How to Grow a City
South False Creek's Forgotten Visionaries

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It was one of those unexpected moments. I was browsing through the Vancouver city archives looking for bits and pieces of useful information for this essay, when I came across a 1975 picture of my father. It was among a collection of random shots in an old file put together by the architectural firm he worked for at the time. His presence in the picture was probably accidental, the main object of interest likely having been the crane in the background, but there he was, complete with long hair and bell-bottoms, looking down and away from the camera as if to say that he was unimportant. Photos can be deceptive, and this one certainly was. The crane was there to help construct a development now recognised as a prominent example of good social urban planning, and the man standing apologetically in front of it was one of the masterminds behind the project. Both were situated on a mound of earth on the west side of a large stretch of city-owned land between the Granville and Cambie bridges, the section of Vancouver's South False Creek known to planners as "Area Six, Phase One."

My discovery might have gone unnoticed had not my father long since moved to the warmer climes of eastern Australia. His Vancouver days belong in my mind to the realm of story. The part of my life that I shared with him took place in Europe—from my birth in the university town of Urbino, Italy, where he held a temporary teaching position, to the French Alps in the mid-90s, just before he went searching, yet again, for a place that would welcome his ideals. As I slowly walked away from the archives building towards Granville Island with a photocopy of the picture—"for research purposes only"—in my hand, I started to feel more connected to my past than I ever had been. History anchors you, and this, as far as I was concerned, was *pre*-history.

Continuing along the waterfront, I could almost picture what False Creek would have been like before the arrival of the European colonists. I could see the historical episodes that one of my father's architect friends had laid out before me in an interview some days earlier: how the slight foot-print of First Nations lifestyles was trampled by sawmills, shipbuilding yards and slaughterhouses; how the Depression years saw many businesses fail and forfeit much of their land to municipal authority; how comprehensive redevelopment was unsuccessfully attempted in the 1940s and 1950s, only to be set aside for a more propitious time; and how, finally, in 1968, all the elements came together to make the much-celebrated change from industrial wasteland to livable community.

Visionaries

My father entered the Vancouver scene when the spirit of the anti-authoritarian student revolutions was still alive and well. Times were heady, and large-scale projects of the type built in the 1950s were out of favour because of their contribution to social polarisation. South False Creek was to become the prototype for planning that took into account the needs and aspirations of future residents from across the social spectrum. Until then, ex-council member Darlene Marzari recalls, city government was more interested in "sewers and water distribution" than living arrangements. By the late 1960s, Vancouver was experiencing strong population growth and there was no question in the minds of city officials that the area should serve residents directly, as a park for recreation, a housing development, or a combination of both. To be acceptable, the plans would have to provide for a wide range of backgrounds, without falling into the traps of ghetto creation on the one hand and selling out to developers on the other. A truly inspired collection of people on all levels assured that neither happened.

The driving force from above came from Alderman Walter Hardwick, an urban geographer from the University of British Columbia with an excellent grasp of the city's past. In his vision, the new development would not only cater to a cross-section of potential residents—young and old, singles and families, poor and rich—but it would also be planned in consultation with them. He was responding to a widespread feeling among both the general public and politicians that there should be more transparency in the planning process. In the 1972 landslide election, TEAM, the winning party, was given a strong mandate for change in False Creek. Twenty-five years after the Second World War, the country had a low public debt and was finally ready to experiment with community participation practices that had been developed for years in the United States and the United Kingdom. Hardwick hired Pat Canning in April 1973 to consolidate citizen interests into a coherent group that could implement its ideas.

Canning came from a privileged background and had been actively involved in the American civil rights movement. She took the notion of citizen power to heart and was eager to put the $40,000 promised by council to work for the people. To Canning, however, Hardwick and his ilk were Johnny-come-lately's in the world of grassroots action, and they had no idea what it entailed to really devolve power.

Far from getting the money, Canning was fired a mere two months into the process. In the June 13th edition of the *Vancouver Sun,* Hardwick defended the city council's decision against the accusations that it was only interested in promoting its own plans. He claimed that there had been ongoing dialogue with citizens from the start, and that it was Canning who was out of touch with the process.

Dialogue or not, the genie was already out of the lamp, and in that short time Canning had managed to establish enough groundswell movement to help birth the False Creek Citizens' Coalition, a loose-knit collection of groups representing the needs of low-income people interested in seeing the Creek become accessible to all. To Canning, these voices were the crucial piece missing in other developments. To the council, they were merely residents of the immediately surrounding areas who were afraid of the increase in the cost of living that would occur as a result of the development of South False Creek. It was the first real step in the involvement of citizens in the planning process.

