

Paperwork's easy part of design pitching to public is harder, says planner

BY KIM DAVIS, SPECIAL TO THE SUN DECEMBER 11, 2010

Like any other urban design or planning team, the 20 or so students from UBC's School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture and the School of Community and Regional Planning started with a set of projections and objectives. They imagined a doubling of Vancouver's population over 40 years, emphasizing the city's rapidly aging demographics, and a reduction of greenhouse gases to 80 per cent of 1990 levels.

Armed with unjaded enthusiasm and energy, and unfettered by such constraints and distractions as NIMBYism and city politics, the students, supported by building and landscape architect James Tuer and senior Vancouver urban designer Scot Hein, prepared a speculative -- but grounded -- "Urban Structure Framework" for the city out to the year 2050.

At a recent gathering, the framework was unveiled to some of the city's leading urban designers, planners, and sustainability thinkers, including Gordon Price and Gordon Harris, respectively director of The City Program and president of SFU Community Trust; renowned landscape architect Cornelia Oberlander; and Vancouver planning director Brent Toderian.

The calibre of the students' considerate design and planning recommendations garnered high praise from both the discerning audience and guest critics. Toderian even invited the students to present their framework to city council in the coming weeks.

Of particular interest to many of those present, were the four key themes the students adopted to guide the city's potential future form:

- Interconnected places: A way to use current transportation arterials to connect and distinguish urban spaces;
- Strategic "green" jobs: A strategy to locate and integrate thousands of new green jobs into hubs around the city;
- A "green" grid: An environmental network equal to the transportation network that presently defines the city; and
- Continuous habitat: A major, new system of affordable, accessible natural areas and parks in underserved districts.

Some of the issues raised included: "Who are we really planning for?"; "What does it take to create community?"; and "How do we engage the average person and inspire them to embrace change?"

"In no disrespect to your accomplishment, but what you have done is the easy part," Toderian told the students, in acknowledging their efforts, while comparing them with real-world challenges. "The hard part in terms of actually achieving something is engaging in this narrative with the general public."

As we all know, even the best of plans do not see the light of reality if people do not embrace them. Toderian argued that the narrative, or the story around any plan or design, is critical to its ultimate success and widespread acceptance. Even if most people support an idea, that narrative can be distorted and its implementation stymied if a particularly vocal minority opposes it.

Other audience members offered that, in order to engage the public, people need to be given opportunities to actively participate in the process, reassured that they have options, and shown how proposed change can improve the quality of their lives.

"I don't think it is enough to show a restorative idea," said Duane Elverum, an assistant professor and assistant dean at Emily Carr University. "I don't think it is enough to show a regenerative future. We're used to seeing the world as it can be, and it's not convincing. I understand the cynicism once you start getting into power structures: in politics or even university politics."

Elverum said the critical question that needs to be asked of people is: "What is one thing that if added or removed would make the city a great city?"

In doing so, he said, people are allowed to become part of the process, and feelings of distance and abstractness can be eliminated.

Another key issue that emerged from the audience was the notion of expanding how urban design and planning are defined. While the students adopted the refreshing approach that people make more sustainable choices when they are surrounded by supportive spaces and places, School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture director Leslie Van Duzer encouraged them to think beyond the physical form of communities.

She noted the "village model" that is emerging in parts of the United States, notably Beacon Hill in Boston, which allows people to stay in their neighbourhoods as they age through the delivery of programs and services that permit them to lead safe, healthy productive lives in their homes.

Undoubtedly, changing the urban form is a valuable tool in the creation of an urban landscape that can support a growing and aging population in a meaningful way. However, without the public will, any way could prove terribly long and winding. If there is one thing that clearly emerges from the work of these UBC students, it is that Vancouver is hardly bereft of ideas, plans and prophetic maps that are good, and even exceptional. It is not a matter of having the ideas; rather, it is what we, as residents of Vancouver, are going to do about them.

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