FUTUR

BY CHARLES MONTGOMERY

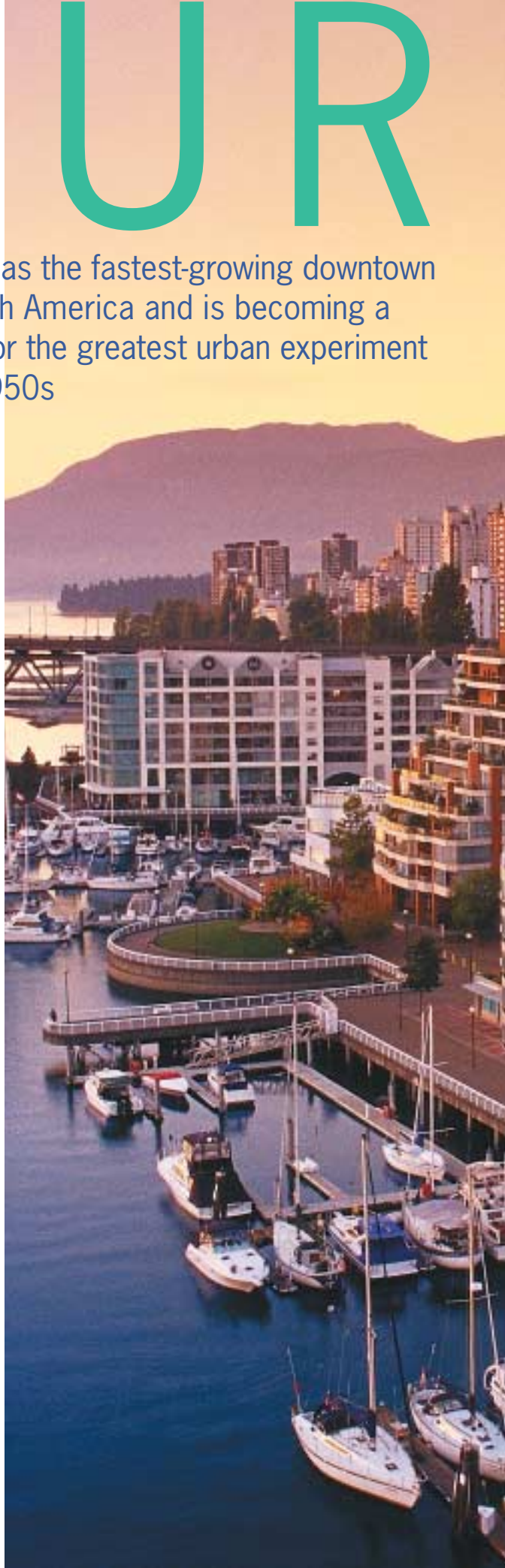
Vancouver has the fastest-growing downtown core in North America and is becoming a showcase for the greatest urban experiment since the 1950s

It's evening on Vancouver's downtown peninsula. The rain drifts in curtains, streams along windshields and storefronts, cascades from umbrellas, rushes in swaths down the blackened pavement. The 1100 block of Alberni Street glistens with reflected neon streaks, traffic-light green, bicycle tail lights. The cars are backed up, idling, steaming — some damn thing is blocking the intersection up at Bute Street.

If you were behind the wheel on this night, you might feel as though you were living the same gridlock nightmare experienced by rush-hour commuters this time of day in cities across North America. You would be wrong. The intersection is congested not by suburb-bound SUVs but by people on foot, great thick columns of them splashing across the crosswalk like ducks, unconcerned that you might have a bitter hour to go before you make it home to your supper.

These pedestrians are part of the greatest urban experiment to take place in Canada in half a century, one that has made Vancouver the envy of city planners across the continent. Within the five square kilometres that surround this corner, more than 80,000 people are doing what was once considered unthinkable: living in the downtown core without private backyards, lawns, two-car garages, basement rec rooms or junk-filled attics; without the sheer square footage of living space that so many North Americans have come to expect as a birthright. Tens of thousands of Vancouver's downtown residents will walk, cycle or take public transit home from work on this torrential night while their commuter counterparts sit in their cars, drumming dashboards, cursing the traffic and pondering the cost of gas and the endless parade of big-box outlets, parking lots and fast-food joints that will mark their path all the way to suburbia.

Now, if you weren't driving tonight, if you were, say, realtor Bob Rennie, you would be positively giddy about this scene as you shook the rain from your umbrella at the corner of Alberni and Bute. Not a day goes by that Rennie doesn't give thanks for the fact that back in the 1970s, the citizens of Vancouver rejected proposals to punch a freeway through the city. Congestion, he says, is his best friend. That and high gas prices. Together, they make it much easier to convince people that their lives would be richer if they traded their



A forest of high-rise condos is sprouting across Vancouver's downtown peninsula, turning the city core into a cluster of vibrant neighbourhoods, unlike many urban centres that fill with office workers in the morning and become empty streetscapes in the evenings.

