

Vancouverism: hybridisation and spread of an urban model

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The transformation that downtown Vancouver has undergone – which has since become a reference, known as “Vancouverism” – has involved building residential towers and creating public spaces that pay visual attention to their surroundings. Nicolas Douay looks into the origins of these transformations and the ways in which this new urban model has been disseminated.

In a context of metropolisation, cities create images, values and ideologies. These may be tangible, through the realisation of urban developments, or intangible, via the creation of a particular urban ambience. This desire to find a brand image chimes with the trend for neo-localism (Goetz and Clarke 1993), whereby local elites implement policies promoting the specificities of a given territory that can, in certain cases, serve as “models”.

Here, these urban models designate the substantive features (urban forms in particular) and procedural characteristics that can serve as references in situations where they are reproduced in another city or adapted from one city to another (Peyroux 2014). Accordingly, the notion of “policy transfer” (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000) refers to a process by which knowledge about the policies and administrative and institutional arrangements implemented in a given political system (past or present) is used to develop policies and arrangements in a different context. Exchanges of information of this kind are based on different commonalities of ideas, practices or expertise (Peck and Theodore 2010; Stone 2004). In the context of metropolisation, these transfers of models are essentially focused on cities, which are the most important strategic knowledge and exchange hubs, ahead of states (McCann and Ward 2011).

Against a backdrop of high levels of immigration, the city of Vancouver in Canada is in the unusual situation of being both a receiver and an emitter of these internationally disseminated urban references. The aim of this paper¹ is, on the one hand, to identify the characteristics of Vancouver’s urban policies, particularly its Asian origins, and, on the other, to question its role as a model through the notion of “Vancouverism”. It also seeks to highlight the agents responsible for the spread of Vancouverism – first in North America and then in the rest of the world – and, lastly, to present the limits of this notion.

“Hongcouver”: the influence of Asian immigration on Vancouver

Vancouver has undergone rapid growth punctuated by different waves of international migration. For example, Asian influences can be seen in the urban space. Indeed, the city’s Chinatown – one of the three largest in the Americas – is almost as old as the city itself.

According to the 2011 census, in the Greater Vancouver regional district (“Metro Vancouver”), the proportion of immigrants was 50.5% (compared to 32.9% of Canadians by birth and 16.6% of non-permanent residents), while the proportion of “visible minorities” was 62.1%. Asia dominates

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the “ethnic landscape”, with 41.4% of immigrants coming from China and 10.6% from South Korea. More specifically, Hongkongers dominate the Chinese community and participate in the transformation of Vancouver’s socio-cultural life (Chang 2000). Four events boosted emigration from Hong Kong to Vancouver, with an intensification in the 1990s: first of all, the entry of the Red Guards into Macau in 1966, which heralded a period of instability affecting Hong Kong, then still a British colony, at the time of the Chinese Cultural Revolution; second, the signature of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, which laid down the conditions for the territory’s future handover to China; third, the events of 4 June 1989 on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, which sparked fears for similar repression after the handover; and fourth, the handover itself in 1997, which took place in a context of financial – and subsequently also real-estate – crisis. These waves of immigration regularly fuelled Vancouver’s cycle of growth and even led to changes in the city’s urban form as a result of the import of new architectural references.

From a desire for density to the import of new references

After the Second World War, plans to densify downtown Vancouver were put forward. Arthur Erickson,² in his essay *Project 56*, had even drawn up comprehensive sketches proposing a vertical city with numerous tall buildings. These suggestions did not materialise in the urban planning of the city, and the construction of towers in 1960s and 1970s were not a response to any particular vision. Indeed, like most North American cities, the bulk of the urban area’s growth at this time took the form of expanding suburbs, while the urban core became less dynamic.

Later, in 1991, the city council sought to boost the attractiveness of downtown Vancouver and set about increasing population density in the urban core, in line with debates under way at the time in North America that had begun to take the importance of sustainable urban development into consideration and condemn the adverse effects of urban sprawl. The city council changed its urban-planning rules and zoning schemes, and offered developers the option of building tall condominiums on sites previously earmarked for employment. Major real-estate projects were also the subject of public debates where exemptions from planning rules would be offered in exchange for building social housing or public amenities. Long-term consultation bodies, known as “design review boards”, acted as forums for the negotiation of these standards, the conclusions of which then applied to builders in the areas where they were compulsory.

² Vancouver-born architect Arthur Erickson (1924–2009) enjoyed great international renown and made his mark North American architecture in the second half of the 20th century.

