
*Alternatives Journal* is available online at: [http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/](http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/).
The Best So Far

Vancouver's remarkable approach to the Southeast False Creek redevelopment is a big step towards sustainable redevelopment planning for urban sites

Don Alexander

The story of SEFC is the story of two radically different visions of urban sustainability - one put forward by activists and designers who want to see an ecologically sound and socially just neighbourhood on the site and the other thought up by real estate interests who want to see a handy return on the investment.

ReDesigning our communities can't stop at rearranging bricks and mortar. To build truly sustainable communities, we need to reconsider the method by which they are planned and the factors that are brought to bear in deciding how they will grow and develop.

Conventional planning is based on a number of procedural assumptions that incrementally add up to unsustainable development. This includes the notion that site design is largely the purview of the developer and should respond principally to their need for an economic return on their investment. It is usually thought that city planners can help guide development in order to gain public benefits and minimize negative impacts, but they have little role to play in creating ambitious visions for the community as a whole or for particular development sites within it. And finally, it is conventionally assumed that only a narrow
range of local ecological and social impacts need to be considered in designing a site. Impacts on future generations and the global ecosystems are generally beyond the scope of conventional planning deliberations.

The City of Vancouver has had policies on the books favouring sustainable urban development for some time. However, whenever it has been time to decide what to do with a specific patch of land, conventional planning ideas and designs seem to have been selected in a knee-jerk kind of way. In short, Vancouver—like other cities in Canada—has had no way of correlating its abstract goal of more ecologically and socially sensitive development with concrete development opportunities.

However, over the past decade, a determined assemblage of community activists and design professionals has persuaded the City of Vancouver to act on its oft-stated commitment to urban sustainability. The issue that provided the immediate catalyst was Southeast False Creek—a blighted patch of former industrial land that represented one of the last major redevelopment opportunities in the city core. Initially, there were fears that Southeast False Creek was destined for the usual big developer, upscale condo approach to urban renewal. But pressure by activists led to the city hiring Sebastian Moffat and his colleagues in the Sheltair Group, a small Vancouver consulting company, to report on how to go about planning a truly sustainable community.

It was a path-breaking assignment. The expression "think globally, act locally" has been a foundation of sustainable development literature and planning initiatives for many years, and many bodies have tried to translate it into guidance for urban planning at the city and regional levels. But applications to specific redevelopment sites have been rare. An easy-to-use yet relatively comprehensive planning process for linking global, regional and local issues of concern to site design has not existed. Sheltair's challenge was to define such a process for Southeast False Creek.

The Sheltair report, submitted in April 1998, was a major accomplishment. Certainly, it is the most advanced work done to date in Canada on site-specific sustainable redevelopment. Although the SEFC planning model is not perfect, it is an appropriate time to celebrate the innovations achieved thus far, to examine the limitations as well as the strengths of the approach used, and to consider how to push the Sheltair and Vancouver Planning Department's work a little further.

**THE SITE AND PLANNING PROCESS**

Over the millennia prior to European settlement of the area, False Creek was a tidal marsh. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was "cleared" and the banks of the resulting basin were developed as the industrial nerve centre of the growing city. But as the air and water of the basin became increasingly polluted, the area's fortunes declined. By the late 1970s, False Creek's industrial era was essentially over, and despite widespread residual contamination, parts of the area were being redeveloped for residential and commercial uses. Today, that process is nearly complete. Still vacant, however, is the largely city-owned parcel in the southeast corner of the basin. [See map.]

Southeast False Creek has a lot going for it as a potential redevelopment site: it is quite large for an inner-city site (creating opportunities for a healthy mix of land uses and innovative community design) and it offers spectacular views of the mountains, the ocean and the rest of the city. It also has good connections: it is not far from Vancouver's central business district and other employment and cultural centres.
and it is well served in terms of transportation facilities (ferries, waterfront walkway, bikepaths, Skytrain, bus and streetcar). On these grounds alone, it has the potential to become a vibrant, urbane part of the downtown core.

Pressures to redevelop the southeast portion of False Creek began to mount in 1988 after the province sold the former Expo lands on the north shore of False Creek to Hong Kong financier and developer Li Ka-shing, thus forcing the city to accelerate its planning process for the basin.