JANIS KRAULIS/MASTERFILE


EVILLE

suburban dream homes for a piece of Vancouver's vertical experiment.

"It's a lifestyle contest," Rennie says, pointing toward the sky where, through a thousand glowing windows, we can see a thousand televisions twinkling blue. "Whoever gets home to his book, his TV, his frying pan or his workout first wins. Well, those folks up there have won, haven't they?"

Fresh-scrubbed, impeccably urban, eyes sparkling with optimism, aw-shucks affluence and the reflected light of his BlackBerry, 50-year-old Rennie looks rather like one of the models in his condo ads. When it comes to his latest project, the 61-storey Living Shangri-La tower across the street, he's also his own target market: upper-floor condos are priced at more than $2 million.

Once, well-off Vancouverites would have turned up their noses at the idea of living cheek by jowl, heaped up into the sky.

"Not anymore," says Rennie. "People are giving up big houses at signature addresses — two-to-four-million-dollar homes — because they want this lifestyle. You want to keep up with the Joneses? Well, the Joneses aren't buying an extra SUV. They are selling their cars and moving downtown."

Besides lining the pockets of condo dealers, this urban revolution has utterly changed Vancouver's downtown, a 20-block-long peninsula bound on two sides by the sea and capped by the magnificent rain forest of Stanley Park. From most aspects, the skyscrapers of the central business district have disappeared amid a forest of glass spikes rising 30 storeys or more above the tide lines of Burrard Inlet and False Creek. One hundred and fifty of them have shot up here since the late 1980s, making this the fastest-growing downtown in North America. With 40,000 new residents in 20 years,

The city is a model for a new kind of urbanism. Called Vancouverism, its principles are being applied in communities across North America.

Condo king Bob Rennie (LEFT) has helped turn downtown Vancouver (MAP, OPPOSITE) into an urban village of high-rise homes. The city obliged developers to ensure that their properties include such as grocery stores and restaurants (TOP).

the downtown population has doubled. Buyers have largely forgotten the city's mid-1990s leaky-condo crisis and are scrambling to join a community that is expected to grow to 120,000 in the next two decades.

Flogging condos outfitted with designer cabinets and views, Rennie admits, is not an act of altruism on a par with, say, searching for a cure for cancer. Yet the condo king's faith in the new downtown reflects the tremendous success of the efforts of politicians, planners and, yes, sometimes even cold-hearted developers to create a new kind of city that some say is more liveable, more vibrant and more sustainable than the kind North Americans have been building for nearly a century.

Their efforts have made Vancouver the model for a new kind of urbanism. Planners are so enamoured of the form that a new word has entered the urban-design lexicon. It's Vancouverism, and its principles are being applied across North America and as far away as the Persian Gulf. But as the architects of Vancouverism have learned, it takes more than vertical neighbourhoods to create an urban utopia.

More than 150 new condo towers have risen in Vancouver's city centre since the mid-1980s, and more are under construction (RIGHT). For the most part, they aren't large living spaces, so people tend to spend more time outside, enjoying the network of parks and paths along False Creek (BELOW) and English Bay.

During the Industrial Revolution and well into the 20th century, city centres were harrowing, polluted places. Planners imagined that people would be better off if they lived away from the smokestacks of industry and the stress of work life. The explosion in private car ownership, particularly after the Second World War, made their dreams of pastoral residential utopias feasible. Suddenly, the middle class could drive home to a facsimile of country living, complete with ornamental trees and private lawns but without the hassles of agriculture or predatory wildlife. Suburbia was born.

It all seemed to work quite well, for a time. In the United States, the federal government invested in vast webs of freeways to carry citizens in and out of town. Canadians followed suit, though to a lesser extent. Those freeways filled with commuters,

STEVEN FICK/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC; ALL PHOTOS THESE PAGES: ILJA HERB

so we built more, and they stretched farther and farther into the countryside, rendering suburbanites even more dependent on their cars. Meanwhile, downtown life began to wither across the continent. The freeways had made it just too easy to leave cities behind.

Even without a downtown freeway, and despite its spectacular setting between the mountains and the sea, Vancouver's core had hit a funk by the 1980s. The office-skyscraper boom that defined the skylines of so many cities was over. The waterfront mills and rail yards on the northern shores of the shallow inlet of False Creek were being abandoned. People and business were heading for the suburbs. Some people hoped that Expo 86 would reinvigorate the city. It did, but in a way nobody imagined.

Dawn, and the rainfall has eased on False Creek and the former site of Expo 86. The baristas are arranging deck chairs on the sidewalk outside Urban Fare, the upscale grocery store and café that anchors the new Roundhouse neighbourhood, which borders the creek. If you're looking for a $100 loaf of bread or a sighting of the city's most powerful people, this is the place to be.

