

PLANNING ON THE EDGE

Vancouver and the Challenges
of Reconciliation, Social Justice,
and Sustainable Development

Edited by Penny Gurstein
and Tom Hutton



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John Friedmann
1926–2017

Professor John Friedmann ranks as one of the most accomplished and influential urban scholars of the last century. His path-breaking work on the formative processes and signifiers of global cities shaped an important genre of urban studies. Over a remarkably productive career, John Friedmann's oeuvre includes a broad scholarship, uniquely insightful and always concerned with how planners, citizens, and scholars can help shape better cities and bring about better lives for the residents of cities and communities. Following a distinguished career at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he contributed to that university's high standing as a public institution of excellence in research and teaching in urban studies, planning, and public policy, John joined us here at the School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP) at the University of British Columbia as Honorary Professor. This was no mere titular appointment. John was active to the last in graduate education, especially contributing to greater rigour in our doctoral program. He continued his own scholarship, including original work on Chinese urbanization, surely one of the most salient research fields in the social sciences, humanities, and urban and regional planning and policy studies. John enlightened us with numerous lectures and attended many of our faculty and student presentations, always offering constructive suggestions on issues of research scope, methodology, and publication possibilities. He willingly undertook the demanding task of carefully reading initial drafts of the papers included in this volume – greatly to the benefit of the respective authors and to the overall quality of the book, as well as contributing a typically incisive essay. For all these reasons, we wholeheartedly dedicate this book to John: the best of teachers, scholars, and mentors among us.

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PROLOGUE

Twenty-One Suburbs in Search of a City

A View of the Vancouver
Metropolitan Area

JOHN FRIEDMANN

Urban geographers, sociologists, and planners have studied the dynamic spaces surrounding large cities for a long time (Dickinson 1947). In the attempt to come to grips with this complex spatial phenomenon in different parts of the world, they have evolved a whole set of new concepts such as *desakota*, *umland*, *periurban*, *urban field*, *edge city*, *zwischenstadt*, among others, which for the layperson remain largely opaque. In a millennial conference with a distinctly economic flavour, Allen J. Scott (2002) proposed the concept of city region as a useful trope for capturing the multi-dimensional aspect of the urban transition, which is the prospect that by the end of the twenty-first century the world as a whole will be spanned by a hierarchical system of urban centres.¹ One of the more prominent of these centres is Vancouver, British Columbia's pre-eminent city region, also known as the Lower Mainland. This region, once a medium-sized central city surrounded by a swarm of twenty-one smaller suburbs, is currently undergoing a period of rapid change, as suburbs are gradually growing together, shedding their profile as primarily dormitories while beginning to acquire distinctly urban characteristics in terms of population density, jobs, transport, communications, and other amenities. Future trend projections by Metro Vancouver, the regional agency, suggest that by mid-century the city region of Vancouver will have grown to become a metropolis exceeding 4 million, a gateway to Asia, and second only to Toronto as Canada's largest urban constellation. My attempt in this prologue is to sketch out this proposition and to look at

some of the evidence that supports it.

Let me begin by situating Vancouver and its metropolitan area within the encompassing bioregion of which it is a part. Some call it Cascadia, but the region is better known as the Pacific Northwest. Across the Canada-US border, it incorporates large swaths of British Columbia, Washington state, and Oregon. Its actual boundaries are none too precise, but before I launch into the urban, which is my main subject here, it may be well to recall that Vancouver is part of an immense ecosystem that has shaped regional culture, local economies, and much else. Encompassing the watersheds of both the Fraser and Columbia Rivers, one of its prominent features are the Canadian Coastal Mountains that also extend into the United States, where they are called the Cascades. Delineating this region has environmental stewardship as its primary goal. Fundamental though it is, I won't take this theme any further here. I mention it simply as a reminder that Cascadia comprises the primary ecological wealth on whose continued health and regenerative power all who live in this region depend.

The metropolitan area of Vancouver extends across the flood plain of the Fraser River Delta. To the north and east it is cradled by the Coastal Range, to the south it is delimited by the international border, and to the west it opens up onto the Strait of Georgia and the string of small islands that hug the 500-kilometre coastline of Vancouver Island, at the southernmost tip of which lies the provincial capital, Victoria. Taken as a whole, it is a tightly interconnected, multi-centric urban region that, with its population of 2.5 million distributed at an average density of about 800 people per square kilometre, we should perhaps begin to call a *regional city*. Together with the closely integrated urban centres on the slopes of the North Shore, the cities of Vancouver, Burnaby, New Westminster, and Richmond comprise the economically dominant part of this regional city. But the municipalities south of the Fraser delta are fast catching up, turning from erstwhile bedroom communities into complete cities that are beginning to challenge Vancouver's regional hegemony. Here I chiefly have in mind Surrey, Langley (City and Township), and White Rock, as well as the gigantic Deltaport container terminal at Roberts Bank, whose major expansion projects are beginning to change the face of the landscape south of the delta. Finally, a significant part of the southern and eastern parts of the metro-region have been set aside as an Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), constituting about a fifth of the total land area. This reserve serves adjacent urban areas in multiple ways and, as I argue below, should be seen as a fully integrated part of the regional city.