In the subsequent process of negotiating the megaproject developments on the north side of False Creek, the city’s planning department developed a “template” for development that depended on collaboration with large developers. In this partnership, developers brought knowledge of project financial feasibility and marketability to the table, while planners saw their role as one of extracting amenities for the public realm (e.g., affordable housing, community centers, parks, schools and public art).

With the development of the Expo lands—now known as Concord Pacific—efforts were made to extend the texture of the city, in the form of the street grid, into the new neighbourhood. However, because of Expo, the original buildings on the site were all but gone, and no efforts were made to reintroduce any of the previous ecological features. Most Concord Pacific residents continue to rely on their automobiles for getting around, and there are no large grocery stores in the vicinity. Though lauded by Vancouver’s own planners as having a high quality of urban design, the site is noteworthy primarily for its sterile towers and barren, empty green spaces.

This was the model the city’s planners were working from when, on July 26, 1990, city council decided to release Southeast False Creek from the industrial reserve and directed staff to develop a work plan for its eventual re-zoning.

At roughly the same time, however, another event took place that would eventually lead to the emergence of a radically different vision for the site. In 1990, council also adopted the Clouds of Change report. This was the product of a task force established by the city to look at municipal responsibilities in the wake of growing evidence of increasing global climate change. The document called for planning initiatives that would bring housing and employment closer together, increase housing adjacent to Vancouver’s central area, and incorporate energy-efficient community design into whatever development was to occur on the southeast shore of False Creek.

In late 1994, council reaffirmed this commitment and directed the city’s Special Office for the Environment to liaise with the Director of Planning and the Director of Housing and Properties to explore the potential for using city-owned lands in Southeast False Creek as a model of sustainable development. This policy direction was further strengthened in October 1995 when council adopted a “Draft Ecological Framework” for the area that addressed land consumption, landscaping, energy, livability, water, ecological learning, and waste.

But the momentum towards building a Concord Pacific clone on the site was by no means dissipated. This was clear when, in May 1996, the city hired Stanley Kwok—the architect and developer who had been the driving force behind the redevelopment on the north shore of False Creek—to conduct a formal study on the financial feasibility of redeveloping the site.

The hiring of Kwok raised alarm bells in the city’s environmental and social justice communities, which wanted the site developed in a manner more consistent with the Clouds of Change vision. As activist John Irwin noted, “We knew that if the city let Stanley Kwok drive the agenda, we would just get more of the business-as-usual unsustainable development that we had already seen in the past.”

To avoid this outcome, the environmental lobby coalesced around the overlapping memberships of the Southeast False Creek Working Group (a network of environmental and social justice organizations) and Designers for Social Responsibility (a group of ecologically oriented design professionals). In contrast with Kwok’s vision, these organizations advocated a “state of the art” sustainable community that brought together all of the most innovative aspects of ecological design in one location, while ensuring a large proportion of the site would be available for affordable housing.

As a Vancouver Sun editorial at the time put it, “[the advocates of sustainability] envision an ‘ecocity’, possibly with a green industrial park, that they say would make Vancouver a world leader in a new environmentalism and spin-off profits from tourism and technological innovation.”

In April 1997, Stanley Kwok delivered his report to council on the economic parameters for the development. To everyone’s surprise, his report was accompanied by a complete site design and a fully worked-out, three-dimensional display model. Dubbed “Creekside Landing,” this was essentially a reprise of the Concord Pacific development, with a slightly reduced role for the private automobile. There was also an artificial “creek-like” feature proposed in place of activist suggestions that a culverted stream be brought back to the surface (“daylighted”). As for sustainability, the report dismissed the concept by saying that no meaningful definition of it existed.
Activists and concerned design professionals lobbied for a “state of the art” community with innovative ecological site planning, affordable housing, green businesses, heritage structures and few cars.

The report goes on to translate those expectations into a systematic planning process that diverges from conventional analysis, which disregarded costs (and potential benefits) for future generations, and made the project bear the cost of cleaning up the area’s contaminated soils. Speakers also demanded that, as an article in Vancouver’s Georgia Straight put it, “the city step back a pace and make sure it got this sustainability thing right.”

Faced with this pressure, council accepted Kwok’s report, but “for information purposes only.” It then authorized the hiring of a new consultant to provide more insight into how sustainability could be defined in an inner city context.

In late September 1997, the consulting contract was awarded to the Sheltair Group, some of whose members had been involved with the environmental lobby. Shortly thereafter an advisory group of local design professionals, property owners and activists was established by the Planning Department to provide feedback to Sheltair and the city on policy development.

