

“EVOLVING CANADIAN CITIES FROM A WORLD PERSPECTIVE:
NEW PLANNERS ARE CONFRONTED WITH NEW FORCES”

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2 min: Introduction

Hello from the West Coast to all of you right across our country who, as the incoming generation of planners, are joining our great endeavour of innovative, deliberate city building. In the last quarter of the 20th century and extending to this very day, a magnificent process of urban experimentation and creativity has been underway in Canada – and, indeed, around the world – with dramatic successes and failures – in a quest to find the urban formula for better human and natural outcomes. Today, I want you to feel the excitement of this great adventure we are all on, which has been all-consuming for thousands of Canadians – your colleague planners – and continues to be one of the most challenging fronts in all of modern life.

We have made progress but you still have so much to do – and that is what I want to talk about today.

In this modern evolution, coherent directions have emerged that I will summarize. But we are also still confronted with biting problems and disruptors that confound our success – that I will also highlight as your personal challenges. I will zero in on the specific Canadian reality, where we have an agenda that is uniquely ours. I want you to know that the urban paradigm continues to wobble and shift – perhaps even more so in these trying two years of Covid lockdown. But I think we are now moving quickly into what I like to call the “roaring twenties”, post pandemic – which offers frightening and thrilling prospects for you, as the new planners who will take the future into your hands.

So, let's get started on the great theme of this conference – new ideas, practices and connections – that I hope will inspire your conversations over the next two days – let me pull up my powerpoint.

As you see, I call this “Evolving Canadian Cities from a World Perspective”. I'll start with an overview of what is driving smart cities globally and then come back to the Canadian context, using my home city of Vancouver as an example, and then list some key new trends that are important to our country – as you join the fray.

To go deeper into my remarks this afternoon, I commend to you, for reference, my two books, which nicely cover these topics – here they are. “Ecodesign” provides the overview and offers hundreds of exemplars from around the world. “Vancouverism” then covers the story of my city both as a guide and as a warning to other Canadians.

5 min: The worldwide urban dream

In the last century, as we started to feel the brutality and banality of modern cities, we began to realize that they had to change. Then, as we started to come to grips with the worldwide crisis of human impacts on the natural environment, with cities at the heart of the problem, this reinforced that they had to change. Right across the planet, a new dream started to emerge of what cities need to become if we are to both thrive and survive in the future. And this dream is about a very different way of building cities that in the past – expressed in two profound themes that contrast sharply with the “efficiencies” (“city as machine”) that drove everything in the century before us. Of course, in your studies, you are dealing with these prime themes every day – but I highlight these to start because they are the anchors for reconceiving our cities and they always have to be remembered.

The first is *Liveability* – creating a comfortable, interesting and exciting city that meets needs but also engenders loyalty and affection and great experience; this is the design side that draws people to want to be in the city, invest in the city, make their lives in the city – this is the ‘human-centric’ city that is conceived from a consumer perspective, rather than just for government and industry.

The second theme is *Sustainability* – creating a city that sits harmoniously within its setting, knitting into natural, social, and economic ecologies, cutting pollution, and weaning ourselves from the carbon addiction – this is the ‘nature-centric’ city that prepares us all to make peace with the environment all around us and to nurture its systems.

These themes have come together over the last 30 years into what you all know is now typically called the “Smart Growth” formula, offering a common framework for our thinking – here it is. This is about both the *urban structure* and *urban infrastructure* of a city – clustered density, mixed use, all kinds of diversity, green construction, human scale, and lovely places – but also transportation choices, supportive facilities, cultural offerings, and environmentally-neutral utilities.

What fascinates me about this formula is that it works over the range of urban challenges we face in modern life – offering a common “City Lens” – so this is a very useful formula for all your efforts.

Now, more recently, particularly over the last year or so, with the pandemic in full play, another theme has shot to the forefront.

