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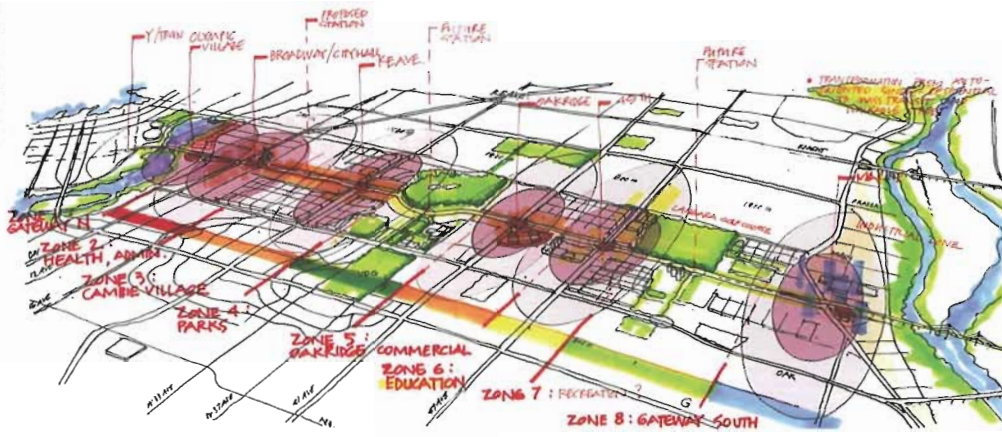
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VANCOUVER'S QUEST FOR ECODENSITY

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TOP BUSBY PERKINS+WILL CONSIDERS INCREASED DENSITY WITHIN THE CITY AS AN INTEGRAL STRATEGY TO REDUCE OUR IMPACT ON CLIMATE CHANGE. THIS SKETCH ILLUSTRATES HOW DEVELOPMENT ALONG VANCOUVER'S CANADA LINE CAN EVENTUALLY RESPOND TO THE ADJACENT URBAN CONTEXT WHERE LEVELS OF DENSITY CORRESPOND TO EACH NODE/RAIL STATION. AT A LENGTH OF NEARLY 19 KILOMETRES, THE CANADA LINE WILL BE AN AUTOMATED RAIL-BASED RAPID TRANSIT SERVICE CONNECTING VANCOUVER WITH CENTRAL RICHMOND AND THE VANCOUVER AIRPORT. IT IS EXPECTED TO BE COMPLETE BY 2009.

ECODENSITY, VANCOUVER'S PLAN TO HELP DENSIFY AND DECREASE ITS ENVIRONMENTAL FOOTPRINT, IS NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES, DETRACTORS AND FAULTS.

TEXT ALAN BONIFACE

Vancouver is often regarded as a city that made the right decisions; dense urban living, no freeways, miles of public waterfront and a walkable and liveable downtown. So when Mayor Sam Sullivan set out to engage the citizenry in an exercise that sought to add an ecological component to the city's longstanding acceptance of downtown density, one would have assumed that the debate would have been fairly one-sided. Observers would likely surmise that Vancouver's laid-back sandal-clad beach crowd would be ripe for action. Reality has embraced a different stereotype; one of a city and province split along political and philosophical lines. The endeavour has exposed that many Vancouverites have proven no less short-sighted or unwilling to tackle the most significant issue of our time in a determined and meaningful manner than most other Canadians and much of the nation's leadership. However, recent moves by British Columbia's, Ontario's and Quebec's premiers are signs of an important shift.

EcoDensity is a well-reasoned proposal. It is an ambitious document which captures a series of initiatives undertaken by the Vancouver Planning Department under the direction of the Mayor and Council. The draft Charter lays out a series of neighbourhood planning and building regulations to be implemented over the next few years that seek to address climate change issues

as they relate to city-building and with a specific focus on density as the vehicle to deliver compact, walkable communities with smaller footprints. It is premised on the fact that "climate change represents the most significant environmental, economic, social, liveability and quality-of-life threat to the city's future." It sets out initiatives "to manage change, to choose and design our future, in the face of these threats." It establishes sustainable strategies for transportation and parking, green energy and waste systems, affordable housing, parks and the public realm, food systems and urban agriculture, heritage conservation and urban health.

