

It's a pleasure to be here at SALA to foster a conversation about contemporary design with people who are about to take on the reins of our urban and natural environments for the next generation. You are on the cusp of dramatic changes – so you have “very interesting times” ahead of you.

You will see that I call the presentation “*Vancouverism – Messages for Contemporary Urban Design*” – I do this for two reasons.

- First, I will be using my new book – here it is – to offer a quick précis of the unfolding of Vancouverism in my generation – both our successes and the kind of issues that we have left heavy on the ground for your generation.

- Second, I want to talk about design – I use the single word “design”, when what I actually mean is architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design – because you will see that I am an advocate for putting our design prowess much closer together into one integrated practice. I want to talk about the craft of design and some of the blind spots that have crippled my generation from doing a

better job of building human habitats and saving natural ecologies.

Also in this presentation, as you are starting to see, I will be using pictures from my book as illustrations – part of crafting my book was to use my own pictures as much as possible – to offer a kind of photo essay to parallel my themes.

Oh, by the way, UBC Bookstore is here today and I will be very happy to sit with people after the session to talk about the book and sign copies for you.

So let me start by looking back. If I cast my mind back to the 1970s, modern cities were basically falling apart as we had traditionally known them – and, using the then standard models, they were not coming back together as we needed them to do. Cities were in big trouble. This had to do with changing consumer expectations and new technologies – sound familiar? – but, of course, the expectations and technologies were different. Let me remind you of some of the obvious trends we were facing and that I am sure you have heard about since you were kids:

-Because of the car and telephone, the tight pattern of cities was unraveling, so they were spreading like wildfire, gobbling up natural areas and farmland. The automobile ads were wonderful and promised so much for individuals and their families but the reality was very harsh for society as a whole and for the environment.

-Anyone who could was escaping the inner-cities as fast as possible – we talk about the unsafe, unhealthy conditions of the inner-cities of that time that pushed people out, or the healthy suburban lifestyle that pulled people out, or the convenience of the car that made longer trips practical, but one of the biggest reasons was the availability of mortgages and the opportunity for home ownership that could not yet happen with apartments and only with single-family houses, so that is where people went. Today we struggle with affordability, but, looking on the bright side, back then housing was affordable to almost anyone if you had a bit of family discipline – only the very poor were left out of the equation.

-However, if you were poor or disabled or had special needs you were in real trouble back then – public housing

was inadequate and scary and there were few alternatives for living – and without a car you were stuck.

-Mobility was tough if you could not afford a car – the journey to work was long – public transit was rudimentary and pretty uncomfortable – cycling was dangerous with no separate paths – and walking trips for even the basics were becoming longer and longer and finally too long to be practical, so people stopped walking – it became true (and is still true today in developing societies) that people would struggle to secure personal mobility (a car) before they would secure a private toilet – the car was seen as that essential to survival and success.

-Because of the over simplicity of building laws, the whole city was homogenizing – we were losing the amazing complexity that had existed for centuries – zoning laws separated uses, sub-division controls excluding more than they included, building codes became so straight-jacketed that we could not even re-use historic buildings without a real fight – and even parking by-laws became so prescriptive and deterministic that whole buildings were

rendered obsolete or could only be used for a single purpose.

So, downtowns were dying, older inner-neighbourhoods were dying, natural environments at the urban edge were dying, diversity was dying, waste was growing, social isolation was growing, social disparity and segregation were growing, – and there was this weird technological fixation by many people in power who pushed for simple, gross solutions like urban renewal and freeways. This is what we faced when my generation was exactly in the same position as you are today – ready to start our practice and needing to change the world. I started out as a neighbourhood planner, trained in architecture and politics, ultimately taking over planning of downtown right when its transformation started, and then become co-head planner of the city with Dr. Ann McAfee – we were proud to have the first gender-integrated planning service anywhere.

Now, it was almost by accident that Vancouver got an early start on a different way of building a city – we had the West End, but then we faced an economic malaise as our resource industry globalized; and, luckily, we had the right people on the scene with open minds to do a rethink – we were all children of the

“counter-culture 60s” with change on our minds. That, in itself, is an interesting story that I cover in my book but, for today, the point is that we started doing things very differently. In fact, people came to call Vancouver, in the 90s, the “counter-intuitive city” because of things that we adopted that others were not interested in – repopulating our core, living at high density, and foreswearing freeways. Fortunately these are now popular themes but back in the ‘80s, when we started our urban transformation, these were seen as quite peculiar moves. It was somewhat later, but still earlier than most Canadian cities, when Vancouver took off on the green agenda – certainly of limited interest for most civic governments at the time – and, again now a major objective most everywhere. As we pushed this all aggressively through the turn of the century, the word “Vancouverism” was coined to summarize it all – which, of course, is why that is the name of my book.