This theme, of course, is *Resilience* – addressing survival against the unexpected, but also planning to cope with the challenges that can be expected, and finding opportunity in adversity – this is the ‘strategic city’, deliberately prepared for many possible contingencies. This is the adaptation perspective – to at least keep ‘head above water’ until we can achieve genuine sustainability. We are all now struggling to understand the demands resilience will bring, and Covid has been an acid test. But I can surely say that the pandemic has not fundamentally changed our urban dream – even though, it has certainly added an urgency and shifted some of our current priorities.

So, that’s the global urban dream that is starting to be played out in extraordinary change – the amazing community of Hammarby in Stockholm, with its

comfortable form coupled with circular systems; the flood-tolerant design of Hafen City in Hamburg; restoration of a river, displacing a freeway in Seoul; or the Highline in New York.

10 min: The Canadian focus – Vancouver as an example

Now let's turn to Canada – where do we stand in finding this dream in our own special way? The fact is that, in North American terms, we are doing a decently good job – even though we are nowhere near the achievements of Northern Europe and we still face dramatic contradictions and shortfalls that your generation will have to tackle.

Let me use my city, Vancouver, as the Canadian case of both advances and warnings for cities right across our country – I could have used Toronto or Montreal or Halifax, because we have all made strides.

Vancouver got a head start over many Canadian cities for the simple reason that way back in the 1980s the city was in an economic malaise and had to re-invent itself to survive. But, the results have become mainstream for most smart Canadian cities. Six things are worth highlighting.

We arranged new development into identifiable and functional *neighbourhood units* – a real “local” focus – with the right array of amenities and very nice retail places with local character. Here are the typical neighbourhood amenities that are absolute requirements; and here is the general scale and commercial infrastructure that we targeted. These neighbourhoods have a balanced ecology of living, working and support uses and enough customers close by to sustain the full complement of retail and services. In Paris, this has been rebranded as the “15-minute neighbourhood”.

We made *parks and open space* the organizing framework for everything else. So we added lots of new parks – here is the standard. And we diversified open space – not just public parks but also lovely private courtyards and green roofs everywhere. The respite of parks makes density tolerable and a good parks network also supports natural ecologies.

We started to seriously add *social diversity*, so we set special housing targets and guidelines for a more inclusive mix. One of Vancouver's unique breakthroughs was to successfully emphasize families with children living at high densities. Kids are now everywhere, making everything more civilized. But we also built in a secure component of low-income housing in newly developing areas, reflecting regional averages.

More mobility choices became very big. By mixing everything up, we could really tap the simple reality but great potential of “proximity” – everything just being closer together – to pursue a different transportation agenda, less dependent on the car. This included a massive expansion of transit, and widespread investment in cycling – all coupled with things like traffic calming, parking cuts, a share-car system, and lots of road sharing. But the biggest result was a huge shift to walking – then weather protection requirements have helped, along with sidewalk upgrades and street furniture. This was not an anti-car strategy but we did want more travel options, a better mode-balance and less auto impacts. The results are very cool.

We put a lot of attention to *quality urban design*. We had an unashamed desire for more density and mixed use but that will not work without pretty hip design – our unique

response was the tower/podium form and townhouse frontages, along with view corridors, sun/shadow management, placemaking, and all the other measures to essentially tame density – converting it from a bad thing to an actual preference in consumers’ eyes. The nice thing is that each Canadian city has approached this differently, creating differing character right across our country.

And, finally, we have increasingly been drawing in the *green requirements* for energy, water, waste, green construction, and even urban agriculture. Our Athletes Village for the Olympics, now a thriving community, modeled the world’s best in sustainable utilities.

Well, of course, not everything worked out well and a few key problems still dog us. These are the warnings that

other Canadian cities have to learn from and avoid. Let me emphasize the three big ones.

First, all the frenzied new development has destabilized our most marginal areas creating a quite *troubled street scene* – impacts of substance abuse, mental illness and homelessness are worse than they have ever been and they are spreading rapidly. Vancouver's continued crisis with this confirms one clear message – an aggressive social development strategy must be at the heart of all change.

