

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY TRANQUILITY  
THROUGH DESIGN:  
CUES FOR BOISE FROM VANCOUVER'S RECENT  
EXPERIENCE

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As Boise emerges as the important city in this part of America, our focus here today is on your efforts to make this city vital and relevant based on your realization that this will not happen by accident and your aspiration to actually design your city for the future. I'm glad to be back in Boise, following up on my first visit about four years ago, to see that you have started to build a constituency for civic design, an articulate leadership for civic design and good community understanding of the importance of civic design. This takes time, but once this all gels, you are in a pivotal position to make strong and fast progress, as a whole community movement, toward the city that you want to become. This is an exciting moment for Boise!

Now, a big part of this is about economic development; positioning Boise in the region as the competitive, preferred centre for the business and commerce that can be enticed to come here and stay here, supported by a growing, ready and well-heeled resident population - this is the new reality of competitive cities in a world where people can go wherever they wish to work and live.

But the other part is about making Boise work well and become more and more fulfilling for all your citizens - this is about offering here in the community the variety of housing and the jobs-and-housing links that keep people here and draw them out of the commuter rat race and make their lives better. This is a discussion about attractions and attractiveness; and, of course, this is a discussion about placemaking, especially focussed on what people identify as the heart or epicentre of Boise. It is about being creative with what you already have in your community and how you can shape that into the image that you want the city to become. It is about understanding the practical constraints to achieving this kind of place and

getting specific on the actions that need to be taken to realize your dreams for the area.

More than anything, you know that this is about actually designing your city, rather than it simply being the result of random economic activity. And related to this idea, I want to start by offering what for me has been a very inspirational idea. I was in Madrid several years ago conferring with a group of European city planners and a fellow guest was the great Brazilian urbanist Jaime Lerner. He said something that I think is very relevant to this topic. He said:

“Every city has to have a design; a city without a design doesn’t know where it’s going; doesn’t know how to grow.”

-This is a very profound statement for us all because it references everything that needs to be considered in future cities - big and small;

-This is clearly a profound statement for Boise because it endorses specifically what you are now trying to do here.

-This is also a profound statement for me because it zero's in on the key to what my city, Vancouver, has been embarked upon for the last 30 years - urban design and quality of life; and why I have been invited here today..

So, knowing that the design of your city is where you want to go as you move forward, I thought I would make my contribution with a simple outline of what I have found to be the key qualities of a successful community - what the factors or elements are that, if they are at play, will give the heart of that community a high probability of success.

-You might think these factors would be self-evident or that surely there is a well-tried formula that we can apply - but it turns out that this is not the case.

-For about a century, urban management has been pursuing an agenda - primarily driven by 19<sup>th</sup> century anxieties about health and safety and, then, with mid-20<sup>th</sup> century standards for the private automobile - that has been pulling things apart, separating uses and activities and creating barriers of the very spaces, the streets, that are supposed to glue a place together.

-Moreover, from about the 1930's on, the basic art of urbanism has been on the wane - we have literally forgotten the primary principles and formulas that had created wonderful places in the past - places we still hold dear in our hearts.

-But, even had all the theories and practices been in place, it is so essential that every place find its own balances and its own personality because one of the keys to being competitive is to be different and to stand out - not to become a part of that "geography of nowhere" that is sweeping the world.

Well, starting about 15 years ago, a revival of urbanistic thinking began that is offering a link back to past successful practices and that is reframing our concepts for the city - particularly the central places in cities - for the future. It is this trend of thinking, as well as some good common sense, that you will need to tap into as you look for Boise's strategy to become a very special place.

Now, Vancouver has had somewhat of a head start on all this (for reasons I will not go into today), so we have experience both of the initiatives that could prove inspirational for Boise and of the problems to watch out for. So I will use Vancouver as an illustration of the points I want to emphasize today - not in any way to say that Boise should end up looking like Vancouver (frankly, I do not want any city to look like my beloved city) but, rather, as a tangible case in point of what is realistically possible.

-And I will use a lot of pictures of Vancouver.

Certainly I want each picture to tell its own story; but, also, taken together, I want them to give you a composite view of the overall results in this one city - just to show you how full and complete - and how fast - the transformation of Boise might be. This panorama is a good beginning. It shows how Vancouver has changed in a very short time - almost everything in all the pictures I will show you today did not exist just 15 short years ago!

So, let's turn to those features of a successful community.

I commend to you to look at your community as a living organism where all the parts have to be in sync, working together, in order to optimize health.

