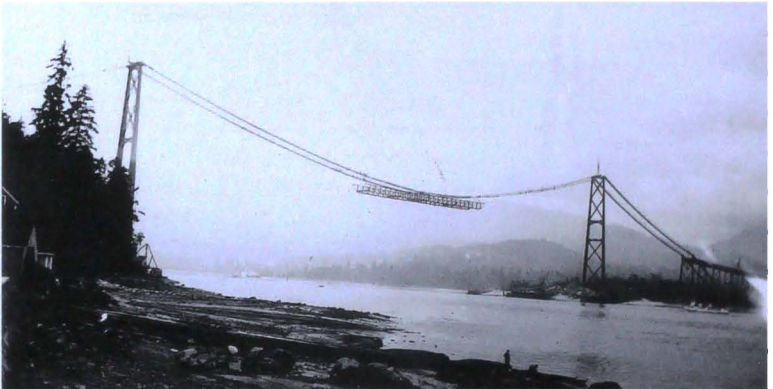


freeway

HANNAH TEICHER



Lions Gate bridge construction, 1938

Recently there has been talk of tearing down Lions Gate Bridge, and such talk truly horrifies me. People speak of Lions Gate Bridge as being merely a tool, a piece of infrastructure that can be casually deleted, plundered from our memories with not a second thought to the consequences its vanishing might have on our interior lives... Why is it so hard for all of us to say loudly and clearly to each other that the bridge is an embodiment of grace and charm and we must not let it die?!

Given Douglas Coupland's paean to the Lion's Gate bridge, it's hard to imagine that it once incited public ire as a concession to wealthy property owners. Not only the bridge, but the causeway through Stanley Park, a jewelled gateway if ever there was one, was the subject of much debate thanks to the requisite plowing under of massive Douglas Firs. It's hard to imagine now a more exalted entry into the city than that from the North.

If Vancouver voters of 1927 had had their way, we'd still be taking the ferry across the First Narrows, unaware of the pleasure of spanning Burrard Inlet at such heights, a pleasure accentuated by its immediate antidote of sinking into deep dark trees.

This premise, that we could even now be living out a vision championed in 1927, while unthinkable in most North American cities, is not so far-fetched. While other cities suffered decades of urban renewal and urban blight, Vancouver stood its stolid ground, largely adhering to a never quite officially adopted town plan of 1929. Its system of wide arterials is not merely detectable today; it still forms the backbone of Vancouver's transportation network in this freeway free city. Driving through stoplight after pedestrian-controlled stoplight is the only way to get through the even, unending grid. No radical, radial, streamlined bypasses here. The only way is through, through a singularly repetitive fabric at a singularly similar speed. The sameness of building stock and upkeep, the sameness of character from neighborhood to neighborhood, the sameness of patterns of habitation, shapes a relentless homogeneity unrivaled in most urban environments. The downtown core is of course an exception, not in its road network, but its building blocks of glistening towers rather than two-storey stucco.

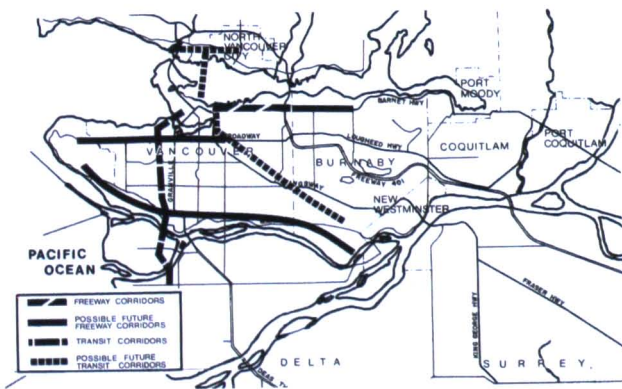
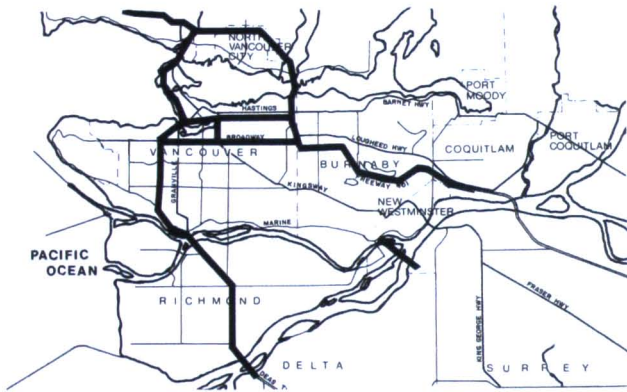
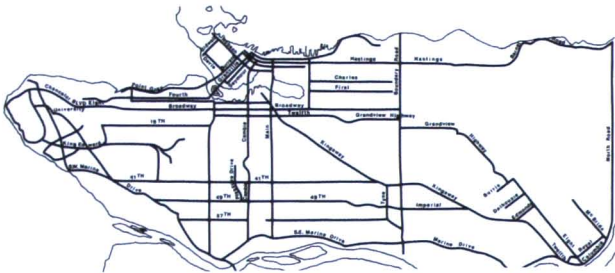
Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Vancouver's city council solicited plan after transportation plan from foreign consultants to reinvigorate the ailing central business district. True to the freeway fervour of the day, most of these plans touted single use expressways as critical to the city's long term viability. Each plan built on the assumptions embedded in the last so that certain freeway locations became taken for granted. One of the more controversial of these was the Carrall Street connector set to cut through Chinatown, conveniently alleviating the city of one of its ethnic enclaves. The Chinese Benevolent Society was fortunate to find allies in other concerned citizen groups. As a combined force marching down Pender Street and voicing their opposition at City Hall, they managed to defeat the freeway proposal affording Chinatown a chance of survival.