The civic elite all seem to have moved to the inner city. There's former mayor Philip Owen, barely out of his pyjamas, wandering past with his morning coffee. The new mayor, Sam Sullivan, just eased out of bed in a high-rise condo a few blocks from here. Art Phillips, the mayor who rejected the downtown freeway in the 1970s, lives several blocks away, in a tower in the new Coal

Before Expo 86 (ABOVE, LEFT in 1981), the north bank of False Creek was a mix of rail yards and abandoned mills. It was utterly transformed for the world fair (OPPOSITE, in 1986). Today, it is a trendy inner-city neighbourhood (BELOW).

'There was no street life,' Beasley remembers. 'It was dead. We worked on this place for a decade. I thought, "What have we done wrong?"'

BELOW: C. HERYET/MAXXIMAGES.COM; ABOVE: B. SPROUT/MAXXIMAGES.COM

Harbour development with his wife, Carole Taylor, British Columbia's Minister of Finance. Jack Poole, chairman of the 2010 Olympic Organizing Committee, recently bought an apartment just west of here. And now here's Larry Beasley, one of the first wave of buyers in the new downtown and also the man most responsible for championing Vancouverism at home and around the world.

Beasley, the city's co-director of planning, is jet-lagged. He's spent the past week lecturing urban planners in Calgary, Edmonton and Mississauga, Ont., about the virtues of high-density neighbourhoods. He should look like hell, but Beasley, a crisp-collar and silk-tie man, never plays the rumpled bureaucrat. This morning, he's got the snowflake pin of the Order of Canada on his lapel,

Larry Beasley, Vancouver's co-director of planning (RIGHT), says the old Expo 86 property has become a showcase for the city's philosophy of urban development — high-density, mixed-income housing with plenty of parks and facilities for families.

RIGHT: ILJA HERB; ABOVE: KAJ SVENSSON/VIEWPOINTS WEST

and he exudes the same pressed urban intensity and optimism as Rennie. It's the look of a believer.

Vancouverism's high priest, Beasley is an evangelist for urban density. Today, he's every bit as much the salesman as Rennie as he shows off what he views as his greatest success: this, the first and most ambitious of the new downtown neighbourhoods, which sprouted from the site of Expo 86.

Beasley sips his decaf and pulls me out among the dog walkers and bicycles crowding the street edge. He's shown this scene to dozens of visiting planners and politicians. "All the ideas we invented, we put into practice right here," he says. "This is as complete a manifestation of our ideas of urbanism as we have."

Those ideas are about more than verticality. Sure, the towers around us are tall — some rise more than 30 storeys — but they are slender enough to preserve the mountain views so sacred to Vancouverites. Yet the most remarkable feature of this landscape is not what's in the sky but what's on the street. Each tower is supported by a podium with a minimum of three storeys of townhouses or commercial space, ensuring that the street level remains vibrant, detailed, warm. "No blank walls allowed," Beasley says, adding that the streetscape is a rejection of modernism's cold efficiency in favour of the theories of urbanist Jane Jacobs. The scene hasn't yet achieved the organic unpredictability for which the author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* advocated so forcefully, but there is that detail, that slowness, and there are bodies, faces, eyes everywhere.

Beasley is unabashedly boastful about the successes of this area, partly because it was seen as an abject failure in its first years. After Expo 86, the provincial government sold the entire site of the fair to Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing. For only $145 million, Li got 67 hectares in the heart of the city.

Vancouver's shorelines and mountains funnel urban sprawl (MAP), into farflung communities, such as Coquitlam (BELOW), in the Fraser Valley.

This may seem a shockingly good deal for the developer until you factor in the remarkable range of amenities that Beasley and his team negotiated in return for rezoning land from industrial to high-density residential and some commercial. Seventeen hectares of parks, a waterfront promenade, a community centre, eight daycares, a fifth of the units devoted to social housing — all of this paid for by the developer. It was a measure of just how much power civic governments can wield when they flex their discretionary zoning powers. These lavish amenities — and the tightly controlled streetscape — are how Vancouver's dense downtown differs from Manhattan or Hong Kong.

The planning process for the new community was collaborative, involving flexible guidelines and a design panel rather than rigid rules. It drew participation from thousands of members of the public. The city's development permit board, of which Beasley is a member, reviewed and approved the final product.

The towers went up. Thousands of people moved in during the early 1990s. But, to Beasley's horror, the sidewalks remained desolate.

"There was no street life," he remembers. "It was dead. I thought, 'We worked on this place for a decade. What have we done wrong? Maybe our theories don't work. Maybe there was some sort of magic we missed.'"