The first aspect of this is the interplay of density, land use mix and quality of life. The specifics will be different in every place because histories vary and tolerances vary and the underlying base of amenity values varies - but the themes seem to stay the same: development intensity brings things close together; the right balance of activities and uses means the whole arrangement is mutually supportive; and community infrastructure, along with a good dose of amenities, glues everything together and makes the place liveable. Let's take the example of Vancouver's downtown:

- Up until the early 90's we had a long history of commerce and offices in the inner city but few people staying in the downtown after 6 pm. So the most powerful policy that we have pursued since that time is an intensive, residentially-based growth strategy

that balances the natural inclination for commercial growth. We call it our “living first” strategy. It’s based on the concept of coherent neighbourhood units because consumers make housing choices based on everything essential for their day-to-day living. This includes pedestrian scale, all the amenities and services at hand and a local shopping “high street” at the centre of each neighbourhood for basic needs and to provide the places where a neighbourhood creates its culture (the standard amenities we require are listed here - they seem obvious but, sadly, are being missed in most community development around North America).

-Also essential is that open space and the public realm be used to contribute to neighbourhood identity and amenity. We’ve settled on the street as the focus of public life so we include grass boulevards and a double row of trees and lush landscaping to screen the density. We also push for ample private space in delightful enclosed courtyards and roof gardens where residents can escape to the safety and quiet of their own small garden. But ample public parks are also

vital. We've added 65 acres of new parks downtown and everything is tied together by a wonderful waterfront walkway/bikeway system which, because of the respite of the water and green, allows more density to comfortably happen.

-Density is our goal - and we want the city to be as compact and dense as we can make it. We say, "Density is our friend", but we have found that the impacts of large-scaled buildings have to be managed and cannot be left to chance or else there are some pretty unpleasant results. So we carefully regulate design (including quality materials) and preserve heritage wherever possible because heritage buildings give vital design cues for the austerity of modern architecture. Of course, security is a big issue. Security installations will never be enough and, anyway, "gated communities" are counter-productive to a good social mix and engagement. Designing buildings to minimize risk is essential and community-based law enforcement is also very helpful.

Another big problem is noise - noise can be the prime limit on people choosing dense, multiple-family living. We actually unmix some uses in residential settings to create "neighbourhood areas of tranquility" with lower ambient noise levels. But the fact is that impact problems are hard to solve. It takes strong planning policies and architectural guidelines as well as community organizations and mediation mechanisms and, even so, the struggle goes on.

-And another problem is the nearly uncontrollable impacts of frenzied new development on existing low-income areas nearby. All the development energy, unbridled, can be just another pressure to de-stabilize already vulnerable communities. Beware of land speculation and gentrification; and ignoring the endemic social problems on the street, such as substance addiction, mental illness and poverty. This is a constant stress in Vancouver that is consuming vast energy and resources.

-But back to the bigger picture, there does seem to be a formula of success with intensive development when

density and quality are tied together: the architectural solutions allow the density to work; the high density generates enough value to carry quality construction, great on-site amenities and a very nice contribution to the neighbourhood infrastructure; and the supportive neighbourhood draws all kinds of people into densely developed areas for a truly urban lifestyle.

-Now, to make the formula work, we did find that we had to tap the wealth created by the public decision to densify and I suspect that Boise will face the same realization. Local governments simply cannot cover the vast amenity costs, so we look to these to be shared by the developers. We don't touch developer profits, but the windfall land value lift can be shared if you just insist. Jaime Lerner calls it the co-efficient of "co-responsibility" or, as my Vancouver colleague, Ray Spaxman, says: it's the "magic of the quid pro quo".

-But this densification and diversification can work like a charm. Our “living first” strategy has had dramatic results: the inner city has more than doubled its population to about 100,000 people in little over a decade and it’s on its way to 120,000 people or more. The key is not to force people into this living circumstance but to make it a preferred choice for them - on their own terms.

But a diverse mix is not just about land uses and their balances, it is also about the mix of people - social mix. The principle is that the heart of a community should be accessible to everyone and the more diverse is the mix of people, the stronger and more robust is the civic economic and social culture.

-Vancouver has attacked this on several fronts.

-Our community plan targets a genuine economic mix of both non-market and market housing in every multiple-family neighbourhood (in these areas, 20% of all units have to be developed for low-income people and there is a political move to push this up to 33%).