I put the photo of the crane away and continued my walk along the seawall. Its cobbled stones were laid down by non-professionals with the help of a VanCity grant that ran out before it was completed. As I passed Charleson Park, I was reminded of a sculpture of white stones in the form of a seagull pointed out by a local some weeks before. Hidden from the uninitiated, it was the first display of community art in the project. Soon enough, I was standing at the corner of Greenchain and Millbank, where my father had planned to buy a unit and use the one allotted car space as his basement studio.

Nothing would have happened without the leadership and vision of a handful of planners, architects and engineers at Thompson, Berwick, Pratt and Partners (TBP&P). Canning calls them "marginal men," professionals "on the margin" who provided the strategic connection between the two worlds of government and citizens. One of these marginal men was my Belgian father, who had come to the West Coast in 1971 fresh from his experiences with the emerging environmentalist movement on the Greek peninsula. He had met Peter Pratt in Athens while working on his Masters thesis on Skyros, one of the northern Sporades islands of the Aegean Sea, and fit right in with the group of bright idealists working for Pratt's father's firm. Joe Wai, who later designed the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Gardens in Vancouver, and whom Canning refers to as "a prince of a man," remembers the time of the False Creek redevelopment as comparable to his high school years, when anything seemed possible and you could recreate the universe simply by willing it to be different.

Just how different those times were became apparent to me as each telling of the events brought mist to the eyes of those who had been intimately involved in the project. The old addresses and incomplete memories cobbled together by my father thirty years later to help with my research became a treasure map—an unforgettable story around every corner.

TBP&P was a Vancouver institution. It was the place where young planners and architects went to work day and night for next to nothing in order to get their foot in the professional door. In the early 1970s, a small group of young architects spent their days labouring for the firm, but their nights were given over to a more esoteric purpose. The group had gelled from late Thursday-night powwows after work, where a bottle of scotch helped give substance to the then-popular adage *if you care, put it forward.* They were the "barefoot boys," and their purpose was to create a socially-conscious and carefully designed community down at South False Creek. When the city decided in 1974 to launch a competition on the design of the first part of the Creek, they were ready. They were awarded the site plan and construction began within a year.

Design

Within the context of the 1970s energy crises, designing compact and self-sufficient communities on a regional level was seen as an economic imperative. In 1975, the Greater Vancouver Regional District implemented the "Livable Regions Strategy" and advocated high density living as a way of preserving green spaces, while making public transit more accessible and reducing fossil-fuel dependency. In South False Creek this translated into a density of 45 units per acre—high for the time—and the setting up of the number 50 bus line with the help of a subsidy from residents. The Canadian Pacific Railway line had been moved to provide transit along the circumference of False Creek, but never gathered the momentum it needed to start operating. Only now are talks about its revival surfacing, as energy efficiency takes a higher priority on a global scale.

Under the guiding hand of visionary Paul Merrick, known by his protégés as "the PM," and Richard Rabnett, the project's figurehead and ambassador, the TBP&P design team dreamt up and helped implement a new kind of urban community. Monty Wood, whose home overlooks the False Creek waterfront near Leg-in-Boot Square, loosely quotes Churchill to explain the careful attention to detail that imbued the development: "first we shape our environment, then our environment shapes us."

The design process was unique. Novel techniques were used to increase creativity and avoid one approach from dominating the whole development. John Wertschek, now at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, recalls how as a young architectural student he was asked to help draw up the plans. A gigantic roll of paper was laid out on the floor in the office, and the architects would take turns working on different sections. In the morning, one person would draw in a desired pattern, only to have it changed with eraser and pencil by someone else in the afternoon. The net result was a complex, minutely designed landscape, notable for its seamless juxtaposition of multiple design strains. One observer described it as a Greek mountain village with Belgian architecture in the heart of a North American town. My father claims that for every minute that you walk along its windy streets there is a unique vista to greet you. This was planning on a human scale.

It was an engineer's nightmare, and employees at City Hall weren't always happy with the plans from above. Bylaws were suspended in order to accommodate the planners' vision; even the street-cleaners had to adapt by providing smaller vehicles to clean the gutters, many of which were located in the middle of the street rather than on either side of it.

Everything possible was done to translate the idea of a livable community into physical reality. Doughnut-shaped enclaves were conceived to provide an intermediary realm between public and private space. Roads were narrowed to make the development pedestrian-friendly and curbs were sloped to encourage the use of bicycles. Safety railings along the seawall that would mar the feeling of openness were avoided with great difficulty by convincing the city's legal department that there wouldn't be a flood of litigants as soon as the project opened to the public. Residents were only given one parking space per unit. Instead of the grid system—a product of land surveyors' concerns for efficiency—winding paths and roads mimicked the growth of European cities as they historically expanded like a spider web from the centre of town. Open spaces were designed for people to spend more time together outside and for there to be more opportunity for fortuitous encounters with cohabitants and strangers. Charleson Park, with its human-made stream, its bridges and its waterfall, has many a tucked-away bench conducive to easy conversation.