THE SHELTAIR REPORT AND THE AFTERMATH

In April 1998, Sheltair issued its policy report. As expected, it provided a series of policy recommendations to guide the development of the site. What was unusual about the report was that it presented an innovative and systematic planning process to justify those policy recommendations.

Starting with general definitions and principles of sustainability, the report goes on to translate those fairly abstract notions into ever more detailed and practical items that could be operationalized from a planning point of view (see figure 2). From principles, the report moves to planning categories (solid waste, transportation, energy, air quality, soil, etc.), suggests goals and objectives for each category, and then recommends appropriate targets and indicators for measuring their achievement.

For instance, under the goal of maximizing the diversion of all wastes from disposal, the report proposes the objective of “[reducing] and [managing] the generation of neighbourhood solid waste.” It goes on to explain why this objective is a priority, what indicators could be used for measuring it, as well as the previous policy initiatives already undertaken by the city and region. Furthermore, it also explains how the objective is supportive of other objectives, the sorts of strategies that could be used to achieve it, and offers an analysis of how to select indicators and targets to measure the community’s future performance in waste management.

What distinguishes the Sheltair approach from conventional planning is that it doesn’t add “environment” onto an already crowded policy agenda. It starts from an ecological worldview that is characterized by a commitment to adaptability, diversity, stewardship and integration. On that basis, it formulates a planning process that brings the different (usually separate) disciplines (such as land use, transportation and social planning, as well as engineering) together into a team approach and makes sure that goals, objectives, indicators and targets are set for each facet of the project to ensure accountability.

Moreover, rather than treating ecological, social and economic considerations as being in conflict, the report treats them as complementary aspects of a single package of sustainability. Thus, the project not only has to be ecologically and socially sound; it also has to be financially viable so that the experience can be replicated elsewhere.

Sheltair’s report served as the basis for the creation of the city’s policy statement that will govern development of the site. Various drafts of the statement were written in consultation with the advisory group and the broader stakeholder community. The policy statement is the first of three stages in large-scale development projects in Vancouver. It is followed by a more detailed official development plan and then a re-zoning of each parcel that authorizes the redevelopment to occur.

With the trail-blazing report from Sheltair under its belt, the city pushed on with another innovative departure from the conventional planning process. In October of 1998, the planning department, with support from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, held a three-day charrette (an invitation-only event involving architects, landscape architects, and planners) that produced a number of design concepts for the site. Whereas Kwok had made only minimal concessions to sustainability in his design, the charrette proposals were intended to test the “do-ability”, in design terms, of the policy statement’s recommendations and associated performance targets, while accommodating the densities advocated by Kwok in his proposal. The upshot of the charrette was that planners and politicians became more convinced than ever that a sustainable community was feasible for Southeast False Creek.

At this point – just as Kwok’s economically driven vision was more or less falling off the table – a third option for the site burst onto the scene. The Vancouver Parks Board proposed that the entire area should be converted to parkland. This, they argued, was essential in view of the deficiency of parkland in the surrounding neighbourhoods. Needless to say,
Although no ground has yet been broken at Southeast False Creek, tremendous progress has been made in fostering the political will to take sustainability seriously, and in translating that into specific policies at the site level.

city council did not exactly welcome the proposal and a major conflict ensued. Eventually, however, a compromise was reached. On October 19, 1999, council approved the policy for Southeast False Creek, including space for a major park on the site.

OVERALL EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS

Although no ground has yet been broken at Southeast False Creek, tremendous progress has been made in fostering the political will to take sustainability seriously, and in translating the concept into specific policies at the site level.

While the adopted policy statement is a considerable achievement, we must also recognize that it is far from perfect. Most importantly, it was achieved at the cost of watering down the content of the Sheltair report. The policy statement contains few performance targets, and many statements merely commit the city to “exploring” various options — for instance, in the areas of water management, energy, air quality, and urban agriculture. The Planning Department’s position is that these issues will be further “nailed down” in the official development plan and rezoning stages. But critics fear that recommendations such as photovoltaics, stormwater swales, and on-site solar aquatic sewage treatment options could be ignored in the final site plan.