Here are a few salient statistics about this emerging regional city:

- Between 1991 and 2011, British Columbia's population grew from 3.3 to 4.4 million, while the Vancouver metropolitan area as a whole, which had accounted for 48 percent of the population of the province at the beginning of this period, gained four percentage points over the twenty years, rising beyond the half-way mark to 52 percent. Provincial population is thus concentrating increasingly in the metropolis, a trend that can be expected to continue.
- By 2041, three decades from the last census, the metro-area is conservatively projected to grow to nearly 3.5 million, thus raising its average demographic density to 1,182 per square kilometre (and 1,418 per square kilometre if we exclude the ALR), making it one of Canada's most compactly settled urban areas. The regional strategy to which all municipalities have signed on assumes that this increase will take place inside the designated "urban containment boundaries." According to present arrangements, the Agricultural Land Reserve is not meant to be used for urban expansion. Though it is currently still under the protection of the ALR Provincial Commission, pressure for more intensive uses in the reserve is likely to increase over the coming decades.
- In 2011, 924,000 denizens of Metro Vancouver's 2.3 million spoke a mother tongue other than English or French, comprising 40 percent of the total population. Chinese speakers accounted for 35 percent of this total, followed by Punjabis with 15 percent. Altogether, two-thirds of the foreign languages spoken in the region were accounted for by only six groups, including, in addition to Chinese and Punjabi, Tagalog, Korean, Farsi, and Hindi. Evidently, metropolitan Vancouver is becoming a multi-lingual cosmopolis, which is increasingly connected through family, commercial, and other ties to places primarily in Asia. The current stream of Asian settlers is expected to continue, with an estimated 30,000–35,000 landed immigrants per year, most of whom will make their home throughout the emerging regional cosmopolis.
- The region's district government has projected the population of the City of Vancouver to 770,000 by 2041. If we include all the communities north of the Fraser River (which I have called the "economically dominant" sub-region), the population is projected to 1.8 million. But the communities south of the river are growing at a considerably faster pace and, by 2041, are expected to reach a total population of 1.3 million. By virtue of their

size, ethnic diversity, and local employment, the former bedroom communities are envisioned to become decidedly more urban.

- Economic growth is unevenly spread across the full range of urban centres. The following data, though not altogether reliable, are from the 2011 census. Taking median family income as a basis for comparison, the range is from West Vancouver's \$84,000 to Vancouver's \$56,000, and declining still further to Langley City's \$50,000. (For comparison, the median for the entire province was \$69,150). In short, half the families in places such as Vancouver and Langley have to manage their lives with an annual median income per person that falls *below* \$22,000 for the first and \$19,000 for the second. For many, these numbers suggest a life lived on the edge of poverty.
- Local employment is becoming increasingly decentred. Here are some indicators projected by the regional agency for 2041: North Shore communities, 109,000; Northeast communities 148,000; Burnaby, 203,000; Delta and Richmond, 259,000; Surrey and White Rock, 301,000; Langley City and Township, 125,000. All of these add up to 1.2 million jobs, which is more than double the City of Vancouver's 482,000. The twenty-one so-called suburbs of metropolitan Vancouver are thus unequivocally growing into complete cities, which is precisely what the regional strategy calls for. But as the region becomes more fully urban, local authorities must be enabled to deal with the multiple problems generated by this process fairly and efficiently, thus posing a series of problems in regional governance whose solution will require the combined efforts of all levels of government over the next few decades.

The projections I have cited are, of course, only rough approximations based on assumptions such as no disruptions from major wars, natural catastrophes, or major global political realignments. They are not predictions so much as informed guesses concerning general trends. But taken together, here is what they mean to me.

Metropolitan Vancouver is becoming a compact, interdependent urban region that is articulated through a complex network of transport and communications. The southern part of the emerging regional city is growing faster than the northern part, with the arms of the Fraser River and Burrard Inlet serving as major divides. Urban and rural are no longer contrasting features in this landscape nor useful analytical categories. As a result of growing local population and employment, the Agricultural Land Reserve

will be under constant pressure to give way to a variety of urban uses. Remember that even year-round agriculture in much of this region requires substantial investment in hothouses and other equipment for intensive agriculture. In that sense, even farming may be considered to be an inherently urban activity.

Perhaps the most important structural changes are occurring in the southern part of the region, where the rapid rise of Surrey and, to a lesser degree, Langley are particularly prominent. This is also the region traversed by the Roberts Bank Rail Corridor, a seventy-kilometre stretch connecting Canada's largest container facility and major coal terminal with the North American rail network. According to TransLink, which is currently making huge investments to facilitate container and coal shipments across this region, 388,000 vehicles cross the railroad tracks on a daily basis, and this number is projected to grow to more than half a million by 2021. This volume of daily traffic, which may well double in the twenty years beyond that cut-off date, is an indicator of the accelerated urbanization process taking place across Delta, Surrey, and Langley. TransLink is currently constructing nine grade separations at critical junctures to prevent the snakelike crawl of freight trains from backing up traffic north to south as well as local traffic, but in the decades ahead, there will no doubt also be a huge volume of heavy trucking generated by the Roberts Bank Superport. The implications of these trends for local urban development are deserving of closer study.

