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THE “LIVEABLE” SUBURBANIZED CITY

POST-POLITICS AND A VANCOUVER NEAR YOU



Above: “Drain,” 2007. Photo: Eric Deis. Page 143: HOK Toronto, Dubai Marina, Dubai, 2008. Courtesy HOK

“Modernist, sustainable, and performative, is [Vancouver] a model for the future city?” asks the *The Guardian*.¹ “The world’s most livable city,” states *The Economist*.² “Consider it the supermodel of North American cities,” declares *USA Today*.³ The popular impression that recent urban planning and design in Vancouver has achieved something important is widespread. And one result is an array of projects and master plans throughout the world that more or less imitate Vancouver. But the Vancouver model is socially and politically regressive, promoting a suburban homogeneity, complacency, and torpor that threatens the capacity of cities to function as sites that support vitality, difference, and invention. Vancouver has been recreated in exacting formal detail in parts of Dubai and is influencing the planning of Abu Dhabi; making its mark on various cities in China; transforming waterfronts in places like Fort Worth; and inspiring greater density in cities such as San Francisco and Toronto. Vancouver now seems to sit alongside well-established archetypes like Paris and Manhattan, places that cities everywhere look to as precedent. If Manhattan is *the Metropolitan City*, new Vancouver is *the “Livable City.”* The broad appeal of Vancouver’s recent urbanism, or, as some call it, *Vancouverism*, and its influence around the world register the spatial logics of contemporary post-political liberalism.

When professional city makers (architects, planners, developers, etc.) look at Vancouver as a model, one area receives special attention: Concord Pacific Place, the birthplace of Vancouverism. North America’s largest urban master planned community, Concord Pacific Place covers 148 acres of centrally located, postindustrial waterfront with approximately 8,000 residential units, commercial space, and forty-two acres of parks. Started in the early 1990s and now close to full build-out, it’s considered innovative because it attracted large numbers of new residents to downtown high-density living at a time when such living was widely scorned. What’s more, it did this quickly and in a way that pleased citizens, developers, and government. It’s a big success. It also doesn’t hurt that its singular glassy architecture set against Vancouver’s mountain and ocean backdrop makes a great photo.

The process behind Concord Pacific Place is not entirely unique; it distinguishes itself more in ambition, scope, and nuance than procedure. It is a highly collaborative operation in which the governing public planning agency works closely with private developers (in this

case, one) to produce a “livable” community as opposed to discrete buildings or blocks. This involves private financing for elements deemed essential: community centers, day care, schools, and parks. The planning agency shepherds capital to the common good while ensuring developer profitability. A key aspect is that community assets are made available at the same time as residential units: The community center at Concord Pacific Place was among its first buildings.

Vancouverism’s form is determined entirely by what local protagonists identify as “livability criteria,” a series of factors aimed at lending a comfortable ease to city life. This translates into maximizing views and providing open space, recreational opportunities, civic amenities, and commercial functions like shopping within walking distance. Concord Pacific Place achieves this through specific architecture and urban design. A public promenade runs along the entire False Creek waterfront and 30% open-space coverage occurs in a series of parks. Its architectural building block is the podium tower, a hybrid building type that combines row housing and commercial and amenity programs in a low-rise podium from which one to four residential point towers rise. The podiums are rationalized as devices that ensure a lively, pedestrian-oriented streetscape through their diminutive scale and relationship to the ground. The slender towers and the significant distance between them create density while allowing sunlight to reach the sidewalk and increasing views from inside the residential units and within the cityscape.

