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**Review**

**East of Eden: Paradise — Are We There Yet?**

*by Don Alexander, MCIP*

**City Making in Paradise: Nine Decisions That Saved Vancouver**

*by Mike Harcourt, Ken Cameron, with Sean Rossiter (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007)*

This is a curious book. It is part history, part memoir, and part policy analysis. Written by two of the titans of urban and regional planning in Greater Vancouver over the last thirty to forty years — and assisted by long-time urban affairs writer, Sean Rossiter — it ably makes the point that what we enjoy today is merely the accretion of many large and small decisions made in the past.

Greater Vancouver has a strong planning culture which is both a product of and contributes to the relative wealth of literature on the Lower Mainland’s urban and regional planning traditions. This book is a useful addition to that literature.

That it is written by two of the key players is both a strength and weakness. A strength because they were there at key moments in the story’s unfolding and can give us new insights, but a weakness in that at times the book degenerates into gossip and an after-the-fact settling of scores.

City Making in Paradise is organized around nine key decisions that have contributed to making Greater Vancouver one of the more livable regions in the world. Space does not permit going through each of the decisions, but in reciting the history of these events — for instance, the development of the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board in the wake of the 1948 floods, or the fight against urban renewal and freeway-building in Chinatown/Strathcona — they introduce us to many of the key personalities, controversies and concepts.

While catty at times, and while tooting their own horns (justifiably), they are generous in giving laurels to people with whom they would not be politically aligned when they feel those individuals played important roles or took principled stands. Examples include George Puil, former chair of GVRD and TransLink, Gordon Campbell, and even the man for whom Harcourt “took a bullet” — Dave Stupich, one of the architects of the Agricultural Land Reserve.

One of the things that the authors tout as unique to the Vancouver experiment is the system of “planning by consenting adults,” whereby all municipalities have to sign on to the growth management plan in order for it to be adopted. I think this system is overrated, given how routinely some municipalities flout the plan’s strictures. But I find it all the more remarkable that Harcourt now finds himself in alliance with the provincial Liberals pushing Gateway (opposed by Metro Vancouver), and has nominated a new non-elected TransLink Board that will meet behind closed doors while being paid $1200.00 per meeting. How does this fit with the commitments raised in this book?

While I support a regulatory role for the province when a municipality or region departs from its own regional plan, I do not support provincial interference to subvert that plan which has happened too often in the past, something the authors draw our attention to over and over again.

Despite the presence of professional writer, Sean Rossiter, the book is unevenly written, and sometimes downright confusing. This is probably partly because parts of it seem to be transcripts of conversation and interview that have simply been stitched together. While written in an accessible style, it still assumes a fairly high level of knowledge of urban planning history and policy, and thus will likely appeal mainly to planning wonks. While useful for teaching purposes, it is not “objective” or systematic enough to serve as a detailed regional planning history. However, it does fill in many gaps and it encourages us to refocus from livability to the broader concept of sustainability. For this it is very much welcome.