The ultimate threshold is "carbon neutrality in all buildings by 2030," but carbon targets and other numeric measures are not specified, representing a potential weakness of the document in the minds of some.

Among these, it is the "density" component that has spurred the most debate. Density has triggered a plethora of fear-based responses. The discussion, therefore, has strayed from purely intellectual discourse to positions often centred upon one's opinion of the politics of the Mayor's office. With this as a contributing factor to the Mayor's demise, the adaptation of EcoDensity, in policy terms, remains a very open question leading into Vancouver's fall municipal elections.

One can't help but be amazed at the preponderance of NIMBYism and the seemingly endless biological imperative of humans to protect the here and now in the face of daunting, perhaps catastrophic change. And similarly, how local politicians have turned on the Mayor irrespective of the merits of the initiative, in an aggressive and at times disrespectful attempt to discredit

him. This acrimony has occurred, despite overwhelming evidence about the benefits—both socially and ecologically—of appropriately considered increased density and its profound realization in Vancouver itself, where it has been illustrated that density can be dramatically increased with a simultaneous reduction in car traffic, commuters and crime rates. This is a well-documented phenomenon of the downtown

In specific terms, this can be seen in statistics produced by Environment Canada, which has noted that Vancouver is the only Canadian city with declining commute times, due in part to 40% of downtown residents using public transit. An additional 25 to 30% walk or bike to work. Moreover, an important element is that design regulations have required that fully 25% of new units in the downtown are designed for families. Contrast this with its sister city Seattle, where downtown units for families make up only 6% of new housing.

The result is that Vancouver residents seem supportive of density on the downtown peninsula, but not in the pristine grassy backyards of the city's other neighbourhoods, where densities can be as low as 2 units per acre. Which is not to suggest that this is the ultimate destination of EcoDensity as the rhetoric might suggest. Indeed, recent revisions to the draft Charter are profound in their attempts at integrating public input, addressing misinformation and providing aggressive methods for carbon reduction. The City is poised, for example, to incorporate in its official language the statement that it will "make environmental sustainability a primary consideration in decisions about density, design and land use." Additionally, the revised draft includes specific language about mandating greener performance, not bonusing it, and a directive to require all buildings to be LEED Gold-equivalent by 2010.

A lack of clear communication of the intent of the initiative and the lack of an emergent champion beyond the Mayor has caused delay but also pause for important public input. As the document evolves as the result of public engagement and dialogue, it has become clear that the current 21 components of the plan will require both strong direction and strong political leadership to manifest its important goals.

Vancouverites—and indeed the nation—appear to be postponing and politicizing a decision that requires quick and meaningful action. Despite the obvious problems associated with urban sprawl and the negative effects of inaction, the City along with many Vancouverites seem unable to set aside historic divisions or self-serving views, blissfully ignoring the fact that Vancouver is using 300 times its own footprint ecologically and thus contributing heavily to the global prob-

lem. The truth, seldom noted in the success story that is Vancouver, is that suburban growth has far outpaced the seemingly endless pace of rising towers in the downtown core.

The rhetoric has at times been extreme, as exemplified in this statement from one opponent: “The development industry is salivating at EcoDensity because it basically gives them bonusing for putting in a green roof or putting in a flower garden.” Many have accused the current City administration of a hidden agenda. The accusations range from the pursuit of a developer-focused profit-oriented agenda on the one hand, to an ideology focused on bulldozing single-family homes and instituting a draconian LEED reality on the other. Clearly, there is always emotion and polarized positions in important debates, but in a city where the Downtown Eastside remains the most impoverished part of the country, the degree to which energy and credence is spent on such views is disquieting.

