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SOUTHEAST FALSE CREEK AT THE CROSSROADS

by Don Alexander

As we approach the end of the millennium, a peculiar convergence is taking shape. For years the nascent urban ecology movement in Vancouver has laboured with minimal recognition and success... until now. Over the last year, a small avalanche has been slowly building, picking up steam. It is centred on Southeast False Creek, a small rectangle of land between Science World and the Cambie Bridge.

A bit of history is in order. In the late 1980s, when City Council turned its attention to the fate of the remaining industrial lands in False Creek South, it was decided that these be re-developed for residential purposes and their industrial designation 'let go.' In the initial flush of enthusiasm over the 1990 *Clouds of Change* report, Council even went so far as to advocate that the site be developed as a model 'sustainable community,' a commitment that was further elaborated on by members of the Planning Department and Council in subsequent years.

In 1993, the *Mt. Pleasant Neighbourhood House and Community Centre* authorized the creation of a False Creek South Access Committee to assist it in gaining a 'beachhead' on the Creek. The Committee worked feverishly for a couple of years doing ecological studies and shore cleanups, but it gradually became dormant as a result of burnout and a lack of success in attracting grants.

In the same year that the Access Committee arose, Priscilla Boucher, Kathryn Cholette, Mark Roseland and myself formed a committee to organize the *Greening Our Cities* conference — co-sponsored by VanCity, SPARC of B.C., and the Suzuki Foundation — that attracted some 250 people

interested in creating a more unified urban ecology movement that would incorporate social justice and community economic development issues as an integral part of its vision.

Wanting to ensure that the conference — held in May 1994 — had some lasting legacy, the committee moved for adoption a resolution calling for the creation of an *EcoCity Network*, which held an inaugural meeting two months later. The Network struggled to define itself for its first year and a half, holding forums on various topics at community centres around the city. Finally, in January of 1996, it resolved to begin organizing in earnest, with the future of Southeast False Creek becoming a major focus.

This interest in SEFC was spurred by the activities of the *Environmental Youth Alliance* [EYA] (which had developed a plan for a community garden and multi-use park on a portion of the site), and *Village Quest*, a project of Virtual High School which had set its sights on establishing an eco-community adjacent to Science World. One immediate result of this decision was that Network member, Mark Roseland, decided to use his urban geography class as a vehicle for designing a proposal for a sustainable community on the site, producing a two-volume report that contains some of the most up-to-date thinking on eco-city theory and practice currently available.

Also, animated by the City's finally initiating a planning process for the area, a number of ecological design professionals began to look for opportunities to influence the outcome. Sensing a plurality of interests, but no

unifying focus, the Network convened a meeting in April 1996 to bring the various parties together to explore the possibilities for common ground and joint action.

Several subsequent meetings were held, with the EYA gradually assuming day-to-day leadership and logistical support. *The Southeast False Creek Working Group*, as it has come to be called, spun its wheels for the first few months, but started to shift into high gear after a forum held in September by the Network brought some fresh recruits into the ranks. Since then, it has been operating at full steam, providing a rare example of cross-organizational, cross-sectoral collaboration that is only minimally centralized.

Early projects included a letter-to-the-editor campaign involving the "Vancouver Sun" after an article praising Stanley Kwok, the developer-turned consultant hired by the City to gauge the feasibility of developing the site, appeared; and a survey of municipal candidates undertaken by *Designers for Social Responsibility*. An organization that I'm affiliated with — *the Social Change Institute* — produced a case study report on the area, which was written by Ga Ching Kong of the EYA, and distributed widely.

Beginning in November, the Group resolved to organize a community forum to begin collating the ideas and igniting the interest of adjacent communities. This came to be called "Springfest" and will have taken place on March 22. Greater urgency was lent to the organizing efforts by the completion of a feasibility report, or pro forma, by Stanley Kwok. Although not yet released (as of press time), enough is known about its contents to see that it amounts to emphasizing maximizing the City's investment while reducing the sustainable features of the proposed development to a few frills.

In short, Kwok aims to largely replicate the model he pioneered on the North Shore — a high-density, residential community (averaging 12 storeys) that would have a largely conventional 'ecological footprint' on the assumption that "the infrastructure [to support it] is already there."

Moreover, the project's density, incorporation of 'green' features, and affordability is to be largely determined by a \$25 million liability inherited by the City as a consequence of the irresponsible industrial practices of the past. So, already proponents of a 'state-of-the-art' community are placed in a defensive position of having to plead with the City that 'going green' won't be economically ruinous, because of a bad faith debt inherited by the City's taxpayers.

Finally, in assessing the 'costs' and 'benefits' of developing the site, Kwok chose a short 'amortization' period, discounting the long-term savings associated with decreased ecological throughput and the tremendous boon to the city's economy and reputation that would derive from having a demonstration project and green industry enclave modeling the sustainable urban communities of the future.

We currently stand at a crossroads. The new millennium beckons. Will the City do a repeat of 'business as usual,' or will it possess the courage to do something truly 'world-class'? The environmental and social justice community senses a window of opportunity, a turning point which may help to shape the future form of the City and, turn, that of the region.

One is reminded of a similar conjuncture in the early 1970s when Southwest False Creek and Granville Island were redeveloped into one of the most successful and amenity-rich neighbour-hoods in the City. While that period awaits a thorough study, the



South West False Creek looking west

evidence suggests that there were four key factors: strong civic leadership (provided by *The Electors' Action Movement* [TEAM] on City Council), institutional momentum with the City and federal government responding to the progressive agenda of the late 60s, strong buy-in by planners and design professionals in the prestigious and holistic concepts being advanced by Christopher Alexander and others, and a strongly mobilized grassroots.

The potential for that development to inspire imitation was not fully realized beyond the recreation of public markets in the New Westminster and Lonsdale Quays. But, perhaps, a sustainable Southeast False Creek is just the catalyst that is needed to kickstart widespread urban change as we head into the new century.

But do the factors that existed in the early 70s exist today? Yes and no. The visionary leadership is certainly missing, but neither is the present Council a homogenous mass. At least four of the NPA councillors can probably be won to support a sustainable vision for Southeast False Creek.

The institutional momentum is there. The City has already committed itself to a sustainable development on the site. The support for the eco-city

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False Creek continued. .

approach is still weak in the upper echelons of the public and private sectors, but is growing thanks to tireless advocacy by numerous academics, designers, and community groups. An opportunity to 'take the pulse' of the professional planning and design community exists on April 4, when Simon Fraser's City Program, in conjunction with the Vancouver Planning Commission, will host an all-day workshop on the Creek facilitated by Dr. Peter Jacobs.

The final element — an aroused citizenry — is largely missing. However, the latent potential may be there, a potential which the Southeast False Creek Working Group hopes to tap in the months to come.

For more information about the Working Group, call Ga Ching Kong at 873-0617. For a copy of the case study report on Southeast False Creek, call Don Alexander 739-0624 or 291-3696.