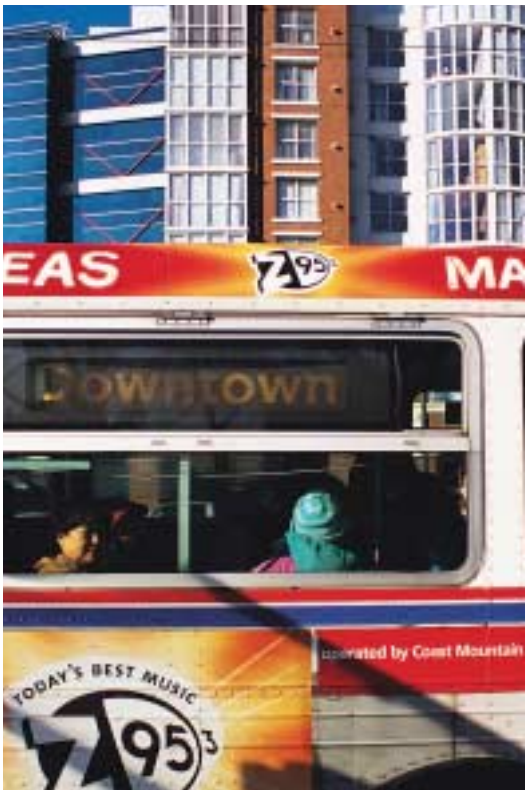
What was missing was time — and that first grocery store. A decade later, the sidewalks are buzzing with runners, commuters and coffee nomads, even before sunrise.

Higher-density living is teaching Vancouverites how to live without cars. Two-thirds of all trips in the downtown area are now made on foot (ABOVE), by bike or via public transit (RIGHT).

"When Urban Fare opened in 1999, people finally started walking down the street here to get their milk instead of driving back to their old grocery stores," says Beasley. "Then came the shops and video stores. Walking — that's what made this neighbourhood."

This collaborative process — offering developers density in return for public amenities and good streetscape design — would become Vancouver's modus operandi for the entire city core. In 1991, Beasley's department rezoned much of the commercial core to allow residential development where once only offices, small commercial, small industrial and parking lots were permitted. This "Living First" strategy gave the core a shot of adrenaline. Developers snapped up empty lots, underutilized office buildings and warehouses, converting them all to condos and other residential units. Real estate became a high-energy sport, according to Rennie. On one project, he sold 493 units in a single day, long before construction had even begun. Buyers didn't get much more than a room or two in which to live,

Suburban residents are more likely to be obese and suffer a range of chronic health problems than residents of inner-city neighbourhoods.



FAR LEFT: GORDON FISHER/MAXXIMAGES.COM; TOP: CHARLES MONTGOMERY; LEFT: ILJA HERB

but they did get parks, community centres and art galleries, all paid for without tax dollars.

The densification project began as a way to revitalize the city by drawing people from the suburbs. As such, its success has depended on more than the creation of liveable neighbourhoods. The inner city is not just a place. It's an idea, and it has suffered a miserable brand image for the past 50 years.

'TV tells us that the inner city is dirty and dangerous. Well, that's a lie. We've created the safest and cleanest neighbourhoods in North America.'

The rooming houses and cheap hotels of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (ABOVE) shelter some of the city's poorest people. As new condo developments march toward it, planners are working to revitalize the neighbourhood without driving the most needy onto the streets.

"I don't watch TV because it's so anti-urban," says Beasley. "The culture is always telling us that the inner city is dirty and dangerous, that we should head out to where it's green and safe. Well, that message is a lie. We've created the safest, cleanest neighbourhoods in North America. We've created spaces worth celebrating. People are starting to figure that out, but we still need to change the culture."

Vancouver, for all its density, now consistently lands at the top of surveys rating the world's best places to live. (In 2005, it ranked highest on the Economist Intelligence Unit's list of liveable cities.) The downtown model, with its walkable neighbourhoods and plentiful amenities, is being lauded as not only more liveable but more sustainable than just about any city on the continent.

First of all, people are learning to live without cars. Two-thirds of all trips in Vancouver's downtown are now made on foot, by bike or via public transit, the latter being much easier to provide when people aren't scattered over hill and dale.

The dense urban form also results in healthier citizens. Study after study has found that residents of post-war suburbs are more likely to be obese and to suffer far more chronic health problems than their counterparts in more walkable neighbourhoods. (See sidebar on page 60.)

The most crucial effect of density is on the environment. It may sound counterintuitive, but the urban jungle is greener by design.

"The gentlest way to treat nature is to live in a place where you are more likely to see concrete than trees. That's because density is more efficient than sprawl. It gobbles up less farmland, less wilderness," says Clark Williams-Derry of Northwest Environment Watch, a Seattle-based green watchdog. The group now champions Vancouver as the example American cities should be emulating.

Not all of this is due to Beasley's dense downtown. Ann McAfee, Beasley's co-director of planning, has spent the past two decades convincing residents of Vancouver's traditional neighbourhoods to accept new village centres with apartment blocks amid their detached homes and shaded streets.