Political and economic structure

The costs of buying and renting in the area varied, but not at the expense of physical amenities. Beyond being aesthetically displeasing and energy-guzzling, cars were considered a moral liability. David Ellis, one of the people in charge of implementing day-to-day planning operations, smilingly remembers how he was almost fired for having authorised a developer an extra 10 metres of pavement to put in a second exit to one of the underground parking lots. Cars are status symbols, and there was a veritable crusade against any display of status difference. Even though only a third of the housing was sold on the open market, planners believed that everyone should be allowed to enjoy a similarly pleasing environment. This vision had prompted them to require every unit, regardless of its value, to have adequate access to light by having windows on either side of the east-west or north-south axes. Dark, damp and cold basement suites were out of the question.

It was hoped that this kind of inclusive planning would not only make the risky venture of socially mixed housing work, but also encourage a feeling of community and neighbourliness. The enclaves would give residents a sense of ownership of the area surrounding their homes, and families were to feel comfortable letting youth play in the communal open area separated as it was from the outside world by an intricate set of pathways and covered passages. Without these, a current resident remarked, the constant flow of visitors to the park and seawall would be scary. There was no need for these communities to be gated; the design itself made unwelcome people feel observed, and thus uncomfortable.

Politically, the project was structured to provide equal representation. The False Creek South Neighbourhood Association still has representatives from almost every one of the eight enclaves as well as the floating home co-operative close to Granville Island. It provides co-ordination among the various sections. Beryl Wilson, who had just retired after twenty years of editing *The Creek,* the community's local newspaper, thinks the planning was a success. What is important, she says, is the sense of community that many people living in South False Creek have and their belief that they are part of a larger project, even if it isn't always a real community in the way the planners might have hoped. A low-income resident herself, Wilson says it beats "living in a basement suite over on Dunbar" by a long shot.

Financing

South False Creek would never have happened if it hadn't been for the improbable co-operation between "the hippies and the suits," in Ellis' words. The planners' office was located in the same building as the False Creek Development Group, three city officials able to make policy and override objections from other departments. There was much come-and-go between the two offices, and Friday evening was beer night to get together for a chat.

A local developer, E.D. Sutcliffe, whose name figures on a small park at the west side of the project, was instrumental in seeing to it that no corners were cut. The very best materials were used to pave the roads, the seawall and the square. The planners at TBP&P patently refused to make the lower income areas less physically attractive, and Sutcliffe worked hard to shape budgets in such a way as to ensure they weren't. It later became apparent that he was dying of cancer, and that False Creek—a project that he took on at the symbolic wage of one dollar per year—was his final gift to the residents of Vancouver. Everyone involved remembers him for his commitment to the place.

Medium-density, mixed-income, inner-city development was a considerable gamble at the time, and it is remarkable that South False Creek was so successful. Elsewhere in North America, inner-cities were decaying, and the prevailing views were strongly against higher density living. As soon as it became apparent that the city was actually going ahead with a mixed-income development, local newspapers wrote the area off as an instant slum. This outcome was happily avoided by the co-operation and compromise achieved between visionaries and financiers.

In order to fulfil its social objectives, the city had to be creative in the management of its finances. It was decided that one third of the land would be given to market developers, while the remaining parcels would be subsidised by partially or fully writing down property values. The price of market housing was increased to help pay for the non-market developments, and little outside funding was required. Ongoing low-income needs would be served by a variety of non-profit groups who were actively sought out and encouraged to be a part of the picture.

The Present

Much has changed since the South False Creek development of the 1970s, and we live in more jaded times. As I walked further along the seawall's flagstone pavement, the megalithic buildings of the downtown peninsula looming in the background, it occurred to me that I had seen gates blocking the entrances to some of the enclaves. I couldn't help but notice the sloppy new asphalt fillings covering the meticulously planned Leg-in-Boot Square. My father designed it in such a way that, on a clear day, you can see the protruding peaks of the Lions while crouching at the fountain. The view corridor that the square takes advantage of has been virtually the only height regulation to remain in the skyscraper-ridden area it traverses. A little further, recently installed benches were laid out in a circle and ironically faced outward towards the mountains, making it difficult to interact with anyone else sitting down even if you wanted to. A real estate agent's panel advertised "location, location, location," but made no reference to the merits of mixed-income neighbourhoods.

