

Tangent—ial Vancouver—ism



Figure 2. Streetscape Example (1)

CHARACTER?

a sample of character as image from the RS-5 Design Guidelines (also applies to RS-3 and RS-3A)

Tangential Vancouverism: *Projects for Vancouver's Urbanism* explores the potential for new "urban extensions" to be tenably designed as vibrant constituents of city life in Vancouver. **Read on »**

Character Assassination

Hannah Teicher
03 Relate

While character isn't directly defined, its meaning becomes fairly clear through contextual interpretation of zoning district schedules and design guidelines. Several terms recur in relation to character: preserve, maintain, retention, and compatibility. Rather than chasing these terms down a linguistic rabbit hole, they can be used to derive meaning, and meaningful meaning at that. They are used because character crops up whenever there is a desire to maintain things as they are, suppressing evolution.

This desire is rooted in strong values – character is value-laden – but what precisely are these values and why do they hold such sway? Why is the presumption towards "all new building and additions being compatible with the historical character of the area (RT-4 and RT-5)?" Or "preserving the character and general amenity of the area and its immediate surroundings (C-3A)?" The "new" is dead in the water with a presumption of guilt for just being itself. (Character assassination, one might say.)

So the new should cover itself up, draped in the trappings of the old, because with the occasional exception, we value the old for being old and we don't value the new for being new. What happened when the old was new and what will happen when the new is old? Rather than get caught up in this absurdity, why not propose a different measure than matching the old for the sake of the past? Because following that logic is almost a resignation of responsibility, a declaration that someone made a decision a long time ago, and it was good. Who decided that the stairs should be perpendicular to the street anyway? (a principal access by means of a straight staircase at right angle to the street, leading to a first-storey porch or open-sided verandah – RT-3) In the original wild west of Vancouver's building boom, it probably just happened that way, both by established convention and expedience.

Now, we have the luxury of questioning both of those and proposing a higher common denominator. That's what the existence of a planning department and planning policy allows. We can question convention on grounds of performance: has it created a vibrant city? A vital city? A challenging city? A city that makes you think? A city accountable for water, energy, and waste? A fun city? A pleasurable city? Why not build some of those measures into the intent of an average zoning bylaw?

Imagine this:

Emphasis is placed on achieving development distinct from neighbouring development in order to enhance streetscape character, abiding interest, chance views, responsive solar footprints, and social encounters.

INSTEAD OF

Emphasis is placed on achieving development which is compatible with neighbouring development with respect to streetscape character, open spaces, view retention, sunlight access and privacy. (from RM-5 intent section)

Of course the replacement of one vague or vernacularly defined term with another reproduces all the same problems of the original. So perhaps we could redefine character to include some of those elements. We could offer a definition with a productive attitude toward future development, acknowledging that the future may be more than grudgingly different from the past. Rather than underwriting expedience, future zoning mechanisms, as one tool among many, might rewrite progress.

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