



Unnaturally Nature

by Katy Amon

Wild, untamed, self-regulating and self-sustaining. An interlocking puzzle of flora and fauna exist in impenetrable growth. The jungle: where your environment decides and defines your destiny.

But Homo sapiens, a species who rebels against destiny, have built another jungle:

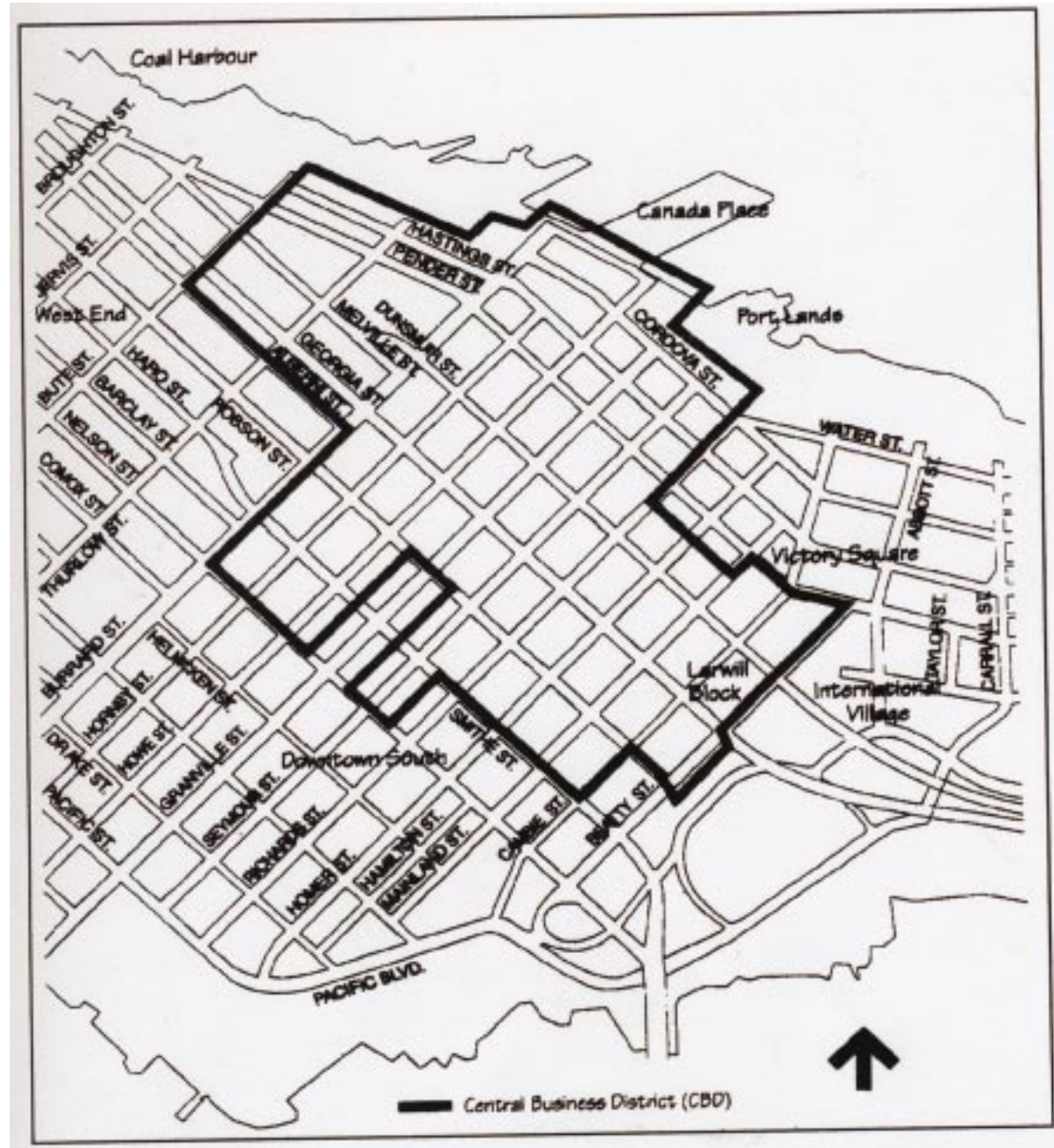
Striving for ultimate control, humans harvest elements from all levels of earth to coat and refinish the landscape. Human built, and reliant on human care. The concrete jungle: a continuous, unforgiving surface made of cement, steel, asphalt and brick.