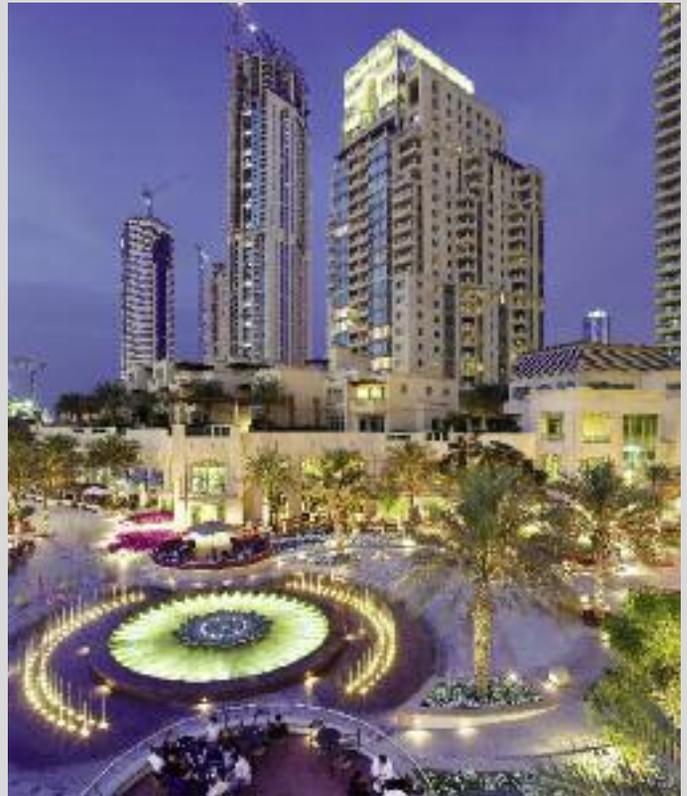
Cities that reference Vancouverism do so in varying degrees and ways. Some replicate its form wholesale, while others appropriate its livability criteria while maintaining aspects of their own geographic and cultural specificity. Dubai Marina, the world’s largest master planned waterfront community, duplicates its form. Developed by Emaar, the emirate mega-developer, and designed by HOK Toronto, Dubai Marina is intended to house an astounding 100,000 people. It borrows directly from Concord Pacific Place in many ways. A number of the lead people at Emaar were hired after working on Concord Pacific Place. Spatially, Dubai Marina imports Vancouverism’s public waterfront promenade, open-space ratios, and podium tower type. As Trevor Boddy, architecture critic for Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* and the *Vancouver Sun*, has observed, Dubai Marina is “almost a perfect clone of downtown Vancouver—right down to the handrails on the seawall, the skinny towers on townhouse bases, all around a 100-

per-cent artificial, full-scale version of False Creek filled with seawater from the Persian Gulf.”⁴ The only significant local contingency in this version of Vancouverism is a shift in materiality and ornament: The towers get arabesque hats and are clad with more stone.

Back in Canada, Concord Pacific Place’s developer is now building another large scale district: CityPlace near Toronto’s waterfront. It’s the largest urban development in the city’s history, and HOK Toronto, not by coincidence, is involved. Again, the reproduction of Vancouverism is palpable. Green space and podium towers are default aggregates. Window wall construction is identical to that of Concord Pacific Place. The *Toronto Star* says that CityPlace “feels as close as Toronto has come to being Vancouver.”⁵ But Toronto, a much larger city with bulkier buildings than Vancouver, has inflated Vancouverism with taller towers and larger floor plates. The result is a different ambience and grain that some critics argue is a misguided deployment of Vancouverism, one in which in an undersupply of light and views misses the core benevolence of the original model.

Shortly after Vancouver architect Bing Thom unveiled the Trinity Uptown Plan for the residential densification of central Fort Worth, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* ran an article titled, “Fort Worth, Vancouver of the South?”⁶ Unlike Dubai Marina and CityPlace, Thom’s plan is a more nuanced deployment of Vancouverism to Fort Worth’s particularities. The podium tower coexists with a broader range of building types incorporated into a plan with lavish public amenities. Trinity Uptown’s official planning document lists its first objective as “reconnect[ing] urban Fort Worth to the Trinity River” and supports this cause by citing Vancouver as its model.⁷ The plan makes a radical invention of shoreline by reshaping the river into a bypass channel, an “urban lake,” and several canals: One river is redistributed into five. This coupling of public waterfront and densification is a base proposition of Vancouverism. The large amount of public and private open space is designed for leisure and recreational activities, and the position and scaling of buildings offers a comfortable and even consistency throughout the 800-acre site.

These are three of the many instances of recent city-making traceable to Vancouver. Why has Vancouver become so influential? There are many answers, but the most compelling and significant one looks to the logics of contemporary liberalism that are powerfully shaping globalization.