Now, more residents live in compact neighbourhoods in Vancouver than in any of the North American cities the group has studied. Compare the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) with Seattle, its nearest neighbour. For every 100 new residents, Seattle has gobbled up more than 6 hectares of land, while Vancouver has required less than 2.4.

The good news is that other cities are following Vancouver's example. San Francisco has adopted the Vancouver model to revitalize its Rincon Hill neighbourhood. Chicago's planners have used it to assuage neighbourhood fears about residential density. Vancouver developers are leading the transformation of San Diego's downtown into a dense, walkable residential district. Toronto, Ottawa, Seattle and Shanghai have called in Beasley for advice.

Vancouver was in the throes of self-congratulation last year when Trevor Boddy, *The Vancouver Sun*'s architecture critic, noticed something alarming. While Rennie was selling the 61st floor of the Living Shangri-La tower for more than $7 million, while empty nesters from New York and Hong Kong and Switzerland were scooping up Vancouver waterfront condos for vacation homes, while Beasley was lecturing Seattle's city council on streetscape design, while we were all crowing about the magnificence of it all, the vertical city appeared to have sprung a leak.

"The whole world is scrambling to live and play on our downtown peninsula," wrote Boddy, "but not to work." There was so much money to be made selling condos and lofts that nobody was building new office towers. In fact, a dozen commercial buildings, from office towers to warehouses, had already been converted to residential

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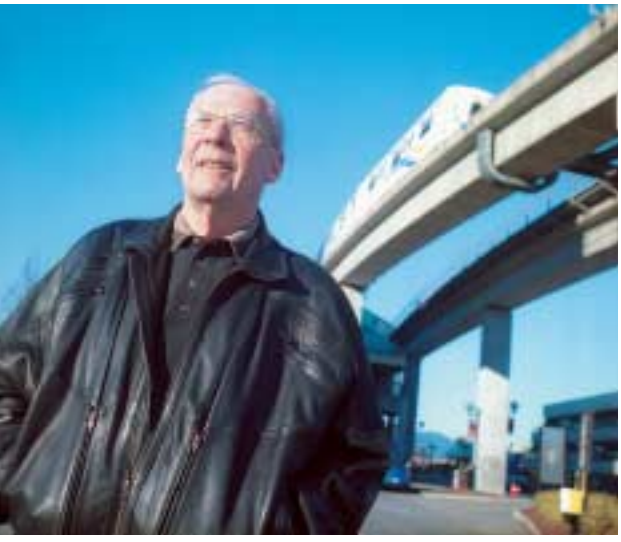
in the previous decade. The Living First strategy had been too successful. The downtown was in danger of becoming, on one hand, a resort — 30percent of Rennie's waterfront condos were being purchased by foreigners — and, on the other, a bedroom community to the suburbs. Ridership projections for the city's new airport rapid-transit line predicted more people commuting from downtown out to the suburb of Richmond than the other way around. Was Beasley's liveable downtown becoming just another part of the sprawl that density is supposed to combat?

Vancouver quickly slapped a moratorium on office conversions in the central business district. But the leakage issue points to a much broader crisis with roots not in Vancouver but in the desperately competitive environment of suburban politics.

There is no centre in Surrey — just a mall and a lone office tower presiding over a collage of vacant land, parking lots and 99-cent-pizza joints.



The former mayor of suburban Surrey, Bob Bose (LEFT), says his community could have been the second great city in the greater Vancouver area. Instead, it has become a sprawling, haphazardly developed suburb with some of the worst gridlock in the region.

In 1996, all the municipalities in the greater Vancouver area signed on to a sustainable development plan calling for dense town centres, world-class public transit and the protection of the region's rich agricultural land. Unfortunately, these municipalities compete with one another for tax revenues. The result? Like so many big cities, Vancouver is ringed by endless kilometres of single-family homes, big-box outlets and cheap, warehouse-style business parks. More new office space is being created in these disconnected suburban business parks than in Vancouver's downtown.

Bob Bose, a veteran councillor in the mega-suburb of Surrey, is as intimate as anyone with this game. From 1987 to 1996, when he was mayor, Bose had a plan as big as Beasley's. He committed Surrey to building its own dense downtown. It would grow around the last three stops of the SkyTrain, the elevated rapid-transit line linking Surrey with Vancouver.

Bose pulls his silver Toyota Corolla up beneath the SkyTrain, runs a big hand through his white hair and gazes through thick glasses at the epicentre of his disappointment. There is no central city here — just a mall and a lone office tower presiding over a collage of vacant land, parking lots and 99-cent-pizza joints.

"This area was supposed to be the region's second great city, but just look at it," he says. "We have let office parks suck the investment energy right out of this place. Why would businesses invest here when they can locate in an office park at a quarter of the land cost?"