It is difficult to inspire urban dwellers to consider their cities' downtown cores as natural environments. In dense built environments the concrete jungle inevitably dominates, but we need to create a landscape amenable to healthy

urban living that exists with, rather than in isolation from, the natural.

There are spaces in Vancouver's core, known as the Central Business District (C.B.D.), smaller than a city block that illustrate the integration of the built and natural environments. These spaces reflect the expense of urban real estate through their smallness and rarity. They also illuminate a desire for innovative integration of nature into the city.

In what ways, and for what purposes, do we integrate the built and natural environments? I set out walking on a sunny day to discover the core's hidden nature. As I stood facing a restaurant called The Sandwich Tree, a woman walked past with duck shaped patches sewn to her dress. I hoped that this was not all there would be to nature in the city.



Vancouver's Central Business District (C.B.D.) as defined by the City of Vancouver in "Central Business District Policies." Source: <http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvc/guidelines/CO14.pdf>



Robson Square

At Robson Square, which is bordered by Robson, Howe, Nelson and Hornby, I shared space with people, pigeons, and two seagulls deep in conversation. Maple leaves fluttered around me, the sun just cleared the top of a building, filtering through the trees and casting fanciful shadows. A woman was doing Tai Chi, business men and women walked to lunch, families played games amongst the many trees. Cars were not visible from Vancouver's urban oasis and while there was



Robson Square

some distant noise, there was also the sound of wind rustling bamboo leaves. This natural sound was so clear that my mind momentarily escaped the city's core, and explored my memory and imagination, seeking a more natural, and seemingly fitting, location.

The Tai Chi practitioner, the business people, the families and I were in an improved quality of life moment. We all were attracted to this space, attracted to a moment to get away from the stress of urban life.

Dr. Val Schaefer, Executive Director of the Urban Ecology Institute in New Westminster, tells me that "nature isn't something you go to visit on the weekend." Nature is something to be reminded of daily by going to spaces with reduced noise levels, he says, in order to hear the "sound of leaves blowing in the wind" and see light filter through trees and "dance through the canopy." Nature grounds us, providing space to decompress and gather perspective. Nature, in the city, provides a substrate from which we connect with ourselves.

The Burrard Sky Train station, at Melville and Dunsmuir, was another of these spaces. It had various levels, mostly below the street, isolated from the noise of the city. On a blustery November morning that threatened snow, members of the public were seated on the numerous benches nestled amongst a variety of vegetation. This major transportation hub was removed from automobile traffic but was still a-buzz with the music and laughter of the many commuters. We came here to make connections to places, people and nature.



Burrard Sky Train station

Cities often are built in areas of great ecological importance, created along or near waterways that aid transportation and trade. We choose to build on ecologically rich landscapes, and this increases our impact on the Earth. In his book *Towards Sustainable Communities*, Dr. Mark Roseland, Geography Professor and Director of the Community Economic Development Centre at Simon Fraser University, writes about the benefits of trees in urban areas. Trees provide shade from the sun, absorb pollutants, are efficient wind breakers, increase habitat space for urban wildlife and improve drainage by counteracting the impermeability of concrete with soil. Vegetation also reduces the

urban heat island effect, which causes increased urban temperatures when the sun's heat is attracted and held by concrete, asphalt and brick surfaces.

Women were using an alley at Melville, near Bute, as a thoroughfare after their lunch breaks. Women in alleys are unusual, but this and several others were lined with trees, making them far less threatening spaces than their treeless counterparts which seemed barren and comparatively lifeless. This is also true of streets. Those without trees were dominated by cars and buildings which overshadowed human presence.

Tree lined streets and alleys seem friendly and welcome walkers, a buffer from automobile traffic.



Tree lined street: Albern and Bute

In Larry Ford's book *The Spaces Between Buildings* he wrote that "trees help turn spaces into places."

Nature provides more than just emotional support. It also has a direct and active role in both physical and emotional human health. Evergreen, a Canadian organization with a mandate to bring nature to our cities, recently held a public forum at Robson

Square asking: "Are Nature-Starved Cities Affecting Your Health?"

