Tangent—ial Vancouver—ism

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** »
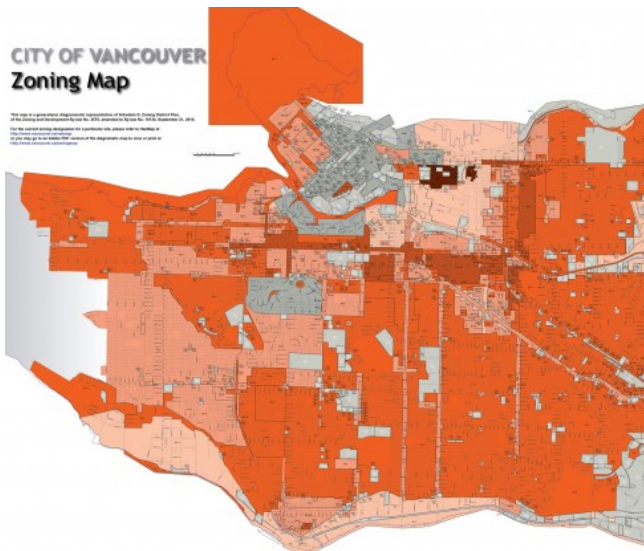

top— RS-1 Character: The intent of this Schedule is generally to maintain the single-family residential character of the RS-1 District bottom— C-3A Character: The intent of this Schedule is to provide for a wide range of goods and services, to maintain commercial activities, specialized services and some light manufacturing enterprises while preserving the character and general amenity of the area and its immediate surroundings

Character Flaw

Hannah Teicher
04 Propose

The definitions section appended to the Vancouver zoning bylaw helpfully illuminates terms such as "family" and "adult magazine," but fails to define the pervasive term "character," a term which has an outsize presence in the district schedules and design guidelines, and countless discussions between architects and planners. The fact that there is no explicit definition is on the one hand convenient, and on the other, highly problematic. The lack of definition potentially confers flexibility, though in practice that flexibility tends toward a "consensually" conservative interpretation, foregrounding planners' (those writing, interpreting, and enacting the code) unquestioned priorities of consistency, legibility, compatibility, and retention. This is not surprising given that the relatively short history of planning, and the millennia-long history of urban form-making which precedes it, is consistently preoccupied with aspirations to uniformity, harmony, and visual coherence. Though at times this system of thought embraces a third dimension (particularly when concerned with the spread of fire or contagion), it is primarily rooted in a paradoxical two-dimensional representation of the city: building, or buildings, as set piece. And this is where character resides.

Parsing character in context, in Vancouver planning documents of various stripes, character equals image. Vancouver is not unique in this regard, but may suffer disproportionately from equating image to substance, given the common interpretation of beautiful North Shore mountains as a beautiful city, or the glut of window-walled towers as an exemplary city. With its fixation on image, character includes attributes such as roof pitch, building height, siding type, entrance orientation, and proximity to property lines. And almost incontrovertibly, those attributes are proposed to be consistent along a block, or enough like one another not to raise any eyebrows.

In this narrow reading, the meaning of character collapses in on itself. Resurrecting the substance of character in response requires re-examining the essence of the term. When character is represented in such a limited manner, the urban fabric reproduced from that graphic and textual code is equally limited. Documenting typical residential and commercial blocks in Vancouver, and truly observing their qualities, reveals this limitation. While buildings or clusters of buildings might have value or meaning wrought by their contents, very little of the urban fabric is worth reproducing on its own merits.

Character Intensity. The widespread accentuation of 'character,' with its limiting, image-based definition, contributes to the replication of an economically expedient, derivative urban fabric.

However, other disciplines, such as literature and theatre, offer clues, as does common usage, where character is defined by distinction and difference. It is nearly impossible to construe the comment "he's a real character," as pointing to anything other than uniqueness and idiosyncrasy, and likely deep ones. Yet in urban design and planning, character has become a proxy for bland equivalence with a limited range of supposedly animating features, such as a strong cornice, contrasting siding, or prominent entryways.

Alternatively, if a character of distinction were embraced, that which is already built and that which is proposed to be built might come into their own, recognized for their own traits in contrast to those of their neighbours. Substantive contrast would urge inhabitants to really notice, understand and appreciate existing elements, overcoming the tendency to obscure the urban fabric of varying times and motives in relentlessly 'similar' surroundings. And substantive difference in new construction, serving contemporary motives, could make its own particular contribution, articulating that the future can be more than grudgingly different from the past. As pockets of exception proliferate in a regularized system, they would each provide relief from the other, alternately allowing each other to be noted for their character.

If the role of character as set piece could first be redefined to preference distinction rather than consistency, character could then be defined beyond set piece, three and four dimensionally. First steps would involve observing beyond the conventional planning diagram of a "desirable" streetscape, and projecting beyond the conventional "artist's rendering" of an easily digestible, blue sky/green swale mixed-use development. Zeroing in on a neighbourhood, a block, or a street and observing what's really there, in front, behind, on the sides, under, and above, according to categories more relevant to an operative urbanism than roof pitch and building height, would be one place to start. Observing the spatial relationship between multiple buildings on a lot and between lots, economic relationships between adjacent uses, infrastructural relationships between buildings and open space, or relationships between projections capable of providing cover from the rain while capturing that rain, could lay the groundwork for a more nuanced and textured notion of character. This character could rise to the task of generating urban performance rather than replicating urban scenery.

Redefining character in four-dimensional performance terms would be hard-pressed to gain traction outside of an overhaul to the functional zoning, and increasingly common spot zoning, that blankets Vancouver. This is a much larger project, but one worth pursuing if the city is going to become the beacon of exemplary urbanism it already purports to be. And this project could be strongly informed by a pointed conversation interrogating the long-standing concept of character. If this conversation gained momentum in service of a systemic overhaul, leading to surveying, mapping and eventually policy-making, it might in the meantime provide the grounds for minor, yet meaningful, incursions into the status quo as it becomes legitimate to ask the question, "What are we talking about when we talk about character?"