Bose pops a throat lozenge and hits the gas. We motor back and forth across Surrey's grid of hodgepodge development. A gravel pit here. A Home Depot there. A golf course. A hillside buried under 600-square-metre mansions on large lots, nowhere near a school or so much as a corner store. An industrial park hosting not industry but a banquet hall, a hairdresser, an insurance agent, a bridal shop. No buses. No centre anywhere.

Bose explains Surrey's part in Vancouver's job-leakage problem thus: Surrey, desperate for investment, converts its industrial land to cut-rate business parks. Accountants, software firms and travel agencies locate in these parks instead of in the more expensive downtowns of the region. Heavy industry, now rendered homeless, lobbies for the rezoning of distant agricultural lands to industrial. Raspberry patches are plowed up. The dominoes fall. And every family buys a second or third car because none of these workplaces is dense enough to be serviced by public transit, and neither are their cul-de-sac neighbourhoods. Bose says the result is that Surrey, one of the least dense areas in the region, experiences some of the worst gridlock in the Vancouver area.

More than half the world's people now live in urban areas, and almost all population growth is expected to occur there. The future will be defined by what happens in cities. Will we design them to use more or less energy? Will we preserve or pave the agricultural land that often surrounds them? Will they be liveable? And if we do design liveable cities, places with the parks, lively streets and mixed uses of Vancouver's downtown, who among us will be allowed to enjoy them?

In 2002, urban and environmental thinkers from around the world met in Melbourne,

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Australia, to draw up a set of principles to guide the design of sustainable cities. The Melbourne Principles for Sustainable Cities (see www.canadiangeographic.ca/indepth), which have now been adopted by cities around the world, invite communities to care for nature and to consider their ecological footprint. But they also suggest that cities can never be truly sustainable unless aspirations and opportunities are shared among all their citizens. Economic strategies should not trump the basic human rights of sustenance, hygiene and shelter. Meeting this principle is, increasingly, Vancouver's challenge.

Before Expo 86, hundreds of poor residents of the city's gritty Downtown Eastside were evicted so that their meagre lodgings could be converted to hotel rooms. Rents shot up around the city. Linda Mix, a working single mom at the time, lost her apartment. She's been fighting for low-income housing in the city ever since.

Mix points to the Roundhouse neighbourhood, with its community centre, parks and seawall, as a symbol of the economic gulf growing between those who can afford to buy into the liveable downtown and those who cannot. City Hall required 20 percent of the apartments on the site to be reserved for social housing and 25 percent of the units to be "suitable for families." The downtown has attracted some families in the past two decades. However, the percentage of children living downtown appears to have declined, as a percentage of total population, in 2005.

That's because skyrocketing property values have squeezed middle-income families out to the suburbs, says Mix. The gap between rich and poor has grown twice as quickly in Vancouver as it has in the rest of the country. She argues that this is more than an issue of social equity. Making space for the middle class is crucial if the city is serious about sustainability.

"The city needs its middle-income people to function," says Mix. "Bus drivers, police officers, nurses, teachers — none of these people can afford to live on False Creek. We've now got young professionals living way out past Surrey and driving an hour to work in Vancouver. Imagine if they could afford space here. They would be two-bicycle families instead of two-car families."

Vancouver has yet to find a solution to its narrowing midsection. The current city council has balked at proposals to devote a third of the units around the 2010 Olympic Athletes' Village to middle-income housing. But, says Mix, recent efforts to house the city's poorest citizens have been extraordinary. For one thing, Vancouver has managed to harness the very market forces that saw people thrown on the street back in the Expo years.

The gap between rich and poor has grown twice as quickly in Vancouver as it has in the rest of the country.

Vancouver's rocketing property values mean the city's bus drivers, nurses, teachers and other middle-income earners are being driven out to the suburbs, says affordable-housing activist Linda Mix.