Figure 1. Downtown Vancouver

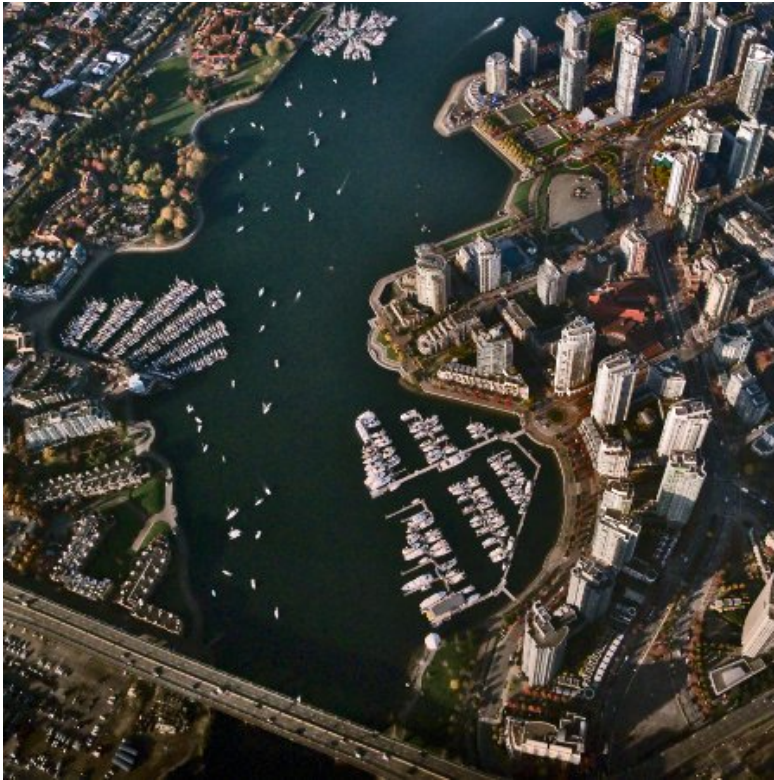


Source: (cc) Evan Leeson, 2009 (www.flickr.com/photos/ecstaticist/3693708662).

Former industrial and port installations were transformed in order to host Expo '86; these areas became places of experimentation where these new principles could be tested. A 97-hectare (240-acre) piece of land alongside False Creek was sold to Hong Kong magnate Li Ka-Shing, chairman of the 11th biggest conglomerate in the world, and the largest in Hong Kong, whose business empire had essentially been built on real estate. Via his company Concord Pacific,³ this project benefited from capital generated in Asia, but also saw the import of architectural and urban styles (Hubregtse 2008) marked by high population density.

³ Website: www.concordpacific.com.

Figure 2. False Creek and the Yaletown neighbourhood



Source: (cc) Evan Leeson, 2009 (www.flickr.com/photos/ecstaticist/4057939786).



Source: (cc) Mark Faviell, 2013 (www.flickr.com/photos/markfaviell/8365602645).

Indeed, Hong Kong's urban development (Ng 2008; Douay 2010) is characterised by the spatial limitations of its territory, the presence of protected natural spaces, and, consequently, built areas of very high density that occupy just 20% of the territory's total area. This has taken the form of "vertical" development, with the erection of many towers (Shelton and Karakiewicz 2010). Initially, these towers were mostly public housing, as a result of a policy in favour of social and intermediate housing that was developed from the 1950s onwards and intensified with the creation of new towns. More recently, by contrast, in line with trends observed in North America and Asia alike, condominiums – high-end private residential complexes – have flourished.

Li Ka-Shing's real-estate group has therefore played a key role in the proliferation of these kinds of upscale buildings. The various towers are all tall and narrow, making maximum use of building rights and benefiting as much as possible from views over the bay. Concord Pacific's buildings in

Vancouver would therefore make use of expertise developed in Hong Kong in order to make the best possible use of the new possibilities offered by changes to the city's planning regulations.

Vancouverism: defining an urban model through hybridisation

While the references mobilised by city councillors and technical officers are linked to the North American context, and in particular New York, as the symbolic figure of dense and vibrant downtown areas, Li Ka-Shing's company imported new references and played a role in the hybridisation of the new urban-planning model that was then in the process of being defined. Within the context of a collective learning process, this is not a question of simple transfers, but rather of redefining and constructing an urban-planning model by hybridisation, blending American and Asian influences.

This urban configuration was theorised, primarily by Trevor Boddy (2003, 2004), via the expression "Vancouverism", which is often summarised as a combination of New York and Hong Kong. On the one hand, the brownstones of 19th-century New York, typical of Harlem and Brooklyn, were the inspiration for the "podiums" that allow Vancouver city blocks to retain their traditional dimensions on the ground while increasing the overall density (as they generally comprise four or five storeys) in order to provide more vibrant public spaces reminiscent of New York streets. On the other hand, contemporary Hong Kong inspired the city's tall, slimline towers. The combination of the New York podium and the Hong Kong tower corresponds to a collective learning process involving the hybridisation (Boddy 2013) of references with the aim of (re-)defining Vancouver's urban model. Accordingly, the city's new 30- to 40-storey towers are essentially residential, as in Hong Kong, but have the advantage of being less oppressive for pedestrians than conventional towers, as they are built on podiums two to four storeys high that contain housing and/or retail premises. They fit in with the contours of traditional downtown blocks, preserving lively public spaces organised around the street, and thus offer a diverse range of functions and uses. In concrete terms, the two decades of transformations in downtown Vancouver have resulted in a multitude of architectural hybrids that have incorporated high-density housing, high-quality public services and a commitment to viability.

