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Urban Heritage Trail an Innovative Way to Highlight Local History

by Don Alexander, MCIP

Vancouver’s False Creek has undergone many transformations in the past one hundred and fifty years.

The first European visitors to the area encountered a Squamish village called Sun’ahk in the approximate location of today’s Vancouver Museum and adjacent Burrard Bridge. The rest was old growth forest, trails through the brush, and teeming fishing grounds.

By the 1890s, the forests had been logged to feed the growing ring of sawmills on the Creek and industry, such as locomotive repair, and residential development had begun to establish themselves on the slopes of the inlet. Its waters, which still extended to Clark Drive, were increasingly filled with log booms and the air had become sooty with smoke from beehive burners.

Then, in 1913, work on the Grandview Cut began to fill in the False Creek Flats, a part of the Creek which was exposed at low tide, to allow railway access from the east and to permit new railway yards and stations to be built. This was accompanied by the relentless filling in of the Creek around its periphery, as industries sought to reclaim land and to dispose of refuse. By the 1950s, the Creek had shrunk to one quarter of its original size and had become so polluted that some politicians argued for filling it in entirely.

However, two things happened in the early 1970s that transformed the look of the Creek, while revolutionizing the way we think about inner-city planning. The first was the decision by the federal government to redevelop the industrially derelict area, Granville Island, into a “people place.” In an approach influenced by the fresh winds blowing in planning and architectural circles, the consultants for the project decided to keep the industrial buildings – which would usually have been scrapped – and to develop the Island’s ambience around them. Moreover, there was to be no strict separation between land uses, or between pedestrians and cars. Even a handful of industries would remain. Today, Granville Island attracts the third highest number of visitors in the province after Victoria and Whistler.

The other innovation, undertaken under an enlightened reform Council, was to redevelop the south shore of the Creek for residential development. The resulting community was socially diverse, with housing options for every part of the economic spectrum, and with high quality design and community amenities. It was here that Vancouver’s famed and much admired seawall was born, and its redevelopment of the downtown area began.

But False Creek has been a canvas not only for industrialists and planners, but also for labour, for immigrants and their descendants fighting racism, and for community activists fighting against destructive urban renewal and the effects of eviscerating freeways. Around its margins, one can also find evidence of more modest community projects such as community gardens and community art projects.

A once-proposed industrial complex and port on Kits Point at the mouth of False Creek on land occupied, until ninety years ago, by the Squamish.
One could go on about the various ways that False Creek has served as a crucible for change and transformation – sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. The point is that our built environments are potentially powerful teaching tools for educating citizens and visitors alike about how human activities and land uses have impacted on the natural environment, how planning has intervened to improve or worsen our physical and social environment, and how citizens have sought to influence the places in which they live and work.

It was with this perspective in mind that I set out several years ago to establish a False Creek Heritage Trail. It soon became clear that getting the cooperation of all the relevant city departments would take a lifetime of volunteer labour – not because of a lack of support, but because of the need to bring so many players with already overcrowded agendas to the table. However, to help lay the groundwork for the idea I decided it would be much easier to establish a trail on-line – a “virtual trail,” as it were. This way people could look at the trail guide on-line, print it off, and walk, cycle or drive the Trail on their own.

Having achieved this feat, thanks to a small grant from the now-defunct BC Heritage Trust and lots of dedicated volunteers, the approach is already producing results. The City of Vancouver has linked the Trail to its own Southeast False Creek web page, and the guidebook has received positive reviews from heritage groups, former parks board commissioners, authors, and community leaders. While establishing an actual on-the-ground trail has proved daunting in the complex environment of Vancouver’s City Hall, it is a far more doable project in smaller communities where there are fewer hoops to jump through. Moreover, the prospects for success are even greater if one can link it to existing projects, such as waterfront or downtown revitalization efforts. Heritage trails are a great way to celebrate the diverse peoples and cultures that make up the places where we live. Moreover, they can help us show the consequences of past decision-making, while conveying a message of how individuals and groups can make a difference to the well-being of their communities.

Don Alexander, PhD, MCIP, is a consultant, part-time instructor at Simon Fraser University, and research director for the New City Institute. He is currently working with former students to produce even more elaborate versions of the trail that will soon be available on-line. The current version of the guidebook – which was produced with the assistance of Charles Dobson, Patricia Canning, and Brendan Hurley – can be found at www.newcity.ca/Pages/false_creek_trail.pdf