

finance matters

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illustration by andrew zbihlyj

Real Urbanism

What is it, and do we want it?

Real estate prices in Canada's major cities have never rivaled those in the world's largest cities, even when Canadian markets are at their highest. One explanation for this reality is that real urbanism has eluded Canada—the kind of urbanism that creates value.

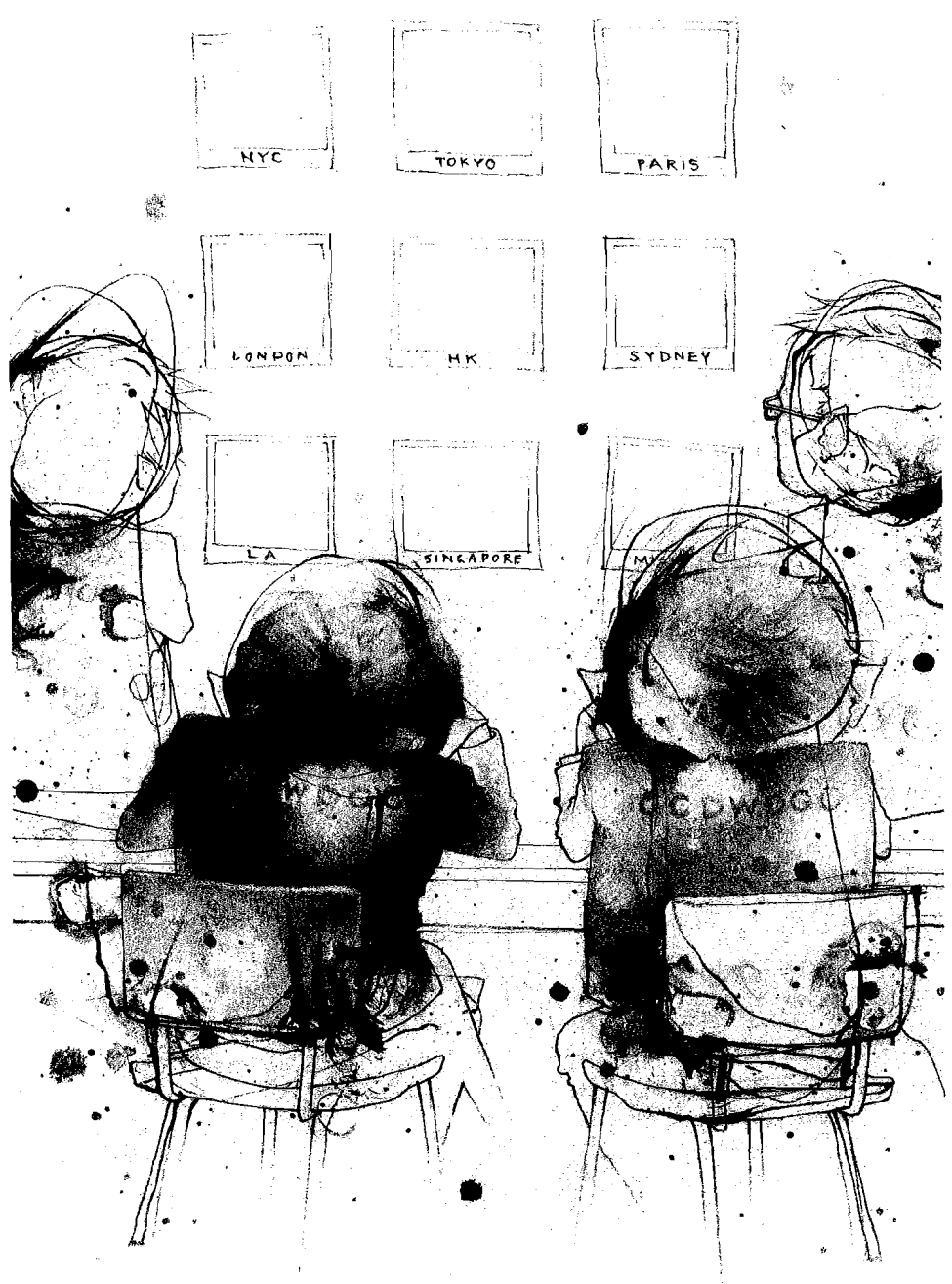
Our big cities may be growing up, but when you scratch away what is a mere dusting of urban patina you reveal the true greenery that colours our uniquely Canadian obsession with the natural environment. That obsession seems powerful enough that it is preventing us from creating the kind of urbanism that characterizes real cities.

Real urbanism is about intensity and complexity. Complexity can be found in design, in use, in multiple ownership and in civic decision-making. It's where things overlap, often making the public realm—the streets, sidewalks and public squares—active, dynamic and interesting. Real urbanism is about a distinct and definable character with a sense of authenticity that creates a unique identity. It's what gives a particular location a "sense of place", attracting people to gather, linger or explore.

Often that distinctiveness and unique identity comes from traditions that have evolved over time. Places evolve over time with layers of decision-making, development, attitudes and lifestyles. Infrastructure ages and is replaced while, perhaps, buildings stay in place and their relationships to that new infrastructure creates a new character.

Real urbanism is also about those special public places, where unplanned and spontaneous social interaction occurs. It is about accommodating a range of human behaviours and letting them influence the sense of place in an organic way.

From time to time, we have deluded ourselves into thinking that Toronto, Montreal or even Vancouver are on the same page as



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cities like London, Tokyo, Paris, New York, Milan, Singapore or Sydney. Not only are Canada's oldest cities unable to claim a section on history's timeline long enough to even register, our newer urbanism lacks the diversity, authenticity and complexity that makes for truly great places.