In 1964, Wilbur Smith and Associates of San Francisco, in conjunction with the Stanford Research Institute, offered their professional opinion: "To achieve maximum benefits from the dollars to be invested in transportation facilities, this review suggests that facility construction costing between three and four hundred million dollars be undertaken over the next twenty years...".² Balking at such a steep bill, the City directed its freeway priorities towards those eligible for federal funding, rather than those with the most pressing need. Situated over a national port, the much debated "third crossing" of Burrard Inlet was an obvious first choice. Popular opposition, squarely on the side of public transit, derailed this proposal as well, though the lack of funds forthcoming from the provincial level exacerbated the stalemate.³

Unquestionably, Vancouver serves the rest of the continent as a control group and for that alone is invaluable. But as much as it is heresy to ask, what might the city itself have gained had it not held the freeways at bay?

The Granville bridge, one of the city's only native pieces of roadway closely resembling a freeway, offers one illuminating answer in the space underneath it. There resides one of Vancouver's most lauded planning achievements, biggest tourist destinations, and most consistent daily draws. A market full of food stalls, a cement plant, an art school, and small artists' studios and theatres vie for attention in this constricted space. While a similar mix may have arisen elsewhere in the city had the unique condition of Granville Island not offered itself, its particular attraction derives from its unexpected location, from the contrast of looming concrete infrastructure and enticing one and two-storey emporia.

What other such opportunities did Vancouver's concerned citizens pre-empt? In their rush to accept the conventional wisdom that cleaving the urban fabric wreaks a one-sided destruction, they may have precluded opportunities which are not immediately apparent: the opportunities which arise in ensuing decades as the city heals over its



Bartholomew plan, 1928; Wilbur Smith plan, 1964; ND Lea plan, 1968

wounds in unforeseen ways, as unmapped potential takes over from preservationist planning.

Where so many cities, even in North America, were first inscribed with the size, scale, and speed of horse-drawn locomotion, Vancouver has but a fragmentary imprint in the old Granville townsite or Gastown. Where cities were subsequently inscribed with conditions conducive to streetcar travel, Vancouver had its genesis and its premature conclusion. Where cities were rent by freeways, Vancouver resisted. Now, Vancouver awaits its own particular third wave. In opposition to the large gesture of freeway building, this wave might instead inscribe a finer grain, one at odds with the pervasive grid, by turns intersecting and colliding with it, offering up multiple ways of experiencing the city. Efforts to incubate conventional greenways and bikeways might be deployed more aggressively and systematically to foster an unanticipated reality, eschewing the predictability of podium/tower urbanism.

Though Vancouver prides itself on being able to equate freeway ends with city begins, the current lack of freeways resulted equally from benign neglect as from civic foresight and citizen activism. Where a transportation problem was identified throughout the 1950s and 1960s, no action was taken, not on the freeway option and not on the rapid transit option. Only now is the Skytrain commuter rail line beginning to catch up to the need for enhanced routes first projected in the 1960s. Rather than continuing to develop through a sort of inertia which seems to merit congratulation at the end of the line, the city is poised to make something of its freeway lacuna, the particular form of blank slate where Vancouver's grid resides.

Notes

1. Douglas Coupland, *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland's Vancouver* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), 118 – 119.
2. Stanford Research Institute and Wilbur Smith and Associates, *Review of Transportation Plans Metropolitan Vancouver, BC, Menlo Park* (SRI Project No. 11-4728, 1964), 1.
3. Donald Gutstein, *Vancouver Ltd.* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1975), 162.



Granville Street bridge construction, 1954



Georgia Street viaduct and Skytrain line