To this point, with the initiative still awaiting Council’s approval, the design and development community is testing the waters with very little certainty as to what a project’s green initiatives might mean or cost. The current version of the draft has sufficient teeth to make meaningful change if applied, promoted and supported by the community. The proof, however, will be in the community’s willingness to see the big picture and create leadership with follow-through. Upcoming projects which will put EcoDensity to the test include a reworking of the Arbutus Village commercial area on the west side, and the large provincial renewal of the Little Mountain housing development on the east side. Previous initiatives which have collided with the beginnings of EcoDensity include a housing project in the Dunbar neighbourhood which spawned the insanely titled “EcoPreservation” organization, and the Norquay project which called for slightly increased housing densities along Vancouver’s Kingsway corridor, the most logical destination for density in the city.

If architects are to participate significantly in the realization of EcoDensity, there needs to be a recognition of the role of bold, reasoned communication. Where is this larger role in the EcoDensity debate? Why is it that the design community and consumers can support outrageously consumptive “icons” of design which evidence no intention of a sustainable economy of means? Where is the urgency from the profession and equally, from the highest levels of government? Certainly, there are some younger developers and many designers pushing in the right direction in Vancouver. Robert Brown, a local green proponent, and Mark Sheih have initiated small projects, but no one has emerged from the more established firms. Windmill Development has produced Docksider in Victoria and is initiating projects across the country, but not, notably in



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ABOVE THE ARBUTUS NEIGHBOURHOOD IN KITSILANO IS A PIVOTAL EXAMPLE OF RESIDENTIAL INTENSIFICATION. THE REDEVELOPMENT OF A FORMER BREWERY AND SEVERAL FACTORIES HAS CREATED A MEDIUM-DENSITY, LOW- TO MID-RISE PRECINCT ADJACENT TO A WELL-ESTABLISHED NEIGHBOURHOOD CONSISTING OF PRIMARILY ONE- AND TWO-FAMILY DWELLINGS.

Vancouver. Peter Busby has produced a well-conceived commentary on EcoDensity, but overall these initiatives remain the minority.

Whether one promotes consensus or a top-down approach, the latter is likely to be the only viable method for quick action in order to avert significant climate-induced problems. In this era of minority governments and carefully scripted speeches, it is difficult to see how any leader—professional or political—would be able to take the strong stance required (witness the politically safe US election debates and the paralyzing platform espoused by our federal government). EcoDensity is a current example of this as it shifts from strong idea to strong policy and perhaps—depending on the outcome of the upcoming municipal election—to nothing more than a lengthy debate. In the meantime, the city has produced 6.8 million additional tons of carbon, and the region 38.4 million tons.

The reality is that the current City administration has waded into politically fraught territory in pursuit of some fairly benign goals. As Trevor Boddy has noted, “There is little a guilty SUV-driver or even a Northern Alberta oil sands operator could not sign on to.”

The Mayor, Council and staff have initiated a debate into which all Canadians must enter, especially at the local level, and moreover have done the heavy lifting for the outlying municipalities’ most of whom have much less desire to walk a green walk through their predominantly single-family neighbourhoods.

Where does this leave the debate as the municipal election and the final draft of the EcoDensity

Charter near? Brent Toderian, the City’s recent ascendant to the Director of Planning throne, has been the one charged with shepherding EcoDensity through two years of public and internal debate. He has inherited not only a loosely defined policy statement, but the very large boots of the former Director, Larry Beasley. It is an unenviable position. Given this, Toderian and his team have done a remarkable job. The City’s recent seven nights of public input illustrated nothing if not a growing knowledge base attributable to the debate, a truly positive sign. It also illustrated some of the likely implications; for affordable housing, for pressures on local amenities, and for a rethinking of the way the city conceives of its neighbourhoods, its travel patterns, its food distribution and its energy use.

EcoDensity is, at its core, a plan to direct a city and its inhabitants through a domain of imminent change with the goal of ensuring its ability to thrive, if not actually survive. As long as citizens remain preoccupied with a vision of the world as beginning and ending with their own life span rather than the shaping of its future, they will not be able to truly debate an issue like EcoDensity with the critical mindset necessary to judge its applicability. The debate rages on, which is a great start, but the community and the nation need a stronger voice. Perhaps a voice intent on defying an apathetic body politic will rise up, as our most animated Prime Minister once did, and say, “Just watch me.” **CA**

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