So what was this new way all about? Well, it gelled over the years as a coherent formula that became known as “smart growth” – here is the basics of the formula – now solidly accepted around the world, but back in the 80s a very peculiar way of looking at things. I posit this formula because it is the foundation of everything we need to talk about today.

I will not be shy – let me say right up front that I feel Vancouverism has many laudable achievements and that it came together to create a very special contemporary city – delightful and amenable and unusually competitive. But let me also not be shy in saying that we continue to have deep problems that require new thinking and new inventions. The Vancouver we see is not yet fully realized as a place and as a culture. Maybe it never will be – maybe that is the nature of cities; they are always evolving, solutions beget other problems, new needs and trends pop up, better ideas are introduced from other places. Is an city ever really “finished”?

The first thing to notice – and this sets Vancouver apart from the more spontaneous approach of most other cities – is that it has all been very deliberate – it is not an accidental city that resulted from just a confluence of public and private forces of change. Actually, some people criticize this, but I think it has been one of the secrets to our advancement. In the book, I talk about how this deliberate approach put the City government in the driver’s seat to guide change and caused the City to have to put the direction of change directly on the table, once we found a consensus about that direction from our people.

Now, getting more specific, while Vancouver's recent experience covers many city-building themes, a few of them are particularly important and special to our city – let me highlight three.

- First theme: the city must be created by design – by collective civic design, not just the art of particular architects or landscape architects.

- The breakthrough for us was to understand that we needed to create a new kind of urban experience to meet public needs but also to open up new demand interest within the private market – and this needed to be a curated experience – so it had to be physically designed, not just expressed in policy.

- We had to tame density and make it appealing – since most people actually hate density – to do that, of course, we had to actually evolve a new housing form that is now closely associated with Vancouverism and that became very popular – the tall thin apartment tower with a podium of townhouses

hugging the sidewalk – built around a lush private courtyard – with all parking tucked away or edited out.

-We had to design with a sense of place – with a focus on neighbourhoods, applying the concept of complete communities and localized scale.

-We had to design-in real desirable alternatives for mobility because the car was so impactful in our limited land area – walking, cycling, and, ultimately better transit became top requirements – cutting back on every kind of traditional accommodation for the car.

-Overall, we just had to meet modern peoples' expectations for high design – which you see in everything we consume in contemporary life (phones, computers, kitchen equipment, clothes) – so all kinds of issues of artfulness and beauty came into play – reflecting the natural beauty of the place – assuring access to nature with view corridors – paying

attention to streetscapes and landscape and park design and public art – and on and on.

-Second theme: the city must be responsible to its citizens and to its environment.

-For buildings, the concept of mutual neighbourliness became important, so the edges of every building are carefully shaped for privacy, safety, noise attenuation and other face-to-face concerns of residents; spaces are even designed specifically to manage urban dogs.

-One of the biggest breakthroughs was to elaborate detailed requirements for housing families with children – widening out housing appeal dramatically for typical families (now over 10,000 children downtown) – proving that, even in North America, families with children can live happily at high density without all the suburban expectations that are normally prioritized.

-We found a way to insinuate lavish community facilities – schools, childcare, recreation centres, libraries, seniors centres, community policing, and special cultural institutions – without a lot of public

spending (did we do enough? – maybe for the middle-class but not for everyone – I will come back to that in a minute).

-When most of the country was cutting back on social housing, we had to do the opposite to make sure lower-income people had a stake in the place and would not just be pushed out (another topic of an incomplete agenda that I will also come back to).

-And, more recently, we have pushed hard on every front of the sustainability agenda – green building, green infrastructure, alternative energy, and on and on – the significant recent successes of the current generation are very important in making Vancouver the acknowledged leader in green urbanism in North America (even this campus is the greenest campus).

-Third theme: city-building is a collaborative effort – even though that collaboration is actually driven by a confluence of individual interests.

-We invented a completely new kind of development management system to tap interests and foster

collaboration – through incentives and judgments rather than just policing – with a lot of freedom to try new things, not just “play by the rules” – it is a discretionary and transactional system still relatively unique – and it really sponsors design innovation.

-We invented completely new funding sources to pay for the lavish vision that is Vancouverism – Community Amenity Contributions and Development Cost Charges that put the biggest part of cost of growth on to the beneficiaries rather than on all citizens – this is now being picked up everywhere in Canada but at the beginning we were the loners trying to make this work.

-And perhaps the most transformative move was to do everything with the greatest possible embrace of public engagement, community involvement, and peer review – the leadership was at City Hall but the ideas and the refinements were coming from everywhere – and this constituency became so pervasive that it was a more powerful source for

support of our ideas than any politician or political party – it literally took planning above politics.