-It also includes building at high densities for seniors and children. I want to pause and concentrate on the issue of dense family housing because it's central to any strategy to draw home and workplace close together and to engendering urban vitality in city centres. Without families these propositions could easily fail because most workers come from households with small children. Also, there's not enough young singles and older "empty nesters" to create a vibrant place. So, in Vancouver, we have special guidelines for family housing at high density and we require 25% of all new dense housing to be designed to meet these guidelines. This deals with the unit, the project, nearby amenities and the overall quality of the neighbourhood. In our downtown, families are flooding back in record numbers - we now have over 1000 row houses downtown, creating a housing option that simply didn't exist before in our city. The number of kids in the inner-city is growing by leaps and bounds - we now have over 7000 children on the Downtown Peninsula at last count. And, there's a spin-off benefit that we've discovered: if you design

a place that works well for children, it seems to work well for everyone else.

-But we found we needed to push the mix even further. Urban centres need alternative housing forms such as live-work units and lofts and, in our case because we're on the water, even houseboats; all to diversify the possibilities for households.

-But several problems persist. Inevitably a popular city exacerbates affordability problems for housing. We've not invested enough in social housing so homelessness is still haunting us and the waiting lists for social housing are longer and longer. Middle-income pressures are also soaring and are even harder to solve. Now we know we have to start thinking about a third sector - a semi-market sector - to secure housing for middle income people. No city can afford to be complacent on these issues or a lot of the other best urbanism moves will simply start to unravel.

Then, the final aspect of diversity and mix that I want to talk about has to do with culture. Smart cities will find a

way to express themselves through great cultural institutions linking up with a network of world culture; and through modest more avant-garde ventures that generate community culture.

-Here, Vancouver is not yet a good model. While we have expanded our congress facilities on Coal Harbour and opened up major new gathering places, especially along the water, we are only now beginning to think about growing our Art Gallery and new music, dance and visual arts institutions. Frankly, we have fallen behind. In this respect, Vancouver's is, so far, a cautionary tale. You need only to look over at your neighbour, Seattle to see what amazing things can start to happen when you make culture a prime civic priority. And for a city seeking to express a unique identity and to differentiate itself, cultural installations and programs can be a very effective "quick fix" - as I learned from my work in Abu Dhabi, where a smart culture strategy is drawing world attention; and, in Curitiba where what they call

“learning towers” in every neighbourhood are setting off a wildfire of creativity.

-But even more importantly, it is with your cultural works that you have the most vivid opportunity to use the magic of design to make the truly expressive, truly provocative and truly evocative statements about your city and its people. It is in the great edifices and places that supreme artistic expression should and can reign free, breaking the rules of civic order, challenging the status quo, making a scene.

Now, let's turn to the essential factor of transportation - and the start of what we have to talk about here is the car. There is no question that cars have transformed our lives and, because of that, it is not surprising that they are pervasive. But, even in transportation, the real principle

to aspire to is 'choice', and a balance of movement opportunities that deliver choice. Through diversification and mixing of uses we can get origins and destinations much closer together but then we have to really work hard to offer genuine alternative options for those shorter trips that will be as attractive as the car.

-To find the balance in Vancouver, we've had to use both the carrot and the stick. We're lucky not to have freeways fanning out from our downtown - because of the aggressive and courageous action of the generation before us - but we have, nonetheless, had to take a strong policy stand to limit auto capacity into the core - we say not one lane of additional auto traffic will be constructed. We say "congestion is our friend" because it helps to motivate people to make housing decisions that consider what they will face as commuters. But negative measures don't actually create choice. To do that, we're really pushing transit development and upgrading the bus system to deal with issues of time and comfort, and we're adding ferries wherever we can - but the easy answer actually rests with the low-tech modes - cycling and, especially, walking. Frankly, transit has a very hard

time competing with the glamour, comfort and security of the car; but walking can compete very well - it can be as glamorous, it makes you feel good about yourself, it makes you genuinely healthier, it's very social and it costs very little. It also costs very little to arrange for it so investment in the infrastructure for walking - and biking, for that matter - is a very prudent civic investment.

-Of course, with everything I have said, I think we all know the difficulty we face: the deep cultural romance with the private car. Can we build the alternatives fast enough and good enough to compete with the car? The jury is still out but we have learned one fundamental thing: the best transportation plan is a good land use plan. For example, in our downtown, where we've created real density and amenity, we've seen a drop in car ownership and use. We have less cars commuting in and out than we had 10 years ago, even with major new development. Over 60% of trips in the core are now done by non-motorized modes, mostly people walking, which are almost unheard of in North America.

But now, let's turn to a factor that has been challenging us for over three-quarters of a century - and that is the management of the physical shape of our city to serve our collective needs not just the private needs from project to project. We've got to get the built form right in the broad fabric of the city - not just in the one special building or square, but in the un-special parts that have generally been forgotten. The principle is that there is a natural built form that responds to the different setting and public tastes of every city - low-rise or high-rise; and there are ways to fit buildings and spaces together that respond better to human needs and perceptions and visceral preferences.