This criticism isn't meant to diminish the quality and character of the lifestyle we've claimed for ourselves in Canada's main urban centres. After all, Vancouver is up there at the top with Vienna and Melbourne in the most recent Economist Intelligence Unit survey that ranks the easiest cities in the world for expatriates to live in. Montreal wasn't far behind in sixth position and Toronto rounded out the top 13 global cities.

Walk down any street in Toronto and Montreal and our good fortune is obvious. These big cities have avoided much of the urban decay experienced by similar-sized cities south of the border. Meanwhile, Vancouver's temperate climate, seaside setting and rugged surrounding geography have allowed Vancouverites to honestly argue that their pursuit of year-round physical pleasure is unmatched anywhere else on the globe.

The peaceful diversity among people that we enjoy as part of our urban character in all of Canada's big cities is also a strong endearing quality when you measure quality of life. These characteristics of a city contribute to lifestyle but they are low on the list of indicators of true urbanism.

In order to develop a true urban fabric, you first need to understand that different habitats exist in places that have different qualities and those habitats exist to primarily support certain species and the activities associated with those species. A wilderness habitat, supporting a diversity of flora and fauna is different from an urban habitat that supports the desires, needs and pleasures of human beings.

We've so far been unable to order our progression of habitats to achieve true urbanism in Canadian cities. We don't seem content with maintaining the wilderness habitat at the edge of our urban centres and instead we seem to constantly struggle with wanting to recreate the vestiges of a wilderness habitat in areas that should be truly urban.

Renowned U.S. architect and planner Andrés Duany, who is considered the godfather of the new urbanism movement, recently used a biblical analogy to describe this phenomenon to Vancouverites when he suggested they were "attempting to preserve Eden and create the New Jerusalem simultaneously".

Duany was pleading with Vancouver's environmental activists to concede that the redevelopment of a brownfield former sawmill site on Vancouver's Fraser River waterfront should include a stretch of the riverbank designed as a truly urban space. He argued against preserving the project's entire riverfront as a natural habitat by restoring the once industrial area to its earlier pure natural state.

Instead he argued an embankment should be built along part of the riverfront to allow people to have direct access to the water's edge. "Fish might have rights, but so do people," Duany argued. Vancouver is an excellent example of the Canadian way of developing its own brand of the urbanism. It's an urbanism that has achieved many of the goals espoused by the theorists of the new urbanism movement. Vancouver's transformed downtown is now a dense, compact and walkable community where people actually live, as well as work. It also has a number of distinct neighbourhoods with a mix of housing types and diverse commercial high streets along historic street car lines.

This style of urbanism in the downtown core is becoming a model that planners, architects and developers from other North American cities are turning to for cues.

Andrés Duany hailed Vancouver's downtown as the best form of urbanism created in the last half of the 20th century. But he also identified that the next challenge Vancouver will face, like other Canadian cities, will be reconciling what he called "your quasi-religious" beliefs around preserving the natural environment. "The unfortunate thing about urbanism," Duany lectured is "that you can't have it all. You will have to choose."

London-educated and South African born architect and urban designer Lance Berelowitz has been a keen observer and critic of Vancouver's evolution as a city since he first arrived there two decades ago. He recently wrote *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination*, part astute social commentary, part natural history review and part urban design critique—in which he poses the question at the outset: is Vancouver a real city?

He characterizes Vancouver as "a kind of cut-out city that is like a backdrop for a natural setting that we love and admire so much". Berelowitz points to the city's over-planning, the kind of excess that constrains that organic evolution that adds the real urban patina to a city. While other North American cities may be looking at Vancouver's new residen-

tial downtown community as a model, Berelowitz contends that Vancouver has hardly anything to teach to places like London, Paris, Berlin and New York.

He also echoes the same refrain that Duany and others have touched with their observations about Vancouver's obsession with its spectacular natural setting. An interesting observation Berelowitz makes about Vancouver's embrace of nature and its seaside setting is the fact that Vancouver's only places for social interaction and civic celebration are its beaches and seawalls. Vancouverites don't gather in one contained space within the city, but rather they spread out along the circumference of the city—looking outward.

There are few opportunities along Vancouver's public waterfront to dine or drink and almost none to shop. Vancouver's Park Board staff are still shell-shocked from the animosity generated by a proposal they championed in 2003 to replace the existing Parks Board concession stand and lifeguard station at Kitsilano Beach with a new commercially-operated two-level restaurant building. A group of area residents went so far as launching a Supreme Court challenge to try to stop the restaurant from being built on the beach. They were joined by environmental activists who warned that this "thin edge of the wedge" spelled an end to Vancouver's tranquil beaches and naturally beautiful parks.

Proponents of the restaurant development argued that not only did the new building simply replace existing dilapidated public buildings at no cost to the taxpayer, but the same site was home in the 1920s to a much larger multi-use building that offered a range of concessions and activities for beach goers. Obviously, Vancouverites of that era were more accepting of an intense brand of urbanism along their waterfront.

Cities around the world are beginning to tackle the broad objective of urban sustainability. They are moving toward re-making downtown core areas much the way Vancouver has in recent years and much the way Toronto and Montreal are currently headed. But they are not doing this at the expense of an urban fabric that has developed over time. The future challenge we have in Canada's big cities is developing a new value creation strategy that preserves the pristine tranquility of nature that surrounds our cities and allows us to embrace the next level of urbanism with which our cities can become urban centres on par with the world's best cities. ©