Many observers have identified British sociologist Anthony Giddens’s concept of a centrist Third Way as best exemplifying the defining political character of globalization. The Third Way fundamentally influenced Tony Blair’s formulation of the “Radical Centre,” and its contours can be distinctly identified within the Clinton and now Obama administrations.⁸ The policies of the WTO and the World Bank as well as the opinions of business figures such as Bill Gates and George Soros can all be read as versions of Third Way liberalism.⁹

As a simple but powerful political stance, the Third Way purports to transcend divisions between left and right by mixing policies of both. As Giddens states, it “goes beyond those on the right who say ‘government is the enemy’ and beyond those on the left who say ‘government is the answer.’”¹⁰ The Third Way thus appears to abandon the ideological divide between capitalism and socialism for an ostensibly smarter, post-ideological pragmatism. Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian theorist, describes this trajectory as a shift to “post-modern post-politics,” an operational state in which “the conflict of global ideological visions is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats...and liberal multiculturalists.”¹¹ This collaborative process, according to Žižek, is marked by a negotiation of interests that produces compromise in the guise of universal consensus. Its policies appear simply to be “ideas that work,” whatever their ideological origins.¹²

VANCOUVERISM'S MIXED USE DOESN'T EXTEND MUCH BEYOND HAVING A GOOD LATTE, ORGANIC PRODUCE, DESIGNER SHOPS, AND HAIR SALONS CLOSE TO ONE'S CONDO. THE INCLUSION OF WORK SPACE IS TOKEN AT BEST.

A vital component of post-politics is multiculturalism. The process of negotiated interests operates, by necessity, in a milieu in which every group of people, every Other, is accounted for and given a place within the social structure. As Giddens postulates, the Third Way necessitates a “cosmopolitan state,” a social space that possesses “values to which all are committed, but... accept[s] ambiguity and cultural diversity.”¹³ The crucial thing about this position is that the differences that constitute *otherness* are held to be locatable and reconcilable inside the system of global liberalism. These differences are thus thought not to be significant or profound enough as to problematize the system itself. Through ever-increasing specificity, identity politics can offer all people their rightful place at the table.

The degree to which Vancouverism correlates with contemporary post-political liberalism helps explain its proliferation. As a dominant ideology of globalization, the Third Way has become common intellectual currency. Building Vancouverism is one way to invest in this currency. By achieving negotiated compromise in the guise of livability, Vancouverism successfully realizes the spatial implications of the dominant globalizing order.

As a process, Vancouverism is an exceptional model for synthetic planning in which government and private capital produce a space for both social good *and* profitability. In this manner its delivery method is a prime example of the type of collaboration that defines the post-political era. More significant, however, is how the spatial logic of Vancouverism resonates with the worldview of post-political liberalism. Livability is the ultimate “idea that works.” It aims to rescue civic community from the perceived failings of the Modernist city by generating newly safe and healthy communities. How could

anyone argue with that? Its fundamental move is to bring large numbers of inhabitants into close proximity while proactively mitigating potential negative outcomes of this density. The way it does this is essentially through a negotiated compromise of space that synthesizes the urban with the suburban.

Larry Beasley, the co-director of Vancouver's planning department during the inception of Concord Pacific Place, has been explicit about how Vancouverism's incorporation of suburban attributes enables it to successfully attract residents from the suburbs to the city center.¹⁴ From this vantage point, Vancouverism can be described as a Third Way urbanism, beyond the old schism of urban and suburban. If the suburb succeeded in achieving the comfortable good life by offering the consistency, predictability, and safety of homogeneous built form and social fabric, Vancouverism offers this good life at a new scale and in a new location but through similar means. The suburb formulaic deployment of streets lined with private plots replete with the splendors of a single family home surrounded by the leisure-filled possibilities of the backyard and the visually demonstrative front lawn has shape-shifted into Vancouverism. The scale, form, siting, and visual expression of Vancouverism's architecture are likewise consistent and orderly. The repetitive insistence on the podium tower—with its small floorplate tower and ample spacing between, floor-to-ceiling window walls, balconies, and rows of townhomes—offers an order and spaciousness that once seemed anathema to the crowded chaos of the city center.