Of course, I have been telling a very good story but the picture has not all been rosy. There are continuing challenges to the paradigm of Vancouverism that you, the new generation, are going to have to sort out. Let me highlight the big ones. In my book, for these issues I call for a complete and fresh rethink, what I call a fundamental “reset”, because the current approaches are not working.

-First challenge: this was an inner-city story – now it must spread to the suburbs – this is the biggest gap for your generation – it is the gap that will make or break the sustainable future of our country and maybe the world – as we have made strides in inner-cities right across the country, we are still building harsh and impactful suburbs and no country can be truly green with these kind of places still housing over 60% of the population. We are starting to see some good moves in Vancouver, out in the suburban municipalities, but we have a long way to go.

-Second challenge: have we been inclusive enough? If you observe our Downtown Eastside, you will know that we definitely have still left a lot of people out and keep a lot of people in a state of stress – we still do not have a predictable formula to support the poor, the mentally ill and addicted – we are not in a state of grace for these people. And this puts Vancouver and all Canadian cities way behind, say, the Nordic countries – in my book, I talk about the components of a fundamental reset to address this contradiction – with policy reform, new public investment, and different laws.

-Third challenge (and the biggest one by far that is endangering the best of Vancouver): Affordability – a huge vulnerability on all fronts – less and less housing for the “missing middle”; places to work becoming uncompetitively expensive, limiting start-ups and commercial growth; expensive housing gobbling up employment sites because we have made the experience so good that we have people coming in with wealth from all over the world. This will take the most fundamental reset of everything on our urban agenda – we now have to invent a way to provide a secure middle-income housing

sector, just as we have tried to do for the low-income sector through social housing; ultimately, we will have to do the same for the commercial and even the retail sectors – this will be a new kind of economy that Canada has very little experience with.

And then, of course, added to all of this, you also have to cope with some of the new realities of cities that just did not exist when we were inventing Vancouverism – we generally call these the disruptors – and, of course, the most powerful one is “autonomous mobility”.

- We all know of the several futures that have been predicted for cities as autonomous driving becomes pervasive [explain “more cars or less cars”].

- This could be a disaster for our cities, and Vancouver in particular because we have been actively taking apart our auto infrastructure and constraining space dedicated to the car. But I think if we play our cards right, we may have an amazing opportunity, instead.

-In my book, I identify this as another key reset – using the culture and potential footprint of autonomous mobility as a way of actually securing much more of the public domain for people rather than machines – imagine what we could do with that extra space – in my book I argue that as much as 60% of the current public street footprint in more dense areas might be reclaimed and reused for all the joys of public life. It is an enticing possibility.

But, in respect for your particular interests, and getting outside the covers of my book, let me now focus-in specifically on design – architecture and landscape architecture – to talk about challenging reforms that I think you have to face in the whole way you and your professions look at the contemporary design problem. I said at the beginning that there were a number of profound blindnesses in my generation that are still pervasive and affect everything we design. I hope you can avoid these biases as designers because they keep us from finding solutions to urban problems that are now coming home to roost for you. Let me highlight just six of these blind spots very quickly – now, there are good exceptions to every case I am going to describe, but the standard practice is what I want you to really think about, rather than the exceptions.

-The first blindness is lack of context literacy in building and even landscape design. It was the great architect, Arthur Erickson, who taught me this, but few others of his generation had his sensitivity. We just could not see beyond the property lines within which we were commissioned to design, so we made huge mistakes and really messed up wonderful places with insensitive and disconnected designs. We did not see the human and natural systems and patterns that flow across whole areas. Often as designers this made us more dangerous than natural disasters so I hope you can learn to avoid that. In every building or space design you ever do, please look at its wider context at least to the extent of the ecological areas and identifiable social districts at play.

-The second blind spot is dependence on mega utility systems – it is almost the opposite as what I have just talked about and, fortunately, this is one area that you are paying attention to – in the utilities and technology of buildings, we have depended almost completely upon wide networks and include almost no accommodation or responsibility for performance on-site – we generate no

energy, throw off all our waste, import materials from vast distances, take no responsibility for water on or through our sites. So we put huge pressures on these mega utility systems which, in turn, cause huge damage to natural systems. So, I hope you will feel the responsibility to make your buildings as self-sustaining or at least district-sustaining as possible.

