Discovering change
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Would the architect of Victoria’s most charming and celebrated buildings be rolling in his grave if he knew his work had helped encourage decades of city-visioning based on avoiding change?

How do we look at buildings? This question began nagging me after I started attending public hearings for development proposals.

A paradox presented itself. For example, at hearings (or in letters to editors), some people argue that Victoria is in danger of losing something, from which viewers the impassioned argument that Victoria must retain forever certain charms “discovered” by the speaker or letter writer.

Therein lies the paradox. I have seen people argue tooth and nail against a beautiful new (albeit modern) building on the grounds that it will destroy the city’s charm, while remaining willfully blind to the fact that this charm is already plenty tarnished not by new proposals, but by an existing built environment that blights some of our streets.

While the defenders are quite certain that something about the present (development, growth, new buildings) is destroying the very thing they “discovered” as worthy of defending in Victoria, they have difficulty formulating a vision (beyond wanting no change) that could explain how, exactly, their past discovery can possibly be reconciled to future development or change.

The result is an impasse. So it often boils down to what people don’t want—in the first instance buildings that are allegedly “out of scale” or “out of character.” On further discussion, this translates as “nothing too massive or tall” and “nothing that looks like a Vancouver building.” Occasionally, someone might even suggest that new buildings should reference the Edwardian period, or on no account look “too modern,” for the spectre of an economic collapse of the tourism industry (and remember that Victoria’s economy is haunted by booms and busts) predicates that we have to maintain another, fictional, “discovery”: that olde England is alive and well in Victoria, its existence being the sole reason tourists come here.

If we finally resolve the impasse, it’s often via compromise—which by definition chips away at the notion of “vision” for a vibrant future. I cannot imagine that Rattenbury’s massive Legislature or Empress were built on compromise.

When I write that we “discover” Victoria, what do I mean? Many people come here from elsewhere, setting the stage for actual discovery: each one, whether a student or a retiree, a panhandler or the latest faculty addition at a local institution, thinks that his (or her) Victoria is the real McCoy.

This is natural; places are often defined by outsiders who take it upon themselves to give it its edges and boundaries. Even David Johnston, originally from Alberta but homeless here (“by choice,” he says), is convinced that his vision is the real Victoria, discovered by him.

And if Victoria is the hometown where you grew up, you too “discovered” it at some point: the process simply took place over time. Try to remember when you discovered Victoria as yours. For me, it happened in junior high when a friend and I walked downtown, “for a break” (from school), where we were caught not by the principal, but in a winter downpour. That rain felt like freedom. By the time we trolled into Quee Queg’s (a long-gone basement bistro in Bastion Square, next to present-day Canille’s Restaurant), Victoria was mine. Here’s the rub: the process of discovery shouldn’t ever stop.

If we remain alive to a place, we’ll continue to discover it repeatedly, at which point we feel its vibrancy. Stop discovering it, and it ossifies into an unchanging cartoon, which is why it’s important to understand that change is essential to discovery, that it’s key to urban vibrancy.

There is, however, also an essentially unchanging aspect to our environment that competes with the built city: the splendour of our natural setting underwrites absolutely everything we do to this urban fabric. Olympic Mountains, shoreline, island setting, (mostly) temperate weather: we discover these as everlasting, in contradistinction to ever-changing urban discovery.

The first puzzle to explore is when anyone champions his discovery of Victoria is to understand what was found: the setting or the built form? Or more to the point: a combination thereof? How is our culture shaped by interaction between the two? Explore this and you’ll discover a dialectic of the individual facing the “last frontier,” yet face-to-face with the communal endpoint of “Island city.” It makes for a peculiar sense of perspective.

Since perspective is literally the starting point for looking at buildings, let’s go back to the opening question: how do we look at buildings?

I think the answer is: with too many limitations.

How else to explain the unsuccessful structures that have slipped in, sometimes even at the expense of more attractive early-20th century high-rises? A case in point is the second-rate six-storey brutalist building on the northeast corner of Douglas and Johnson, a puny but sufficiently ugly thing, which replaced the 10-storey Permanent Loan Building (1914).

Or what about the more recent faux traditionalist Victoria Conference Centre, with its useless, perennially empty retail frontage on Douglas, and the schizophrenia-inducing, non-aligning “sight lines” (“blind lines,” more like) of its southwest courtyard side overlooking the Empress Rose Garden? Is this building acceptable simply because it’s squat? Stand on Humboldt, to the east of Douglas, where the rise allows
you to survey its grim dominance of the block: one look at its unimaginative, stadium-sized roof, angled in just that compromised way so it’s not too steep and not too flat (but tilted just enough to nearly blot out the Empress) and you know that Ranenbury is spinning in his grave.

Consider the surface parking lots plastered along Wharf Street and other prime downtown locations. Consider the animus against The Falls development proposal, finally approved, which (happily) has ripped up one of these lots, as construction starts on what might become one of Victoria’s best-looking downtown buildings. Consider the decay of many of our stubbier structures, the unimaginative blank walls, the neglected facades: these are charming?

Consider guidelines on setbacks, height, or walkways/public space that set limitations and uses in cement. Yet uses change. The architect Robert A.M. Stern notes that adaptability is key to urban success: early 20th century skyscrapers in Lower Manhattan were built as offices, which in the days before air conditioning meant that a distance of about 27 feet from exterior wall to building core was “the ideal module around which to design.” At this scale, every worker (whether CEO or secretary) had access to light and air.

When such buildings were no longer needed as offices, they rolled with the punches and converted to apartments, made possible by the relatively small core-to-exterior-wall distance. Today’s large-scale office buildings, in contrast, can’t adapt: with bigger floor plates and no concern for window access (because of air conditioning), the distance from building core to exterior wall precludes their transformation into anything other than open-concept offices. As Stern put it, “Once those buildings have outlived their usefulness as office space—and sooner or later everything does—what can they be adapted to?”

Victoria’s first “skyscraper,” the Permanent Loan, if it still existed, would fit the adaptability bill in terms of core-to-envelope scale. Bastion Square has hung on and thrived because of its adaptability: what started as law office became “head shops” and record stores in the early ’70s, and is now office space again. Adaptability is the life-blood of cities, yet too often we pretend to be surprised by change and innovation, while we design and plan as though for an eternal present.

Perhaps it’s only because of the current flurry of construction in Victoria that more people seem suddenly to have sprouted eyes, become on-the-spot experts of what’s in character or scale, even if definition, excepting negatively, eludes. Yet throughout the 20th century, Victorians approved ugly or compromise buildings—provided they were small, didn’t change much, and didn’t stick out so as not to distract from the natural splendour.

In the name of “charm,” we settle for playing second fiddle to nature’s grandeur when, as a city, we could be orchestrating the symphonic response that setting deserves. Our 19th and early 20th century architects hardly restricted themselves to a single scale.

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