I have already noted the decentring of the urban economy that is intimately related to demographic projections. On the one hand, many settlers from Asian countries are choosing to live in the smaller, more affordable communities in the outlying urban centres, often with the help of fellow nationals. This continuing stream of immigrants brings with it multiple challenges to local authorities as they endeavour to promote the social, economic, and cultural integration of newcomers with already existing populations. Much of the rental housing market, for example, will be under growing pressure to provide more affordable housing. New jobs must be created, poverty alleviated, social tensions reduced, and particular attention paid to the needs of young immigrants as they adjust to Canadian and more specifically to BC culture, with its orientation to the out-of-doors, high levels of social tolerance, First Nations visibility, and sustainability consciousness. These are huge challenges.

Before concluding, I would like briefly to comment on the issue of regional governance to which I have already alluded. The GVRD (Greater Vancouver Regional District), recently re-named Metro Vancouver, was created by the

provincial government as a governing institution for our regional city. Created in 1967, it has multiple functions, but from a planning perspective, perhaps the most relevant is its responsibility for the collaborative process that has resulted in the Regional Growth Strategy, officially adopted by the board in July 2011. It is this document from which much of my information about the region has been drawn. As I read this strategy, what impressed me the most is the sustainability framework that informs it. Here is a relevant quote:

Regional Vision: The highest quality of life embracing cultural vitality, economic prosperity, social justice and compassion, all nurtured in and by a beautiful and healthy natural environment. Achieved by an unshakeable commitment to the well-being of current and future generations and the health of our planet, in everything we do ...

Sustainability Imperatives: Have regard for local and global consequences and long-term impacts. Recognize and reflect the interconnectedness and interdependence of systems. Be collaborative. (Metro Vancouver 2017)

These are noble words, and my overall impression is that the report accurately reflects them. Titled *Shaping Our Future*, it embodies the collective wisdom of those whose signature commits the region's many local communities to this vision. As a collective effort, it is an inspiring document.

Yet we need to remember that the metro-region of Vancouver is a dynamic urban system that is constantly reshaping itself as global, national, and regional forces impinge on it. I have tried to summarize some of these changes here, as the region adjusts to its sustainability imperatives, migratory flows, and fluctuating global markets within a single strategic framework. We may, as the strategy tells us, have a sustainability imperative, but we also have more short-range "imperatives" that have to be brought into balance within the overall planning frame, such as fully integrating – socially, economically, culturally – the hundreds of thousands of immigrants from abroad who will be arriving in the regional city in expectation of a better life, or serving the still unmet imperatives of social justice by reducing existing inequalities that range from First Nations' claims to opening up new channels of social mobility via educational and other reforms specifically aimed at the younger generations.

In a broad sense, the projected changes that will test the region's resolve are fairly certain, but they are not, as such, predictions in a strictly numerical

sense. What local communities will need to think about is how best to prepare for the many different kinds of challenges they suggest. One critical challenge is to strengthen local capabilities for governance, whether through a formal restructuring process (which would require provincial legislation), local job opportunities, special capacity-building courses such as diversity training, reaching out to local immigrant populations, and the like. Such an emphasis, spread throughout the many local governments of the multi-centric metropolis, is only part of the story, however. As we have learned from experience, the devolution of power to local authorities calls for a strengthening of the centre as well.

Here I might mention the assumption by Metro Vancouver as the de facto regional government of new responsibilities with regard to economic development, a function currently *excluded* from its roster of official tasks. Yet economic development is quintessentially a regional issue that requires more than competitive promotion by twenty-one local authorities. Relevant policy research, policy formulation, and methods of implementation are also required. It would make sense to concentrate these functions rather than disperse them to local authorities where they now rest. A second function, surprisingly absent from *Shaping Our Future*, is responsibility for regional disaster management. This is particularly important for a region situated on the Ring of Fire. With global climate change over the next several decades, potential floods and rising sea levels threaten significant portions of the entire region. Like economic development, disaster management is both a local and area-wide responsibility, but the regional component has not yet been officially recognized as a legitimate function of Metro Vancouver.

These and other issues will be discussed in much greater detail in the chapters throughout this volume, which for the first time acknowledges the interconnectedness of the region's multiple urban communities that are rapidly merging into a major cosmopolis on Canada's western rim.

Note

- 1 Recent specifically Canadian contributions include Bourne et al. 2011 and Bradford and Bramwell 2014.

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- Bourne, Larry S., Tom Hutton, Richard G. Shearmur, and Jim Simmons, eds. 2011. *Canadian Urban Regions: Trajectories of Growth and Change*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

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