Two of the featured speakers, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, are specialists in environmental psychology and urban design. The Kaplans discussed how nature can benefit the physical and mental health of individuals and communities.

Using case studies the Kaplans exemplified the power of keeping nature close at hand. One such study, by Frances E. Kuo and William Sullivan, suggests that living near trees results in lower levels of aggression, increased levels of concentration, and better social cohesion. Dr. Stephen Kaplan's essay, *The Urban Forest as a Source of Psychological Well-Being*, expands on this with a discussion of the keys to restorative environments including proximity, scale and view. Natural spaces need not be large to be effective. Despite their diminished size, the pockets in

Vancouver's core can have positive effects on both city and human health.

From her window office at Harbour Centre, Dr. Gloria Gutman, President of the International Association of Gerontology and Director of Simon Fraser University's Gerontology Research Centre, has a view of the mountains, ocean and an undercover green space at 601 West Hastings.



601 West Hastings street

Undercover places are a must-have in Vancouver, where it is warm enough to sit comfortably outdoors almost year round, but where there is also a

great deal of rain to contend with.

Dr. Gutman agrees that we need a "window to the world" because "people need to see the change of seasons." Humans experience repeating periodic fluctuations in physiological functioning, corresponding to circannual cycles, or, the annual pattern of the seasons.

Humans have timing mechanisms, biological clocks and calendars, to predict environmental changes which allow physiological and behavioural states to be synchronized to the outside world. Environmental cues help us keep biological cycles. Regular exposure to natural light can increase concentration levels, lower the likelihood of depression and improve quality of sleep.

As people age and their mobility decreases, they discover an even stronger need for proximity with nature. The physically frail may be confined to a single room and so

the placement of windows is critical to ensuring that the less mobile receive exposure to natural light and see changes in time of day and season.

The Courthouse at Robson Square was a refuge from Vancouver's rainy climate. In this space I was joined by many other wayward pedestrians seeking shelter from the downpour outside. There were plants all around, and a clear view of the plants outside. The space was indoor, but felt natural. The ceiling was glass, casting the space with only natural light facilitating a second hand relationship with torrential rain. This place protected me from the elements, creating a sense of warmth, but without compromising the connection to nature.



Inside the Courthouse at Robson Square

The feel of Robson Square Courthouse contrasts sharply to the feel of other indoor spaces, such as Pacific Centre Mall or the lobbies of the



Inside Pacific Centre Mall

numerous banks and offices that dominate Vancouver's core. Their lighting is electric and the air feels stuffy. A few token plants do not create the connection to nature. Many offices have plants, some plastic, and only those employees with prestige and status have their offices by windows. A window office rewards employees with not only a view and connection to the outside world, but also better health. Gutman knows this, and is proud of her large office with a view to the outside world.

Park Place, a secluded green space near the Dunsmuir and Burrard



Park Place

bus loop, was full of people, some making transit connections, others just passing through or sitting. It was covered in trees, plants and a small lawn. Sounds were muffled by the trees, but equally by a wall of still, silent buses awaiting their next trip. There was a man-made water fall - a brick wall ending in a cement pool filled with sand and rocks. I heard a mother explaining to her young, enraptured children: "see, it falls all the way from the top to the bottom."

Gutman spoke of nature as a cue for reminiscence, a connection to the past. What of those city dwellers, never exposed to the wilder landscapes of at least countryside? What of those who never see the land they live off of, to whom the built environment seems natural. Nature's presence in the city reminds us about the natural processes upon which we rely. A nature-filled city creates a connection for those who would not otherwise see it.

Canada is a country brimming with immigrants, and a diversity of plant life which reflects this heritage. Consider the Kobe-Japanese Steak and Seafood House on Alberni which has a small Japanese garden on the sidewalk outside their entrance, replete with Japanese plant life. The diversity of urban dwellers begs the question: Which species should be used to regreen cities? Vancouver is a mixing and melding of ethnic back-



The Kobe-Japanese Steak and Seafood House

grounds, and our built physical landscape already reflects this diversity. We should use plants that may or may not be indigenous, but that will survive the stress of the built environment and the local climate. Val Schaefer agrees, and says that this is the only way to deliver a positive view of nature in cities.

