



MOVING FORWARD IN CANADIAN COMMUNITIES: *SOLILOQUY OF AN URBANIST*

by Larry Beasley

Summary

This article reproduces Larry Beasley's closing plenary speech at the Canadian Institute of Planners' national conference in Toronto. He touches on the profession's past and present challenges, and what we as planners can do to ensure that the profession delivers a tour de force performance as urbanism once again takes centre stage in public and political discourse.

Sommaire

Cet article reprend l'allocution présentée en plénière par Larry Beasley lors du congrès national de l'Institut canadien des urbanistes à Toronto. Il évoque les défis auxquels la profession a fait face par le passé et ceux auxquels elle est confrontée actuellement et s'attarde sur ce que les urbanistes peuvent faire pour que la profession réussisse un véritable tour de force alors que l'urbanisme reprend une fois de plus sa place au cœur du discours public et politique.

Toronto is on a roll. The excitement is tangible. Strong new political leadership, new ideas and a groundswell of activity all illustrate what is happening throughout our great country. Across Canada, people are awakening to urbanism, quality of life, the value of our cities and the imperative to make them flourish. It is as though we have come back from a long sleep. There is a sense of extraordinary expectations. That is what I am going to talk about today—the revival of urbanism and of planning as the influential profession for urbanism.

I have felt this energy only a few times in my 30 years as a planner. I remember this kind of energy when I first started out. Ken Greenberg¹ reminded me one time that we have a solid history of workable, caring cities. When I came to Canada in the late 1960s, Canadian cities were pretty special. But when I first started out as a planner in the early 1970s, we were already beginning to worry about the demise of neighbourhoods. So the call went out, and senior governments responded with exciting partnerships to

revitalize inner-city communities and their housing—and that is what we did. That was a time of optimism.

However, we have also gone through a long time when our cities have been losing ground. Cities started to be shaped primarily by laissez-faire attitudes—the profit motive—or unshaped by special interests. Government was in a state of confusion about the public interest and blinded by management dilemmas like cutting budgets and red tape. Modernist architecture was brutal and blithely anti-urban. Civic budgets became overwhelmed because of our outdated funding sources. That was a time of pessimism.

I think, as planners, we were often seen as a part of the problem rather than the solution. Our profession was associated with what was going wrong. We lost our credibility and the trust of the public. Everywhere, we were open to attack, and most of us felt it. At one point in British Columbia, the province was on the verge of outlawing planning, although fortunately, saner heads prevailed. But cities are robust, planning is robust, the

concept of urbanism is reviving and citizens are declaring everywhere that they want their cities to be great. Even politicians are beginning to use the right words and to sponsor the right ideas. However, we face big problems and people want real, effective answers.

Ours cities are often ugly. We have to teach ourselves to see again, and to use that vision to reshape the built form. Our cities are often inhumane—look at our growing homelessness problem. We have to teach ourselves to care again, and to use that compassion to reshape supports for people. Our cities are not sustainable—look at the impact of the car and pollution. We have to teach ourselves to honour nature above all else, and to tap natural forces to fix cities. So, this is a time of opportunity for planning and for planners if we get it right, if we join hands with many others. After all these years, I am now confident about some key qualities we must bring to the table. Most important, planners have to have vision. We have to have good ideas, and they have to be new

ideas and strong ideas and simple ideas that come from a clear view of the world and a sure sense of urbanism. They cannot just be ideas on process. They must be substantive ideas like those we have learned from Jane Jacobs and Alan Jacobs.^{2,3}