Vancouverism is more than just a prototype for these new, high-density towers; rather, it is about ensuring openness with respect to the local environment by preserving sight lines that provide views over the neighbouring sea and mountains, reclaiming the seafront by developing a large number of public spaces, and all the while encouraging mixed uses. The effect of all these changes has been a diversification of urban functions, a reduction in traffic levels and journey times, and, above all, a renewed vibrancy in the city centre.

Figure 3. Erickson Building, by Concord Pacific



Source: (cc) Glotman Simpson, 2010 (www.flickr.com/photos/glotmansimpson/7000661429).

There would appear to be certain limitations to these incredible transformations. The fact that the city's towers are essentially residential has meant that of the 83 hectares (205 acres) of new developments approved for downtown Vancouver over the last decade, 90% are condominiums. Today, with rising real-estate prices, the city centre is losing office space and turning into an inner-city "bedroom community" where only the most affluent socio-professional categories can afford to live. Furthermore, Vancouver lost a third of its jobs in company head offices between 1999 and 2005 (Brown and Beckstead 2006). This "de-downtownification" (also observed, on a different scale, in places like Detroit) leads to the construction of extensive transport infrastructures in order to allow city-centre residents to commute to the suburbs for work. Outbound flows from the urban core begin to far exceed inbound flows during the morning rush hour. And soaring property prices lead to a residential specialisation, to the detriment of functional diversity.

The global spread of the Vancouver model

The spread of Vancouverism corresponds to a social and collective process that is based on exchanges between different groups (Peck and Theodore 2010). The definition and subsequent circulation of the Vancouverism concept owes much to professional real-estate networks. Concord Pacific put its experience to use by reproducing the same kinds of architectural and urban "language", importing it from Hong Kong to Vancouver, and now to Toronto. Moreover, professional urban-planning networks, together with local political and technical elites, show off their practices and participate in their dissemination. This role as transfer agents came to the fore during professional events such as the UN's World Urban Forum, held in Vancouver in 2006, or the

London Festival of Architecture 2008, where the Canadian government chose to highlight the Vancouverism concept as the country's key contribution that year to architectural and urban best practice. The promotion of Vancouver as an urban model corresponds to an urban marketing strategy that has been circulated among different groups. While it has not necessarily been used by the same property developers as in Vancouver, the notion of Vancouverism has become a reference in terms of urban design that has inspired creations in San Francisco and even in Dubai, with its new Marina district.⁴

Figure 4. How the model has spread

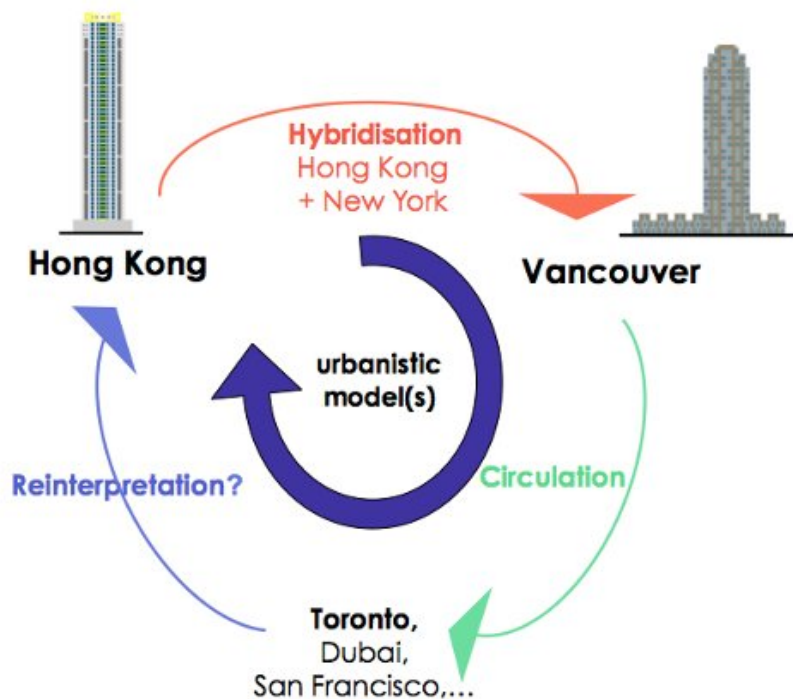


Diagram: Nicolas Douay.

Ultimately, while the spread of Vancouverism may sometimes be the result on almost identical real-estate projects developed by the same groups, the dissemination of this kind of urban model tends rather to take place in stages in the context of carefully chosen discourses, partial ideas, or even syntheses. In other words, the spread of Vancouverism can be likened to a collective learning process between a number of emitting agents and a number of receiving agents that plays an active role in the definition of contemporary models for sustainable urban development.

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⁴ See here: www.bcbusiness.ca/tourism-culture/false-creek-dubai.

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