnerships must form that are not typical in the municipal culture of North America – partnerships of capital and government and community power. Vancouverism seems to flounder when disputes and antagonisms overwhelm the discourse because the lowest common denominator that often results simply does not



deliver on what it promises to do. It is necessary not just to work with market forces but to bring attention and solutions to people, situations, and aspects that are not well handled by the market – and especially for victims of the ebb and flow of the market.

At any one time, the model of Vancouverism is complete for the needs of the moment, but it is also always inherently incomplete, so it must be applied with care. It articulates a comprehensive proposition, not one that covers only one or a few sides of a situation. It is always there to be used and, better yet, to be built upon. But it is a flexible, changeable, and adaptable model. It is in a state of continuous realization, formulated in round after round of invention and experimentation that have assembled a puzzle of elements into a coherent proposition that at any point in time has been useful but is always ready to be further embellished. It looks different and is applied differently in different circumstances. It originated in a struggle for urban rebirth, offering clarity in a time of confusion about how the city might be rearranged or fixed. Now, it

- ◀ 1.3 Metro Vancouver sits on an alluvial plain of the mighty Fraser River, edged to the north by the mountains and Burrard Inlet and to the south by the us border.
- 1.4 Here at the Bayshore Hotel, downtown, adjacent to Stanley Park, the magnificent mountain and water setting of Vancouver is dramatic. In the foreground is Coal Harbour Park, with its underground community centre hidden beneath the lawn.



struggles for environmental reconciliation and better human fulfillment, along with the increasingly elusive requirement for affordability. The learning curve of Vancouverites has been a pleasure to watch.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF VANCOUVERISM

Our greater city-region sits within a break in the mountains caused by the vast expanse of Burrard Inlet and the alluvial delta of the Fraser River (see Figure 1.3). Urban development, agriculture, and green open spaces sprawl within this opening, blanketing the plain, extending up the valley, and edging along the mountainsides. It stretches south to the American border on the 49th parallel. It is the largest urban area in the province of British Columbia, anchoring the west coast of Canada as the nation's third-largest metropolis. The actual City of Vancouver, off-centre in the region in a westerly direction, is directly hemmed in by the inlet and the river. The historic downtown is even further squeezed on its own small peninsula, which is almost an island. A majestic backdrop of mountains and the close proximity of water are pervasive in anyone's experience of the place (see Figure 1.4). It is undoubtedly one of the world's most beautiful settings, although the weather has its ups and downs – rarely too cold or snowy, seldom very hot, usually warm and sunny one minute and cool and grey the next. The beauty of the setting beguiles you while the climate claims and abuses you in turns. The very fickleness of the place makes it your mistress –

an important truth to understand as you read this story. So let me pause to offer a lyrical description of what this place is like, so well expressed by the late Arthur Erickson, Canada's greatest modern architect and a dear personal friend of mine:

What is it about Vancouver that keeps many of us inescapably under its spell? Is it because we succumb so heedlessly to the sheer beauty of its setting – to the haunting melancholy of a summer evening's light or to the spring air washed with sea salt and the sap of alder? Yet this perpetual game of the senses – taunting us each time as if to test our loyalty – helps us endure the repeated rejections when our ardour is cooled by the awaiting downpour. Then, when memory of the physical beauty and its previous seduction is dimmed by the long grey aftermath where form, colour, light and scent give way to leaden skies – suddenly at the depth of our despair, out of formlessness, shapes begin to appear. Light shines on them and an entrancing world appears once more to beguile us ... Deep down and undeniably we know that it is the sheer transcendence of sensual splendor that keeps us constant even though the epiphany depends upon the utter dreariness that precedes it.²

To put it simply, the geography creates an atmosphere that is challenging and magical, all at the same time.

But, pulling our feet back to the ground, I will turn to the various places in which the experiment and experience of Vancouverism has unfolded. Throughout this story, most of the action takes place in the many districts and sub-areas that comprise the actual City of Vancouver, particularly in the inner-city. Without a basic orientation, the geography can be quite confusing. So, let me pause to introduce the names and locations of the key spots that will become familiar as our story unfolds. Since a picture is worth a thousand words, maps are provided here as a ready ongoing reference.

The region, officially called Metro Vancouver but often referred to as the Lower Mainland or Greater Vancouver, includes some twenty on-shore municipalities (see Figure 1.5). Metro Vancouver has about 2.5 million people. The City of Vancouver, the pre-eminent local jurisdiction, nudges Canada's largest port on the north, which commands major stretches of Burrard Inlet. The city sits proudly on a lovely sweep of water called English Bay, extending northwesterly from this urban shore, which offers delightful civic beaches. The city embraces a glimmering recreational water basin at its heart known as False Creek. The city's



1.5 This map shows Vancouver's regional context. Officially called Metro Vancouver, it is also known as the Lower Mainland or Greater Vancouver. Boundaries of the separate municipalities are shown. The city of Vancouver sits at the western edge of the region. Other cities include Burnaby, New Westminster, Richmond, Surrey, Delta, Coquitlam, Port Moody, North Vancouver, and West Vancouver. The port and airport are starred.

eastern edge is marked by a street called, not surprisingly, Boundary Road. About 650,000 people live in Vancouver.

The inner-city, or core city, is comprised of several features (see Figure 1.6). The downtown peninsula, which juts to the northwest, is rounded out by Stanley Park at its tip. Stretching east from the neck of this peninsula over to Clark Drive is the Downtown Eastside, and south of that is an area of one-time tidal flats, which is called, predictably, the False Creek Flats. Two water-oriented districts flank the southern edge of False Creek – what was first referred to as False Creek South but is now commonly called Southwest False Creek and the more recent Southeast False Creek, also known as the Athletes Village of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games (the moniker of “the Village” is sometimes added to or substituted for its name by those who wish to especially remember its famous initial mission). Outside the inner-city, the old streetcar neighbourhoods extend to the south and east, with Kitsilano to the southwest, Mount Pleasant to the southeast, and Grandview-Woodland to the east.

And, lastly, the downtown peninsula, the main stage for much of this tale, is comprised of several distinct districts and features (see Figure 1.7). At its heart is the official downtown, the traditional business centre of the city and region. This is bounded on the west by the residential West End, which extends to Stanley Park. To the east, the area generally called the Downtown Eastside contains a series of distinct sub-areas: Gastown (the original historic townsite), Chinatown (once the only legal precinct for Chinese immigrants, and also very historic), and Strathcona. The new development areas that dominate our story include the following: Coal Harbour (north waterfront of the peninsula) and the nearby upland district called Triangle West; False Creek North (south waterfront of the peninsula) and its upland districts of historic Yaletown and Downtown South; and False Creek East. A new area just coming together is Northeast False Creek, tucked between the historic districts and False Creek, at the foot of the downtown escarpment.

It all seems very complicated at the outset, but in fact, one of the many personalities of Vancouver that you will come to appreciate as you read this story is that it is enjoyed and understood in human-sized precincts. Each area has a name, a character, a history, and its own set of actors and myths.

THE TIME FRAME OF VANCOUVERISM

My time frame for the emergence and flourishing of Vancouverism is specified here, but it is a tentative one intended to be taken with a grain of salt.

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