In Vancouver, three strong ideas have made all the difference: using the concept of “neighbourhood” as the basic building block of our city; having a “living-first” strategy for transforming our downtown; and creating a “city by design”. Now, led by our young people, we are pursuing several newer ideas, and they too are going to make all the difference. Designing “sustainability” and developing “social equity” are two central tenets of Vancouver’s future. We have to have fast and sustained action to pursue these ideas. Planners must show real leadership and not just be factotums for politicians or only do background studies. We must inspire, mentor and guide. We must tap interests—not just take positions. We must find the solidarity with our citizens that Jaime Lerner⁴ talked about. We have to bring a strong process of engagement with all those around us. We know the public must be involved so we need to be convenors—and good ones. But we cannot get bogged down. We must really solve problems and bring forward exciting new propositions if we want credibility and a place at the table. In Vancouver, we had to create a whole new way to do business with the Cooperative Planning Model,⁵ and a new way to think about the future with CityPlan.⁶ These are amazing processes of engagement.

We have to really communicate. We need to say what we say well, demonstrate through examples, and communicate the whole package in a language people can understand. Of course, we have to tap into common thinking; but we also need to connect with the humanity of those with whom we work, and not objectify people as we all too often have done in the past. We have to match process and communications with strong analysis, giving solid facts and projections, not just opinions. We need to use solid methodology, not just surf the Internet. We need to be critical and take nothing as given. We need to change the laws and processes, to do what is right. We need to bring technology to the heart of our work.

I have learned that planning is part philosophy and part craft. It is a dialectical reality. Theory is vital and the public interest is our guide. Common sense is likewise as vital, and here practicality is our guide. A strong, critical attitude binds it all together. The task at hand is to apply theory and practice to rescue and recreate our endangered cities and to illustrate for a new generation that Canadians are true experts at city building. Through this work as planners, we will also rebuild our stature as the profession that society will assign to undertake, even lead, this great endeavour. This will undoubtedly bring the old urban themes echoing back yet again. Maybe they have to be rediscovered with every generation; or maybe it is especially important to articulate them at this time, because politicians are ready to hear them and adopt them and make them happen through the world of politics.

Let us commit ourselves to rebuilding a strong sense of community and neighbourhood. Through this lens, CityPlan in Vancouver is uncovering clues of how to transform NIMBYism (not in my backyard) from a conservative barrier of fear to an engine of joy for revitalization. Let us commit to rebuilding inclusiveness. The initiatives of Mayor Larry Campbell in Vancouver are illustrating to me that a formula of social responsibility is still possible. Let us commit to rebuilding culture. Globalization cannot be allowed to steal away the soul of our towns and cities. Who really wants a geography of nowhere? Let us commit to rebuilding the “city by design”. Design need not be forgotten. Beauty is okay. We must harness the scale that is exploding our cities. Finally, let us commit to rebuilding the healthy organism of the city. This includes being sustainable, and keeping the principles of balance, intensity, mix and amenity high in our minds as we invent tomorrow’s cities. It means cherishing and protecting the sense of mystery that still remains in so many wonderful urban places.

What makes it tough—a continuing challenge—is that the barriers are huge and the forces against urbanism are strong. Never take that for granted. The societal dysfunction that is hitting our cities is vast. Vancouver’s Downtown



City of Vancouver.

Eastside is festering, and I could find the same conditions in every downtown in every city in this country.

The confusion of senior governments is shocking, but the disinterest of the recent past has been even worse. Mr. Martin’s “New Deal”⁷ must work. But we cannot wait. We have to reconvene necessary government relations ourselves in forms like our Vancouver Agreement⁸ and Toronto’s Waterfront Initiative.⁹ The internal bureaucratic barriers are the Achilles heel of the profession: the unrealistic and anti-urban standards from the past, competing interests and bureaucratic inclination to conservatism (sometimes this feels most oppressive of all) hold us back. The selfishness of some and ignorance of others still tramples too much that we treasure. Just think of the negative effects on our cities of insensitive retail formats or fixed attitudes on parking—these are only some of many examples of self-interested pressures that are distorting urbanism. Our own lack of guts can be our greatest handicap. Sometimes we just have to draw a line, say no, and be sanguine with that.