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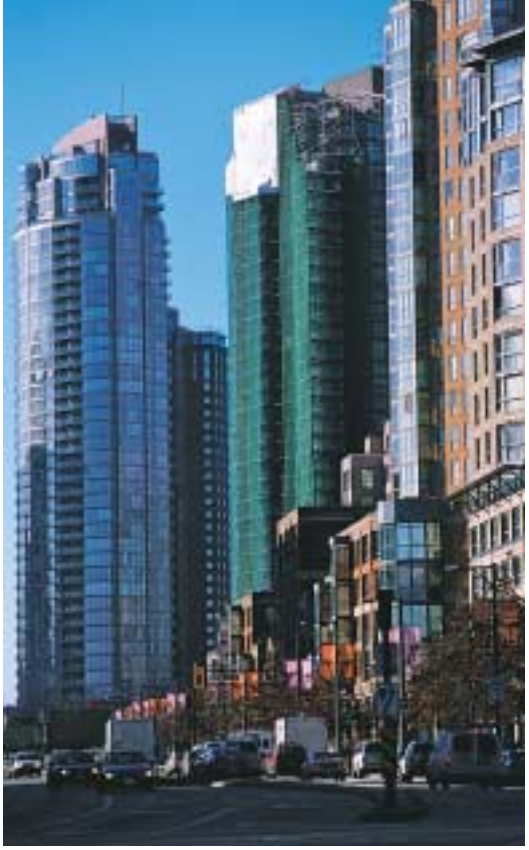
In 2004, Larry Beasley announced to a banquet hall filled with developers that it was going to be increasingly difficult to find new residential sites downtown to develop, and that they should go east if they wanted new building sites. This "east" included the Downtown Eastside, best known as the home of Canada's first government-sponsored drug-injection site. This neighbourhood was once a vibrant shopping district, but its fortunes plummeted when Woodward's, the six-floor department store at its core, went out of business in 1993. Without the anchor merchant, shoppers stopped coming to the area. Entire blocks of stores were abandoned. The streets were commandeered by drug dealers. This is Vancouverism's shadow, a case study in distilled misery, grinding poverty and open drug use. And yet its residential hotels have long provided shelter for thousands of the city's poorest people.

Is it possible to revitalize a poor neighbourhood without pushing out the poor?

If this were the eve of Expo 86, those residents would be bracing for eviction, says Mix. But Vancouver may have learned something from those

years. Developers are no longer permitted to destroy cheap one-room lodgings without creating an equal amount of replacement housing for the poor.

Then there's the vacant shell of that old department store. Vancouver's city council finally bought the Woodward's building in 2003. The council wanted to bring new life and new amenities to the neighbourhood, but it also wanted to build 200 apartments for the poor. Everyone was keen on the project. Hundreds of residents put forward ideas.



Prices for upper-floor condos in towers such as these on Pacific Boulevard start at more than $1 million.

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Problem was, the city didn't have the money to build much of anything. What it needed was the financial muscle that made Vancouverism work in other parts of the city. It needed condominiums, and it needed believers.

In 2004, local developer Ian Gillespie agreed to finance and build on the site a public plaza, retail space and plenty of offices for non-profit groups. The province, in turn, would finance 200 units of social housing and Simon Fraser University would construct a downtown campus for its School for the Contemporary Arts. In return for his contribution, Gillespie got the right to build as many as 536 condominiums in the air above it. In essence, condo buyers would help pay for the revitalization of Canada's poorest neighbourhood.

The deal was something of a miracle in that it required faith. Insiders say Gillespie would never have ventured into the neighbourhood if not for Bob Rennie's constant reassurance that yes, people would pay downtown prices to live above what now resembles skid row.

In the past year, Rennie has spent more than a few afternoons wandering among the boarded-up shops and needle-strewn alleys of the Downtown Eastside. On this Saturday, as the sun finally begins to push through the January overcast, the condo king seems strikingly out of place in his designer trousers and spotless Keds. He self-consciously presses a 10-dollar bill into the hand of the ragged fellow who stops to show him a swollen and deformed leg. The two Vancouvers shake hands.

"Not everybody wants to live next to a guy like that," Rennie says after the encounter.

Neighbourhood of the future

A 32-hectare site bordering Vancouver's False Creek still bears the calluses of century of sawmills, foundries, shipyards and ironworks. But it also bears the hopes of those who wish to build Canada's first model sustainable community. Even before the official groundbreaking on March 10, the project, which will include the Athletes' Village for the 2010 Olympics, had already profoundly influenced a new generation of architects, designers and builders.

As in the dense downtown, residents here will be able to work, shop and play within walking or cycling distance of their homes. But that is just the beginning. Builders will be encouraged to use the latest in energy-efficient building envelopes. Rainwater will be collected and diverted to irrigate rooftop vegetable gardens. Cars will have a tough time finding parking, but there will be room for bikeways and electric tramways. Energy generated from sewage will be used to heat most of the neighbourhood.

Vancouver decided early on that the Southeast False Creek lands would be a testing ground for the city's response to *Our Common Future*, the United Nations report that defined sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It was a tall order, recalls Mark Holland, who was hired as the city's first sustainable-development planner for the site in 1996.

"Sustainability is supposed to address the most pressing concerns facing humanity: energy, climate change, water and other resource shortages, ecosystem disturbance, food, health, safety and economic development," says Holland. "We had to figure out how we could address all this on one piece of land."

The process brought in academics from local universities and thousands of citizens, who envisioned a lush, vibrant community housing a wide range of income earners. It also engaged local builders and architects, who set their minds to figuring out how sustainability could translate into built form. Today, although work has just begun on the False Creek property, Vancouver boasts some of the country's most lauded green buildings.