Second, the real estate spiral up has exacerbated *affordability problems*. Protecting housing security is Vancouver's biggest single challenge, which could put everything else in jeopardy. Even with low-income targets, we have not invested enough, so waiting lists for social housing remain long. Middle-income households

are also increasingly being shut out. The Vancouver warning is that a coherent strategy for wide housing affordability has to be built in for every city.

Third, only recently have we started to acknowledge the unique situation and special needs of our several indigenous communities. First Nations themes and reconciliation were not evident in our urban agenda, except in the most token sense, and, they too, were left behind. Fortunately, this is now starting to change with dramatic First Nations development projects around the region – and recognition across the country. The point is that the first occupants of urban lands cannot be ignored or denied but it takes both deliberate action and respectful arrangements to be inclusive.

10 min: The suburban challenge in Canadian cities

Now, these advances and setbacks in every Canadian city have primarily been an urban inner-city story. Canadian suburbs remain out of the loop, built to obsolete and retrogressive standards, and essentially unchanging since their great expansion in the 1950s. We will never have an environmentally defensible urban pattern in this country until we fix this problem – until we can match suburban liveability with sustainability and resilience. Let me say this in no uncertain terms – this is the great challenge of your generation.

Here are a few ideas that are starting to gain currency in Canada.

Undifferentiated suburbs need mixed-use *regional town centres* as job and service nodes – focal-points in a network connected by rapid transit. Although these were first conceptualized in Greater Vancouver back in the

1970s, they have only recently started to come alive – offering all kinds of new opportunities and consumer choices at many key locations rather than just focused on Downtown. The transit network is still incomplete, but it is already showing how these centres can reinforce one another while still differentiating their image and brand. This is the place for suburban intensity that suburbanites won't see as intrusive and can accept. So, this is a big start.

The harder nut to crack is diversification within the vast expanse of settled, low-density, low-scaled residential communities that make up most of every region. An answer with great potential is what we call *incremental infill*. While that whole theme of densification is certainly applicable out in our communities, it has to be accomplished in a very gentle, discrete way – almost silently, almost invisibly. So, this will increasingly be the

story of laneway and rear-yard houses, of secondary suites and phantom duplexes and triplexes, of tiny units slotted into forgotten spaces, of apartments over retail, and of small garden apartments and townhomes on left-over sites. All of this will be where we build around and retrofit existing built stock without destabilizing the community and with modest impacts. This is a tool-kit that local government has yet to open up for builders in most of our cities – but this has to come. We now know that a sustainable city starts to work at no more than about 100 units-per-hectare, or 40 units-per-acre, which is a target well within reach as a retrofit strategy.

And, lastly, another trick that is gathering steam in North America is *reclaiming the obsolete strip malls*. Every suburb has an almost endless supply of strip malls – think of the road out in either direction in Regina or Calgary – where independent retail is floundering because of the

discount chain competition and the explosion of on-line shopping. And these sites already had too much space allocated to parking, even in their hay-day. These are the new locations for neighbourhood diversification – for insinuation of townhouses and mid-rise apartments at a modest scale, with very little impacts on adjacent neighbourhoods. When local government adds a bus-rapid-transit spine connecting these places and linking work sites, which ultimately gets converted to rapid transit, we have the makings of a comprehensive corridor strategy and a big success story.

So that's the current status quo as I see it for the Canadian agenda. But we also have to begin to embrace and cope with a big thrust of hot new ideas coming out from what I see as the gutsy cities in the world. Here is a shortlist of interesting game-changers still to find their way to Canada – both for our cores and our suburbs.

A most fascinating trend is the growth of the *share economy*. This is not just about Uber and air-b-and-b's. In the Nordic countries, this is now about shared housing, shared workspace, and even, in Helsinki, a community-based localized currency app for sharing of home appliances and trading of personal services – completely off of the financial and tax grid, for major household savings. In Canada, the housing piece of this is about legalizing multi-generational housing and even truly-integrated co-housing for families with children and seniors.