We know it is complicated out there; but in a fluid, messy world, there is the bedrock on which this profession can always depend—our values, philosophy, ethics, and sense of justice and fair play. That is what brought most of us into this profession. We have a spiritual force. Furthermore, there is one tether to that bedrock that will serve us well as individual planners: our sense of self. We must face ourselves and know ourselves, because what we *intend* is often just as influential as what we *do* in how our work unfolds. That is important because each of us in our work holds a collective responsibility to this profession, not just to ourselves or our organization. Every time you act on something for today's crisis, you add to the opus of your own work that can or cannot sustain inspection. But you also add to the practice of the whole profession that does or does not facilitate the efforts of every other planner to plan.

Taking all of this into consideration, how do we know when planning is working?

- We know it is working when we are matching intuition and passion with logical thinking and technical prowess to tackle the hard issues of cities.
- We know it is working when we achieve equity and align our energy behind those most in need.
- We know it is working when communities are engaged on *their* terms.
- We know it is working when we are addressing today's problems but also building carefully for the future.
- We know it is working when we balance critique and flexibility—but foster excellence and innovation.
- We know it is working when we have influence that has come from consistently good, useful advice.

- We know it is working when we are taking action backed up with contingencies; producing products; and making change and owning that change.
- We know it is working when we are feeling stress but are managing that stress and having fun.
- We know it is working when we reach out to constituencies but have personal relationships with people as unique individuals.
- We know it is working when it reinforces our ethics.

Mostly, we know it is working when our citizens are happy about the cities we create with and for them. This is the acid test. In the final analysis, planning has to touch the hearts of everyone—not just their minds, not just their pocket books—it has to touch their hearts. ■



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Larry Beasley is Co-Director of Planning for the City of Vancouver. Larry studied architecture and has degrees in geography and political science and planning. He chairs the National Advisory Committee on Planning, Design and Realty for Ottawa's National Capital Commission. He regularly advises other Canadian municipalities as well as cities worldwide. He is an Adjunct Professor in the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia - and lectures widely elsewhere. The United Nations honoured his work in 1996 as one of the "World's 100 best planning practices" and the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada recently conferred on him its 2003 Medal of Excellence as "Advocate for Architecture". In May 2004, he was appointed a Member of the Order of Canada, our country's highest honour for lifetime achievement.

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References and Notes

1. Greenberg K. Ken Greenberg is the former Director of Urban Design and Architecture for the City of Toronto and is now the Principal, Greenberg Consultants, 603-20 Niagra Street, Toronto, Ontario.
2. Jacobs J. The Death and Life of Great American Cities. New York (NY):Vintage Press; 1961.
3. Jacobs AB. Great Streets. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press; 1991.
4. Lerner J. Refers to keynote speech made at 2004 CIP National conference, Toronto, Ontario.
5. Cooperative Planning Model: the process in Vancouver where citizens, developers, politicians and city officials interact collaboratively to conceive and then build the residential city.
6. CityPlan: the city-wide plan, adopted in 1995, which provides a framework for deciding City programs, priorities, and actions over the next 20 years. In 1997, the Community Visions program was launched to bring CityPlan to the neighbourhood level. As local neighbourhood plans are approved, work starts on making the Approved Visions a reality.
7. New Deal: In the lead-up to the 2004 federal election, PM-Elect Paul Martin promised a "New Deal" for cities that included new arrangements for cost-sharing, tax breaks, and infrastructure funding mechanisms for urban areas across the country.
8. Vancouver Agreement: a commitment by the federal government, the Province of B.C., and the City of Vancouver to work together to support sustainable economic, social and community development in Vancouver. Although the agreement affects the entire city, the initial focus of work is in the Downtown Eastside.
9. Toronto's Waterfront Initiative: Following the release of the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force's report in March 2000, the Government of Canada, the Province of Ontario, and the City of Toronto jointly announced their support for the creation of the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation (TWRC) to oversee and lead waterfront renewal.

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