"The site has become a laboratory for green thinking. It is informing projects all over the city," says Holland. Take Vancouver's National Works Yard, which collects and diverts rainwater to its toilets. Or the new BC Cancer Agency's Research Centre, built in part with recycled materials.

"Vancouver was the first out of the starting blocks, but now sustainable design has become a national agenda," says Thomas Mueller, president of the Canada Green Building Council. A new generation of energy-efficient residential towers and walkable neighbourhoods is emerging from Victoria to Calgary to Toronto.

Sadly, while the green movement has gained momentum nationally, it may be faltering in Vancouver. In March, the new city council dropped the requirement that one-third of the units in Southeast False Creek be devoted to middle-income housing. That will likely mean people who work in the new neighbourhood's daycares and shops may have to commute from distant suburbs. Ironically, Mayor Sam Sullivan credited the decision to concerns for economic sustainability.

C.M.

"But he's just trying to survive in his own way. And he's not going away."

Rennie hops from foot to foot, gazing up at the stern brick facade of the Woodward's building. It's hard to tell whether he is scared or enthralled by his new mission. Rennie needs to find 536 condo buyers if the city is to succeed in delivering the rest of its promises.

This time, his marketing campaign features not the cheery empty nesters, Armani furnishings or ocean views of False Creek but graffitied walls and scarred faces, images of the neighbourhood's grit and resilience. "We're not trying to hide anything about this place. This is not going to become False Creek. Nobody should expect Tiffany's to move in. You want to know what we're telling people? Be bold, or move back to suburbia."

Mount Baker in Washington State towers over the horizon for townhouse dwellers in Port Coquitlam, one of the most distant of Vancouver's many satellite cities.

Rennie is counting on the success of the Woodward's project to boost the value of a property he's already bought around the corner, in Chinatown. But there is tremendous power for good in the sheer force of his optimism.

If Rennie finds those buyers, if Woodward's does bring together the city's rich and poor, then surely the definition of Vancouverism will need to be revised. The city's greatest success will be shown to lie not merely in the design and marketing of elegant towers and the preservation of views but in the potential for governments, developers and citizens to create a city that works for all people.

That dream requires a creative, activist City Hall willing to use its power to extract public benefits from developers and other levels of government. It demands engagement from citizens. But most of all, it requires faith in the very idea of the city and in the notion that people really can be happy living close to one another. It will take some convincing for North Americans to come home to that idea, but as cities continue to grow, it will become among the most urgent of causes. It has gained an evangelical spokesman in Beasley, who is quitting Vancouver's City Hall this year to promote his version of the dream city across the continent and around the world.

GORDON FISHER/MAXXIMAGES.COM

Charles Montgomery's first book, The Last Heathen, *won the 2005 Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction. He researched this story using a bicycle and public transit.*

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Suburbia's health hazards

When Larry Frank moved to Vancouver to take the position of the J. Armand Bombardier Chair in Sustainable Transportation, at the University of British Columbia, he chose a cramped townhouse on the edge of downtown rather than the expansive house in the suburbs he could have bought for the same price. It was a choice informed by the better part of 15 years spent examining the alarming relationship between urban design and health.

"When you choose where to live, you are not just buying a home," says Frank. "You are buying into a community that will influence the air you breathe, how you travel, and whether you are socially and physically active. Are you going to spend your time sitting in a car or on your feet?"

What Frank and other researchers are discovering is that living in suburban sprawl is bad for your health.

In two recent studies based in Atlanta, Georgia, Frank's team found that people who live in walkable neighbourhoods are twice as likely to get the recommended half-hour of exercise per day than those living among the culs-de-sac of suburbia. For every extra hour per day spent in a car, people are six percent more likely to be obese.

"If you spend your time on your feet, you're lighter," says Frank. "And if you spend your time on your ass, you're heavier. It's as simple as that."

Given that nearly one-quarter of Canadians were obese in 2004, Frank hopes that urban planners and health authorities will take note.

But suburban living does more than simply make people fat. In 2004, a study assessing the relationship between sprawl and a broad range of chronic health disorders found that people living in the suburbs of big cities are more likely to suffer arthritis, breathing disorders, digestive problems, headaches and urinary-tract problems than people living in more compact cities.

In 2003, U.S. researchers found that the suburbs don't even offer protection from the hazards many people associate with inner-city life. According to the study, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, people who live in sprawling metropolitan counties are more likely to die in car accidents than those who live in compact neighbourhoods. Another paper in the same journal found that even when pedestrian-fatality numbers were added to homicide statistics, it was still more dangerous to step outside your door in the suburbs than in downtown.

Not a bad reason to live in town. Here's another: one morning this past winter, Frank had to rush in to downtown Vancouver for a 9:30 meeting. He waited until 9:26, then hopped on his bike. "I made it there safely," he says with a laugh. "And I was almost on time."

C.M.