And now, Covid has daylighted for us a vast new reality for how we live and work in our communities – *home-based work*. We all now have the “communications cockpit” in our homes, so the corporate world is truly invested in this new possibility. To really bring out the

best in this, we will need new home plans that include designated work spaces and more flexible laws that allow people to work with others and produce things in their homes. We will also need on-call meeting spaces and flex-offices widely distributed, like these Dutch examples. These new arrangements may put core cities back into crisis as office vacancy-rates spiral – to avoid the worst and even survive, cities will have to replace downtown offices with live-work or go dark – it may be that simple. Even a shift of only 20% of work to a home base will dramatically change how we move around in the city, how we use our homes, and how urban places thrive or die.

That same home “communications cockpit” will also enable the other huge urban disruptor – *on-line shopping* or *e-commerce*. What will this mean to the strong retail patterns that now define and energize urban places; how will it change goods movement? I truly believe this will

take aggressive crisis management by local governments to stave off commercial malaise and save streetscapes that we all love and take for granted. At the moment, most municipalities have not put even a thought into this.

You're going to start to see another new trend that has not really hit home in Canada up to now – and that is *alternative home tenure*. To get affordability solidly back on track, new tenure choices, in addition to those shared housing types I have already described, will be the name of the game – not just conventional market housing but such things as rent-to-own, non-profit home ownership, and mingle-ownership. Madrid and Vienna are the touchstones on this issue.

And then, all these new land-use and housing ideas are increasingly going to be connected together by *new forms of mobility and integrated mobility* – autonomous

vehicles, of course, will have to be accommodated – that will be the big technical and governance problem of your generation – but we are already seeing a crowd of cool new personal mobility devices and one-pay systems for multi-mode travel. Everywhere, cities are trying to catch up with these transformative technologies. These have great potential to reinforce the human-scaled neighbourhood unit because we will move around safely without taking a lot of space.

All this new transportation is also going to reinforce a daring urban design movement, again kick-started by the pandemic, which is already starting to dramatically reclaim urban space for people. The gurus call it the “*repossession of streets*”. This is where cars are completely banished from the street-setting because we have better access without the cars. There are many compelling examples – here’s New York and Montreal.

Lastly, we are just starting to see what is called the “*urban tranquility movement*”, which is to attack like never before the debilitating effects of noise in our cities – from leaf blowers to construction machinery to the roar of traffic.

Then, two final imperatives that are still almost indecipherable as to urban implications, have to be taken on in completely new ways by your generation. The first is equity, diversity, and inclusion. The very structure of our cities is frighteningly exclusive and discriminatory and our ambivalence about this is close to shameful. The second is big data. We still have almost no practical idea of the potentials of pervasive information applications and management on every kind of urban system, except for a few quite worrisome experiments, such as Sidewalk Lab in Toronto. I see creative thinking in the Academy on

these issues but you will now have to aggressively bring these into our general professional consciousness and repertoire, as urgent matters. I cannot even show you results as provoking examples, because almost nothing has been tackled.

1 min: Conclusion

So there – in my 25-minute dash – is the state-of-the-art for a new urbanism in Canada – as I see it. There is a lot to do in every city. In my generation we made our start in bringing back our dying core cities and revitalizing inner-city neighbourhoods. But that is just not enough for sustainable, competitive cities in the future. You, the upcoming generation, will have to tackle suburban sprawl, but in a new way that is compatible with suburban needs and sensibilities. Because the affordability crisis is spreading to every city, I hope you will put major attention to making decent housing a basic human right

for all Canadians. And then, have some fun in inventing the special Canadian expression for all those eye-opening urban disruptors and innovations that are floating around out there. I suggest that is the urban agenda you face.

Some say it will be up to you to save the world – that is a rather grand statement to say the least. But I have no hesitation in saying it will definitely be up to you to save our Canadian urban culture and to re-imagine Canadian cities – to make them more and more hospitable, harmonious, and robust. As this message says, “there is no Plan-B”. If my experience has been any kind of indicator, you have quite a rollercoaster ride ahead of you.

I want you to grab it and run with it. . . .