In addition to substantive issues, there are also concerns about the planning process itself. Even if the city had wanted to, the planning process for Southeast False Creek had proceeded too far to make full use of the Sheltair framework. For its advantages to be fully realized, the Sheltair approach would have to be applied from the beginning of the planning process for a new site. Much of the planning that has occurred for Southeast False Creek to date has been of the usual municipal type: building on past council policies in an incremental fashion.

In the kind of systematic planning approach advocated by Sheltair, there is more opportunity to consider the global, regional, and local contexts of development and, in light of site opportunities and constraints, to consider the tradeoffs for how a site should be used. However, when policies are passed by council over a period of years or even decades, many of the parameters for an area are already set and thus are not up for public discussion when consideration of a specific site begins. This deprives people of a right to be involved in crucial public decisions and narrows the thinking process to a small range of options.

This in turn is related to the fact that, despite efforts to involve more people than is normal for a site of this kind — largely due to grassroots pressure to do so — outreach efforts in Southeast False Creek planning were ultimately inadequate. This was shown by the eleventh hour intervention by the Parks Board, supported by a neighbourhood organization. If these
stakeholders had been involved earlier on, it is possible that greater consensus could have been achieved on the best use of the site.

It is also important to recognize that the Sheltair report itself is not without its shortcomings. For instance, the analytical framework starts from some rather abstract definitions of sustainability. The limitation of this approach is that it risks preaching to those who already “bought into” the wisdom of taking a sustainability approach.

An alternative approach would attempt to show how urban development practices contribute to the growing global ecological crisis and how the various options available for developing a particular site can either aggravate or help resolve global problems. In other words, it would start from a demonstration of real, rather than philosophical, imperatives.

Issues at a global scale are invariably also reflected at a regional level and the locality in question. A second weakness of the Sheltair report lies in the lack of systematic attention to this regional and local context. Any site planning exercise ideally should start from an analysis of the issues and challenges making themselves felt at these scales, such as acute air pollution or a shortage of green space in inner city communities. That way planners are better able to consider the relevant trade-offs and prioritize pertinent goals and objectives. These kinds of considerations are only hinted at in the Sheltair report.

Information about regional and local issues and challenges, in turn, should be correlated with a detailed analysis of the opportunities and constraints associated with different types of sites. For instance, brownfield sites in general afford little opportunity to protect existing habitat. However, their inner city location often means that they are well-served by transit, thus affording an opportunity to reduce the dependence of new residents on their cars. Again, systematic attention to context is underdeveloped in the Sheltair report.

Finally, while it makes an excellent reference document, the Sheltair report is too comprehensive to be readily used by planners and politicians. Their day-to-day decision-making needs a more concise and streamlined guide.

STAY TUNED

By taking sustainability from a mere buzzword to the realm of specific policies and commitments, the Sheltair report has done the inestimable service of setting a new standard for urban environmental planning in Canada. The report, and the policy statement it helped spawn, have won accolades and attracted interest both domestically and internationally, thus giving the politicians and planners who take credit for these achievements a powerful incentive to stay “on track.” With the help of a vigilant environmental community, interest will continue to be focused on how well the city fares in translating these sweeping, if sometimes vague, commitments into actual official plans and hardwar e on the ground. If everything comes to fruition, we may well see a new style of urban development in Canada. Stay tuned.

Don Alexander is currently teaching at Simon Fraser University and has been involved in the Southeast False Creek issue, as an activist and researcher, for the past four years. He wishes to acknowledge the role of his colleague, Sue Roppel, in assisting with the development of some of the analysis in this article.

NOTES

1 The Sheltair Group Inc., Vision, Tools and Targets: Environmentally Sustainable Development Guidelines for Southeast False Creek (Vancouver: submitted to the Vancouver City Planning Department, April 18, 1998).
3 See Ga Ching Kong, Southeast False Creek: Council’s Next Challenge (Vancouver: Social Change Institute, 1997).
7 Sheltair, Vision [note 1], p. 63.
8 See “Park: Development Can Co-exist at Creek” [editorial], Vancouver Sun (August 6, 1999), p. A18.
9 One of the breakthroughs in this case is that the city has authorized Planning and Engineering to relax existing site and service policies (relating to road widths, sewers, and parking, etc.) if this will assist in achieving a more sustainable result.
10 For a constructive critique of Sheltair, and an elaboration of an alternative planning model, see “A Strategy for Effective Ecological Development (SEE): A Model Sustainable Planning Process” by Sue Roppel and Don Alexander. This paper, which is currently under consideration by other journals, is available from the authors.