-In Vancouver, there is no question that the high-rise is our preferred form - tall thin towers to get people up to where they want to be to capture the splendid views; and ample separation among towers so people can see around and through them. But that is a

special response to the Vancouver setting and not a requirement to achieve the kind of qualities that I have been talking about today. Each city has to find its own scale and form.

-And very tall high-rises may not be at all suitable for Boise and, frankly tall towers are not the only way to achieve development intensity. Intensity can be done in low-rise forms, like most of Europe's cities, or in mid-rise forms, like many of America's middle-sized cities seem to prefer. But, regardless of whether or not there are towers in the equation, the Vancouver experience still has something to offer Boise, because, no matter where we are, most of the time we find ourselves on the street - the sidewalk - and this realm needs special care everywhere.

-In Vancouver, we start with a coherent, dominant street wall at the traditional scale, with the bases of buildings above about 6 stories shielded from the sidewalk to cut their powerful impacts, allowing them to float almost out of one's perception. This is how big buildings can be humanized.

-It's also desirable to bring active residential use right down to the sidewalk level as often as possible - fostering the shop-house form where it makes sense but more often pushing for row houses to truly domesticate the street. My advice is simply not to tolerate blank walls; to draw doors and porches and stoops and windows and almost any engaging detail down at eye level; to bring weather protection along public routes. Essentially, within those first six floors, the idea is to create the fascinating, intimate urbanism that engenders a strong sense of place, comfort, domesticity, civility, safety and vivid memory.

-I also recommend putting all the parking, except the traditional short-term curb-side parking shown here, underground and pushing parking standards as low as practical. Whatever you do, just ban those strip malls with the parking up in front, separating the people and the buildings from the street. They are such a negative force and they are totally unnecessary.

-The shape and character of open space are vital. I say avoid useless private plazas and use buildings to give memorable form to public park spaces and squares - and embellish public places with public art. And carefully manage sun and shade to keep public places warm and comfortable.

-And, of course, we have to build environmental sustainability increasingly into the equation - resolving the development contradictions that are degrading our world. Vancouver's agenda has been strongly influenced by our Athlete's Village for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. After the games, this area, called Southeast False Creek, will be occupied by 15,000 people. This will be a complete community but it will push the boundaries in regard to alternative energy, water conservation and management, waste reuse and community-based disposal, advanced green building requirements, urban agriculture and edible landscape, diverse transportation options, and environmental stewardship and learning. The idea is to take the "premium" out of sustainability and make it a standard feature in the future.

-And then, if you dare, you can go even further. I hope you will see your city as a work of art in-and-of itself - and there are many ways to do this. For example, In Vancouver where we have this evocative stand of tall buildings, we decided to sculpt our skyline to protect key public viewsheds and corridors and to shape it as an artistic expression against the mountain backdrop.

-Of course, all of this collective choreography takes civic leadership in the form of regulations about built form because otherwise everyone just does their own thing. We had to come to the realization that "regulation is our friend" but you can guess the problem: how to balance the public objectives I've been discussing with the private market objectives that drive development. How much regulation will a developer tolerate? Can the amenity benefits be translated into developer profits? In our case, the answer seems to be yes - from the developers perspective business has never been better, so developers are cooperative with the system - but this

is an accord that has to be worked out in every city directly between civic and development forces and it depends upon mutual understanding and a commitment to mutual interests. This has to be a top agenda item for any city that aspires to excellence through civic design; and, of course, I'm alluding back to Boise when I say this.

And in fact, civic leadership is at the heart of all aspects of a better city that I have been describing today - which means we have to talk for a moment about process - civic governance and growth management. The key principles are inclusiveness of the process, flexibility of our laws and systems to satisfy everyone's needs, collaboration and mediation among diverse interests and the right division of labour between politicians and professional officials to do thing responsibly, equitably and efficiently.

-In some places people try to get around the old government structures that hold up new approaches but I'm an advocate of re-inventing the core government to do business differently for better urban results. And with the complexity of cities, this is all

about cooperation. In fact, in Vancouver, we call our new way of doing things the “cooperative planning approach” where citizens, developers, politicians and city officials are motivated to work together - trying to transcend the confrontation that once pervaded our system and that one sees in cities all across North America. Confrontation is simply too time consuming and too expensive for good civic results in the future.

