

Architecture students' term project a first for Vancouver

Not since Harland Bartholomew in 1929 has a city-wide master plan been prepared

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Vancouver is one of only a few major cities in North America that does not have a physical master plan guiding change and growth.

The Vancouver Town Planning Commission hired American urban planner Harland Bartholomew in the 1920s to draft the last city-wide plan. Bartholomew's plan, completed in 1929, was never officially adopted, but did set the tone for much of Vancouver's current urban structure.

Now, more than 80 years later, the closest thing Vancouver has to a plan is CityPlan, which is anything but a comprehensive physical plan.

CityPlan is a series of nine ambiguous neighbourhood vision statements that took 13 years to complete. These visions are little more than inconclusive results of a complex polling system that tried to gauge residents' opinions on a series of choices. This "direction" was supposedly meant to provide a neighbourhood-based interpretation of how the city could pursue a laundry list of motherhood goals. CityPlan provides very little insight into how the city intends to shape growth and manage change, and even less insight as to how the city might look decades into the future.

Residents will only buy into a plan that will shape their neighbourhood and city when they are able to visualize how change will impact them. They need to see more than words on paper that speak to a vision or objective. Citizens need to be able to visualize physically how something they see today might look tomorrow.

Vancouver's planners and politicians haven't done a great job of leading this kind of planning -- especially outside the downtown core and certainly not on any city-wide scale. Their biggest hesitation comes from their fear of the wrath from residents.

But now, a group of architecture and planning students at the University of B.C. has recently crafted a master plan for Vancouver that paints a vivid and compelling picture of change in Vancouver over the next 40 years.

"Vancouver 2050 Vision" is the work of a group of about 20 students in the UBC School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture and in the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning. The students spent the last semester crafting a very realistic, thoughtful and hopeful plan for Vancouver that starts at the neighbourhood scale and works through concepts and design solutions that knit together across the entire city.

If you want to know how your neighbourhood can change as your lifestyle needs change, you can find it in this plan. If you want to know how Vancouver can accommodate a growing aging population with an adequate and diverse supply of affordable housing, you'll find it in this plan. If you want to know how we can move about a more heavily populated city when peak oil pushes energy prices to new highs, you'll find it in this plan.

Most important, this plan addresses all of these challenges in an integrated way, with real physical and spatial plans and solutions aimed at preserving the quality of life you cherish in your neighbourhood today.

There was no ducking the important realities in drafting this plan.

First, the students started with the assumption that, with current trends continuing, Vancouver's population will double to 1.5 million people by 2050, and that jobs will also double. They accepted that our population will continue to age, with more than 25 per cent of the population consisting of seniors by 2050. They also assumed that in order to meet government-mandated climate change targets, Vancouver would reduce GHG emissions by 80 per cent by 2050, most likely by reducing automobile use by as much.

They focused their physical planning and urban design around a key form-maker that already exists in Vancouver-- the historic grid pattern of streets with the main arterial streets being the old streetcar lines. Restoring street cars along almost all of these arterials, as a sustainable form of electrically-powered transportation, provides the infrastructure framework for a logical pattern of new growth. The kind of growth their plan envisages is nothing that threatens the current scale of Vancouver's built form. In fact, all of the development they propose along these arterial streets is four and no higher than six-storey buildings.

Their plan also sees existing single-family homes being allowed to transform into mini-multi-family buildings, with two or three units per home and with laneway houses.

Job nodes are strategically located throughout the city and connected by public transportation and a series of green-ways that also link community amenities, like parks and community centres. The plan also includes a creative approach to creating green infrastructure and encouraging biodiversity in the city landscape by repurposing certain streets for green uses once alternative choices are provided for public transportation. The designs incorporate a myriad of solutions in response to issues of energy use, including new forms of district energy and buildings that produce energy instead of consuming it.

This plan would be a great launching pad for a city-wide collaboration that brings citizens together to face the realities of change and connect the dots between their desires for quality of life and the planning solutions that will preserve it. The City of Vancouver would be wise to tap the talents and the idealistic enthusiasm of these UBC students and their expert professors to take their plan and turn it into Vancouver's first real masterplan through this kind of collaboration.

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