Vancouverism metamorphoses the suburban front lawn and backyard into the large scale by emphasizing the role of landscape architecture in the ambitious shaping of both private and public green space. More often than not, each podium tower is surrounded by lavishly designed and detailed landscaping. The intricate paving patterns, bubbling water features, swaths of grass, and geometric arrangement of flora that decorate these buildings at their perimeter achieve a similar emphasis on visual display in the absence of real function that mirrors the suburban front lawn. The leisure and recreational promise of the suburban backyard is maintained and amplified in Vancouverism through public space that is intensively designed and primarily programmed for strolling, jogging, rollerblading, cycling, and group sports.

Of course, Vancouverism purports to a mix of uses that the suburbs never claimed. However, in reality, Vancouverism's mixed use doesn't extend much beyond

having a good latte, organic produce, designer shops, and stylish hair salons in close proximity to one's condo. The insubstantial inclusion of work space, for instance, is tokenistic at best. All of this is highly successful at supporting a predictable and homogeneous social environment.

Condominium strata councils form the basic social aggregate of this environment and effectively police it in the safeguarding of property values. Private security guards patrol both the public and the private domains. Model inhabitants are middle-to upper-middle class professionals with urbane sophistication. A walk in Concord Pacific Place reveals a remarkably consistent code of public conduct defined by the yuppie lifestyle preoccupations of fitness, shopping, and dining. It's a controlled, safe, and hygienic version of the city that is urban in scale and density but suburban in character.

The way Vancouverism inflects urbanism with the qualities of the suburban good life vividly demonstrates a negotiated spatial and social compromise developed by an intensive collaboration between public and private city makers. In fact and in a very literal sense, the podium tower form itself is a negotiated compromise, singularly fusing more "human" scales with the scale of high density urbanism. Vancouverism's synthesis of formerly conflicting spatial ideologies—the urban and the suburban—is the example par excellence of post-politics in the making of cities.

MULTICULTURAL DIFFERENCE IS THUS REDUCED TO "LIFESTYLE" PRACTICES SUCH AS SHOPPING IN CERTAIN STORES OR DANCING IN CERTAIN CLUBS.

In 1982, Canada became the first country to institutionalize multiculturalism at a national level.¹⁵ Vancouverism emerges within this political context and can be interpreted as a multicultural construct. The values "to which all are committed" can be said to take the form of livability, functioning as a platform in which ostensible cultural/social diversity is supported while not endangering the cohesive uniformity of urban space. In comparison to the racial exclusiveness that marks much of 20th-century suburbanization, Vancouverism is

undoubtedly inclusive. While its model citizens are basically socioeconomically consistent, they are diverse in categories such as ethnicity and sexual orientation.

The positive characteristics of Vancouverism and post-political liberalism are many and undeniable. The idea of a cooperative political culture unencumbered by the quagmires that arise from the clash of old dogma is promising and full of potential. Clean, safe, orderly, healthy, and tolerant are, of course, attributes that many people want in cities. Vancouverism is not equal to the suburbs of the past and offers numerous advantages that, in themselves, deserve support and promulgation. But what might have been lost along this strange route from the suburbs to the city as a new form of suburb? What foulness might lurk within the rosy glow of the livable city? And what dilemmas hide in the type of liberalism that has given it shape? Žižek states, in response to Third Way positioning, that "far from simply liberating us from the constraints of patriarchal tradition [i.e., capitalism and socialism], the unprecedented shift in the mode of functioning of the symbolic order that we are witnessing today engenders its own new risks and dangers."¹⁶

In Žižek's analysis, the paramount risk of the post-political, postmodern liberal capitalism is that it presents a wholly new form of political denigration, one that forecloses the political act itself.¹⁷ While the negotiated pragmatism of the post-political searches out good ideas that work well, Žižek reminds us that "the political act (intervention) proper is not simply something that works well within the framework of the existing relations, but something that *changes the very framework that determines how things work.*"¹⁸ Post-political liberalism forecloses this possibility of authentic politics and does so by denying the portion of the political that is by necessity antagonistic and confrontational.¹⁹ Real politics involve a struggle between substantively different ideas that compete for the role of defining a better world, and the absence of this struggle diminishes the discursive potential of ideology to perform this role. In fact, while post-political liberalism professes the primacy of negotiated working ideas, it ensures the continued and unchallenged dominance of contemporary capitalism.