-This is about a clear, strong vision of the future city, - a vision set through the leadership of the local government. This is about a pro-active planning agenda and discretionary development management laws that are light on hard regulations and heavy on expectations along with targets, incentives and bonuses. This is about everyone working closely together to broker the many public/private trade-offs that achieve a good balance for a final scheme. This is about wide and pervasive public engagement in all kinds of formats and touching all people. And this is about politicians pulling themselves out of development approvals. Politicians are the best people to decide on the policies, zoning and guidelines

that set the stage for development; but appointed officials, preferably in open session, can bring an expertise into the specific development decisions for the finest and most consistent results if a community really wants to be known for their architectural and urban design excellence.

-And I want to pause for a moment and emphasize one aspect of all of this that I have found to be an essential aspect of the kind of city by design that you are considering here in Boise: that is peer review through the convening of an Urban Design Panel. Through long experience, I have concluded it is essential to separate out professional advice on proposals from the deluge of community advice and input. This is partly in recognition that urban design is very complicated but it is also in order to give professional issues and the expert voice a little air time that can be heard in the cacophony of public processes; and that can, therefore, be listened to. A volunteer Urban Design Panel is a very good way to do this. I would dare say that in the 30 years that this has been in place in Vancouver, it has been the single

most important influence in raising the quality of design in our community. Not only that, advising on this in cities all over North America, I have seen that it is dead easy to operationalize. You don't need special legislation to do it. You don't need a big process to start, just a good conversation with your development community. You don't need much money because it costs very little to operate. But it has immediate and extraordinary affects. That is because of a very simple fact: community needs and the art of city building have separate dynamics but are both very important - they have to have their own balances.

And now, for the last element for urban success that I want to cover today: it's something very hard to describe but essential for any place that wants to be remembered and loved. I'm talking about a certain intangible appeal about a community; an ambience that excites or fascinates or causes awe; that brings on that emotional response from people and builds their love for the place and loyalty to the place; that "brands" the place with a certain, hopefully unique, civic image. You know it when it's there and you know it when it's missing. Is it "the buzz" as in Hong Kong

or “being sexy” as the mayor of Berlin has recently claimed for his city? Whatever IT is, there has to be a quality of fascination, even mystery, and a magic about the thing. It’s the spirit of the place. These images pick up on Vancouver’s mystique. The important point I want to emphasize is that you have to be careful that, in the mad rush to grow, this natural essence and appeal of the place, which frankly is very strong here in Boise, is not diminished or lost - but rather that it is protected and nurtured.

I hope I have shown that an explicit civic design agenda is vital for creating a better city - and is certainly vital for Boise because you have now declared your intention to make your community distinct and special and to enjoy the economic benefits that come from that. But this will take a new kind of planning from what cities have done over the past century. This will be a planning approach based less on systems and the birds-eye scale of land use management. I call it “experiential planning” - creating the real, direct experiences within each setting that people tell us they want, and making sure our places are accessible to and are fulfilling for all kinds of people. This means getting down to the human scale, at the level of the

street, and shaping things in four dimensions to deliver the emotional side for people, not just efficiency or fiscal prudence or environmental sustainability. The planning we now have to do must plumb peoples' experiences at a very detailed level.

Who would have thought twenty years ago that a new equation would emerge in the economy of cities:

urban design = economic development.

It's not enough to manipulate the traditional economic sectors to insure a city that will be rich in opportunities and fulfilling for citizens; and enticing for investment. A city that wants to be catalytic but also humane - dare I say, even beautiful - must do much more.

-In the case of Vancouver, the results so far are leading to this: this second panorama shows what we have created - a community that is surely connected but has avoided the negative side of globalization; a community that is popular with Vancouverites; a community that is working from a civic perspective especially at its core, with 24-hour vitality engendering new business and culture and lively street life; a community that's working for more people than

in the past, leaving less behind with social or personal alienation; and a whole city now on a very solid foundation for the future, enticing many new citizens that are helping us build the robust diversified economic and social base that we need.

-These are the same aspirations here in Boise and your very declaration of this will take you a long ways toward achieving all of this and much more.

True greatness has to be in the city's very DNA - and that's where the civic elements that I have been talking about come into play. These factors create communities that people can relate to, embrace and even love. Because urban success is finally dependent upon peoples' individual commitment and dedication to the place; their investment; their contribution; their passion. Tomorrow's urbanism will be about happiness and contentment, the challenge of ideas as people come face-to-face with one another, the nurturing that comes as different types of people become acquainted, the economic dynamism that is the inevitable result of our concourse together - and all of this is the real promise for Boise as you take your community in hand to

further evolve this great place to reflect your most exciting dreams.

Thank you.