Cornelia Oberlander, Canada's premier landscape architect and the creator of the Robson Square landscape, feels a need to mix indigenous and introduced species in

her designs. She echoed the importance of finding hearty plants to withstand pollution but also uses introduced plants "that are beautiful." Robson Square has an eclectic mix of different reds, greens, yellows and browns contrasting the drab gray that is otherwise found in the city. It "gives you a lift" as Oberlander intended. Aesthetics play a significant role by drawing the eye and the pedestrian to a view or place.

The Sheraton Vancouver Wall Centre, at Burrard and Nelson, had an open space filled with trees, pansies and other plants, large rocks, and benches surrounding fountains. This place satisfies both my taste for instinctive natural beauty but also a personal aesthetic. I have loved buildings since I was a small child and find beauty in this towering, shiny structure. Across the street was an ESL school with walls made of blue and green tiles adding to the beauty conjured up by surrounding plants, in and outdoors.

Look up. At Robson and Hamilton, over the Subway fast-food restaurant, notice the rooftop garden. Green roofs are insular and energy saving. They increase city biomass, biodiversity, and habitat space, slow water movement, and reduce the urban heat island effect. Vancouver has many, the most renowned designed by Cornelia Oberlander, sitting atop the Vancouver Public Library's central branch. She believes roof gardens are a way to "take care of land that is replaced" by the built environment. Further integration occurs when plants are left to grow and cover walls of a building. At the corner of Melville and Thurlow a cement wall is completely covered by several varieties of climbing plants, all slightly different shades of green.



At the corner of Melville and Thurlow

Hotels are an especially great source of city nature, hosting shrubs and planters in and around the entrances to their lobbies, and many with rooftop gardens. The Rosedale Garden hotel on Hamilton has a lobby full of plants, several rooftop gardens and a mural of a naturescape alongside the indoor pool.

Not all of the core's natural spaces are "good spaces." On Melville, to the west of a government building, there is a sheltered, natural-looking space. The plants are

glassed in from the seating area, and the view is punctuated with a derelict building and a multileveled parking lot. Nature is contained, the integration is poor and it has an overall sterile and unappealing feel to it. As with indoor spaces, plants alone do not connect humans to nature. The dysfunctional space may contain elements of the natural environment, but lacks interaction with those elements. To this must be added a respite from city noise, and a sense of isolation. Serenity at the corner of Georgia and Beatty is improbable, the Georgia Viaduct to one side, and an industrial building spouting smoke and toxins on the other.

We have visited Robson Square, Park Place, and Burrard Station. These, plus Cathedral Place, and the space from Hastings and Hornby to the Canada Place promenade represent the densest green linkages, the best green spaces in

Vancouver's core. And yet they do not form sufficient green space to bring a natural feel to a large built environment.

Christine Spinder, Director of Development at the Stanley Park Ecology Society, suggests that companies should allow their employees to garden in company green spaces providing a less manicured and formal landscape. She would like there to be less pruning, in an attempt for a more natural and beautiful form, "most true to internal workings." Another tangible solution to introduce nature into cities, suggested by Dr. Roseland, is to enforce a bylaw promoting green walls, described as vertical green houses, and green rooftops. Despite common perception and skepticism, Mark Roseland says that "nature is reality," it is "very tangible, very real" and plays an indispensable role in urban living. We need to play upon the beauty and connection

that nature can bring to the city to improve the human experience.

The nature that is integrated into Vancouver's core is not comparable to that found in the jungle. Jungle nature is natural nature. It does not require humans to modify, select, or maintain it. When combining the real and concrete jungles, nature becomes part of the human dominated landscape. It would be naive to think that by reintroducing small pockets of the natural environment the ecological deficit will be paid. It is unnatural nature, a step away from the concrete jungle towards a more bearable environment, but only to benefit urban dwellers and urban living.

Nature in the city is indoor, outdoor, under-cover, on walls, on rooftops and wherever else it can survive. This unnatural nature is connected to ourselves, and our health and well being. It is our city's health, a lesson to be learned, and

a representation of our city's diversity. It is beauty. In *Man and Nature* Yi Fu Tuan wrote that cities are "the most powerful expression of man's conquest of nature," but as Cornelia Oberlander says "long before we built any buildings, we built a garden."



Georgia and Beatty