Post-politics is, as such, a myth and its popular circulation a chilling manifestation of the hegemonic disposition of today's globalization. Concurrently, multicultural difference is increasingly specific and inclusive but actualizes itself only within global capital. In this way multiculturalism ushers in its precise opposite:

the unprecedented homogenization of world culture.²⁰ Multicultural difference is thus reduced to “lifestyle” practices such as shopping in certain stores or dancing in certain clubs. Along these lines, an idea such as the Third Way can be construed as a dangerous limiting and flattening of difference, difference that could and should participate in real and substantial struggle.

Vancouverism as a spatial manifestation of post-political liberalism mirrors this foreclosure in urban terms. In its emphatic quest for healthy compromise and balance, it fails to recognize the important and positive potential of antagonism within social life. Urbanistic and architectural antagonism is the necessary correlative to radical and substantive diversity. It occurs when different people with differing agendas can actualize their specificity through diverse social habitats that are registered in the space of the city—through architecture in the broadest sense as well as through less physical social acts. It necessarily involves the risk that one may not like what the other does. It invariably entails moments and periods of discomfort.

A common popular criticism of Vancouverism is that it’s boring—too homogeneous and without edge. This critique arises exactly from the degree to which Vancouverism steers its every move toward assuring the good life by diminishing the chance of confrontation and limiting the expression of competing interests. This constraint renders Vancouverism bland, conformist, and oddly quiet and inactive, especially given its exceptional density. The cozy comforts and activities of a narrow social stratum overdetermine the model, ultimately rejecting the idea of the city as a place where different people with differing agendas and interests (ideologies) navigate the space of the city. It views that type of navigation as too messy and unpredictable.

Where are people such as workaholic office employees, rebellious punks, senior citizens, and the truly poor in the Vancouver model? Where are recent immigrants whose social habits do not mesh with its strict codes of conduct? Where is a breadth of public space that could facilitate such diversity? Where is the spectrum of building types and scales of inhabitation—both residential and commercial—that are the physical necessity of substantive diversity? By making a new and totalizing synthesis between the urban and suburban, Vancouverism forecloses spatial practices that have the potential to challenge existing frameworks: new and unforeseen programs and interrelationships, alternate ownership and rental structures, and the architecture that responds to these demands. This is not just a shortcoming of

“experience.” The constraints on citizens productively confronting each other within the city through a wide array of acts, ranging from the discursive to the architectural, mark an impoverishment of democratic culture. At its best, the radically different and confrontational city is ironically a device for peace. It provides a domain for increased acceptance of widely divergent ideologies that is opposite the closed-minded protectionism of the suburbs.

But isn’t confrontation within urbanism a bad thing? A useful counterpoint to Vancouverism in this regard is Koolhaas’s vision of Manhattanism. As a mythic and utopian condition, Manhattanism maximizes the wealth and diversity of social and, by necessity, political life. “Manhattanism is the one urbanistic ideology that has fed, from its conception, on the splendors and miseries of the metropolitan condition—hyper-density—without once losing faith in it as the basis for a desirable modern culture. *Manhattan’s architecture is a paradigm for the exploitation of congestion,*” says Koolhaas in *Delirious New York*.²¹ Congestion is, in a primary sense and in Koolhaas’s terms, a baseline of confrontational potential: the frictional collision of divergent subject desires. Its exploitation as a source of meaningful urbanism represents a comprehensive, not to mention realistic and sympathetic, understanding of human social and political life. It realizes that a city overdetermined by goals such as peace, quiet, and safety can be a limiting and conformist place.