Cracks were starting to appear in the picture-perfect story I had been engrossed in, and the pride that I had felt was being displaced by an increasing anxiety—what had become of all these ideals? My father could offer little solace, as decades later and now on another continent, he is still struggling to help implement socially and environmentally sound projects.

A visit to one of councillor Marzari's "bright boys of the sixties" gave me some clues about the larger forces at play.

Michael Geller, the manager for CMHC's social housing programme at the time of his involvement with False Creek, views its successes and mishaps from a different perspective. Though he concedes the development included a mix of incomes, he contends that, on the lower end, it catered to the "deliberate poor"—either people from a relatively privileged background who happened to be financially challenged, or students and professionals at the beginning of their career. Geller well remembers how, as soon as it became established, one of the co-operatives blocked the construction of another in order to keep its views of the water. Like the council at the time, he insists that the only public interest in the project surrounded the creation of a new city park. He doesn't share Canning's enthusiasm for planning from the ground up—he claims that the best way to get the public involved is for developers to put forward a proposal, "something people can fight against."

A case in point is Geller's own present-day project: UniverCity, a development on top of Burnaby Mountain whose aim is to attract ten thousand new residents to the area. It is mandated by Simon Fraser University and was created with the goal of establishing an endowment fund. Geller is the president of the SFU Community Trust, whose stated objective is the creation of a "complete community" based on the four principles of "economy, equity, environment and education." Where South False Creek aimed at breaking even, however, UniverCity is a profit-making venture. Knowing how hard it had been to make South False Creek work financially, and having been reminded that there are few government housing programmes left, I wondered how the trust could possibly claim to hope for social equity while seeking to create an endowment fund.

The university is in a remarkably similar situation to Vancouver in the late 1960s. Like South False Creek, the land on Burnaby Mountain is an inheritance to be leased out by a public institution with discretionary powers over its development. But the parallel ends there. Unlike False Creek, in which two thirds of the development was non-market, UniverCity will be over 90% market-based. The trust has attempted to make up for exorbitant prices by encouraging rentals, varying the size and location of units, and legalising secondary mini-suites, but the lack of financial assistance severely limits what can happen on the mountain in terms of a diverse income mix.

As it stands, tiny suites are the only option recommended for lower-income needs, but such suites have been resisted by the city of Vancouver for decades because the cost involved in having them would preclude low-income rental space. Their cost will mean that only those who don't need assistance in the first place will live in them. On the social- mix side, segregating lower-income residents from the rest of the upscale development by putting them in tiny rooms without compensation in terms of public space is a far cry from efforts in South False Creek to downplay status differences between residents. Such differences create a mentality of division and are counterproductive to the sense of community UniverCity is claiming it wants.

Discouraged by the university's approach, I talked to a Vancouver city official about what—if anything—remains of the legacy of South False Creek.

Ian Smith, a senior planner, is optimistic: the project set a precedent for the creative redevelopment of industrial lands and for public access to the waterfront. A recent survey shows that there is still a balanced mix in the area, and that the neighbourhood school is full, indicating a strong presence of families. The lack of integration with adjacent areas and the inadequate provision of public transportation were valuable lessons for subsequent projects. With regard to the social mix, he is more cautious: cutbacks from senior levels of government have strained the city's capacity to provide housing for those less able to afford it. A worst-case scenario has been avoided because developers have been building without taking heed of demand, which has brought prices down in times of oversupply. Nonetheless, the city's 20% requirement for non-market housing, already eroded by the allowance for rentals and payments *in lieu,* increasingly risks translating into a bipolar split between rich and poor.

The Case for Visionaries

The social mix in the South False Creek is part of a philosophy of inclusion, and it stands in stark contrast to exclusionary values that have become the norm in recent years. Even planned communities mandated by public bodies, such as the UniverCity development, have little more in view than the financial bottom line. Their directors and financiers no longer see the need to interfere with market forces. If the market supports it, build it; if not, then that is the way it is meant to be.

Cynics will say that this is how it goes, but cynics have always been saying that, and there was no lack of them in the 1970s. The difference may be tangible through the decline of government funding for social projects, but the government's lack of action is merely a reflection of the prevailing public view that such projects are not worthwhile.

The more we separate people along the lines of social difference, the more we feel the need for protection. The next step in this isolationist logic—now a regular feature in cities across North America—is gated communities, with patrol guards, surveillance cameras, and exclusive access cards. The only way of reversing this trend is through public planning that directly addresses social segregation, which was exactly the dream of that exceptional group of forward-looking idealists who brought about South False Creek. With enough public will and foresight—as well as a few dedicated women and men willing to challenge and resist the cynics—there is no reason why it couldn't happen today.

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