-The third blindness in buildings has been our rigid inflexibility of use, mix, and re-use of structures. This was brought to my attention by the great architect and urban designer, Andres Duany, looking at the tower and podium in Vancouver as just one obvious example. We now so tailor our buildings and they are so tightly fit within codes based upon use that we simply cannot exploit them over time as we need to, so we demolish and rebuild at an increasingly faster rate than we need to – we are amazingly wasteful and just squander the embedded energy. I hope you will take the long-term perspective and the full cost-accounting perspective in your design work. I also hope you will not get caught up in the building-as-object mentality that has created buildings that not only cannot be handily reused over time but are not even

useful for the same purpose as needs and demands evolve. Beautiful works of art simply for the artist's ego can be pretty self-indulgent and socially harmful if we are not careful.

-The fourth blind spot has been our use of so few building types to address the amazing diversity of activities that we need to accommodate in the city – again, this is almost the opposite of what I have just described but none-the-less problematic (it shows the world is a dialectic). The whole range of creativity in building typology that was once explored by people like Constantinos Doxiadis, the mid-century Greek architect, is just not happening in his way of looking at whole urban systems as structures and space continuums. Instead we use a small number of standard building types over and over again in individual structural units – the tower and podium being the best Vancouver example – and only refine and refine. We don't even use the mid-rise form enough in this town, much less more innovative configurations. I hope you will be inspired to think more organically in shaping your building types, maybe taking cues from solutions like Habitat in Montreal and its architect, Moshe Safdie.

-The fifth blindness is that we essentially construct our buildings the same way we did in the Middle Ages – with assembly by-hand on site – and almost no building-level mass-production or pre-fabrication. Yes, we mass-produce the component parts, but generally we still bring those component parts to the site for hand assembly at vast cost and taking undue time and with undue risk. My previous example, Habitat in Montreal, is very relevant to this topic, but a local architect, Oliver Lang, has started to really open up our consciousness here in Vancouver. He is pre-fabing buildings in his factory for local sites at about 1/3rd off the cost and in about 1/3rd less the time of typical construction – but maintaining all the design elegance and uniqueness that people want. He is inspirational. I hope you can transform building technology so we can deliver city change easier, faster, and cheaper.

-And the sixth and final blind spot I want to touch on is that, sadly, we have not used the amazing prowess of design to attack the problem of affordability – we must learn to design in affordability. For example, the Swedes and Finns are doing amazing alternative design solutions for living in co-housing; the Danes are frontrunners in live/

work buildings – these being just a few examples of how design of new formats of uses can cut costs – we tend to look at housing costs in the affordability debate, whereas people elsewhere are looking at the total cost of living as the frontier to reshape and, with that perspective, design becomes a prime tool along with new financial tools like neighbourhood currencies off the international monetary grid. I hope you will put your design expertise to the service of building affordability for housing and workplaces to bring this dangerous situation under control.

And then, I have one last suggestion - something that became so important for us as we invented Vancouverism and I think becomes more important every year. In our design professions we are still way too wrapped up in our individual design silos. I see the future of great city-building as a multi-disciplinary action – but not where our design work is integrated in a serial way – the planner and urban designer designs and then passes the baton on to the architect who designs and then passes it on to the landscape architect who designs and then passes it on to the public artist, and so forth. Instead that integration must be done, in the future, in a truly lateral way, where all the designers are working together in one studio, at the same time,

finding collective solutions. We talk about this a lot but do it much less consistently than we should. I hope you will change this in your generation.

Well, let me close by offering a simple summary – for our discussion.

From our experience of Vancouverism, looking back from Expo 86 until the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, that period of great transformation in Vancouver, here are the simple messages that I highlight in my book:

- (1) the importance of public leadership – civic leadership;
- (2) the potentials from public/private collaboration;
- (3) the coherence that comes from acting from principles;
- (4) the imperative of reorganizing to do things differently in order to achieve a new kind of success;
- (5) the long-term benefits of building public constituency;
- and,
- (6) the danger that any city might face if it has some success but then becomes complacent – which is a real danger of today's Vancouver.

And then, looking forward to the future that you will command, here is a summary of some of the outstanding contradictions of the design process, which I would urge you to take in hand to fix – a way of looking at urban design that I hope you can incorporate into your paradigm as you take responsibility for what is yet to come.

- (1) sensitivity to context;
- (2) independence of building systems;
- (3) flexibility of building use, mix and re-use;
- (4) Diversification of building forms;
- (5) building mass pre-fabrication;
- (6) design for affordability; and,
- (7) multi-disciplinary design.

Most Canadians do not realize that, as a culture, we are quite adept at building and managing modern cities. In fact, in a recent list of the world's most liveable cities, Canada was the only country that had three cities in the top ten. Along with Switzerland, Austria, and Australia, Canadian cities are always at the top of these kinds of lists. You can see this as a great opportunity – even with all the problems we face, this country offers you a design take-off platform that is very high. It offers

your generation the ability to soar and that is exactly what I hope you will do.

Let's open the floor for a good discussion...