In contrast with Vancouverism, Koolhaas’s Manhattan systematically facilitates the full expression of radical difference. Its tower frames and street grid, both neutral and omnipresent, are the vehicle for the self-realization of competing cultural conditions. Manhattanism achieves its full potential as “a collection of architectural city-states, all potentially at war with each other.”²² Koolhaas is explicit that the difference within the city is ideological and irreconcilable. “[N]o longer does the city consist of a more or less homogeneous texture—a mosaic of complementary urban fragments—but each block is now *alone* like an island, fundamentally on its own.”²³ The grid “suspends irreconcilable differences between mutually exclusive positions.”²⁴ In other words, Manhattanism is a way of city-being that exploits the antagonism of competing ideologies as a core and constituent element of desirable social life. The terms of Manhattanism have nothing to do with the terms of livability; it’s about competing ideologies, not negotiating compromise. And one could argue that a true livability would accommodate conflict.



Top: public "seawall," looking north toward Concord Pacific Place, Vancouver
Middle/bottom: Concord Pacific Place, looking west/east, Vancouver. Photos: Goran Basicic.

Of course, nobody wants violence ... political or architectural. It goes without saying that both cities and political systems require points of commonality and interconnection that facilitate desirable interaction. Manhattanism's grid is, in actuality, such a system, since it enables mutually exclusive positions to inhabit proximate space peacefully. But it does this precisely by discouraging ideological compromise. It elevates real difference while facilitating its productive coexistence. Each floor, each building, and each block is the potential site of irreconcilable difference's full development, while the "rules" of the grid maintain a minimal threshold of order and control.

Such a city is a collection of spaces that operate in divergent ways and with changing conditions of scale, form, public/private, and programmatic content and its juxtapositions—conditions that are informed by cultural preoccupations related to things such as ethnicity, religion, gender, and political disposition. It's an eclectic and lively mash-up of large spaces, small spaces, low-rises, high-rises, new buildings, old buildings, large office floor plates, small live-work studios, take-out joints, high cuisine, sparse interiors, exotic interiors, and everything in between. Sidewalks, parks, and plazas teem with wildly different people— young mothers, irreverent skateboarders, brisk bankers, chess players, Tibetan monks, anxious runaways, and many more. Experience is fundamentally shaped by chance and surprise. What is offered is an adventure into potentially shocking gestures, comic conversations, rude innuendos, unforeseen allegiances, simple pleasures, and sublime beauties. The shared act of navigating this field of juxtaposed and ever-shifting differences is itself the collective life of an activated polity. The grid exploits difference while passively limiting it to its systemic terms with the optimism that a sufficiently peaceful collective culture will emerge. Vancouverism, in contrast, seeks its commonality by devaluing difference and shaping a pervasive controlled and totalizing space. Since it is scared of the unknown and the potential perils of radically divergent subject desires, it enforces one idea of an acceptable set of public/private, scale, form, and programmatic relationships. In this sense, Vancouverism mistrusts its inhabitants.

The fatal flaw of the livable city arises from the fact that it prefaces a narrow range of criteria at the expense of a more ambitious, broader, and optimistic understanding of humanity. The way the livable city limits the social and political potential of city life reveals its para-

doxical reality: The livable city smothers living. Just as multiculturalism operates as the ideology presiding over its seeming opposite, the unprecedented homogenization of world culture, livability ushers in its precise opposite, a safe and banal city devoid of authentic substance.

A secondary and far-reaching paradox is the degree to which the unrestrained and literal pursuit of collective comfort in city planning and design often produces its inverse, existential discomfort, what can be described as a conformity-inducing repression in which difference is relegated to relatively superficial decisions such as whether to eat sushi or Thai food for dinner. Manhattanism, a modality that is outwardly disinterested in collectivity, produces what it seems to disregard: vibrant collective culture. So should Manhattanism fight back against Vancouverism?

Koolhaas's mythic Manhattan is a thing of the past, if it ever existed at all; for decades Manhattan has been something different. It too has become livable. What's more, it seems unrealistic to argue for a return to a previous state. Žižek believes that the relentless trajectory of global capitalism makes a movement toward previous desirable and more radical forms of political culture futile. The question is then: What new forms of urbanism will rescue us from our current predicament, the paradoxical predicament of a deathly livability? The task of imagining the new urban devices, the new grids, which suspend irreconcilable differences between substantially different city dwellers, allowing them to radically coexist both physically and ideologically, simultaneously together and separate, is one of the most pressing tasks facing urban design and city planning today. ♦