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Building a heritage pathway is one way to link community, history and ecology

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IN 1998 THE CANRON building in the False Creek area of Vancouver was torn down, despite intense efforts by heritage preservationists to convince Vancouver’s city council to save it. This massive building, which enclosed 10,700 square metres of space under a clear span of steel girders, was where many of the components of Vancouver’s bridges were manufactured and where ships were built in World War II. It was one of the very few buildings still in existence from False Creek’s industrial past.1

The destruction of the Canron building is an instance of the widespread practice of devaluing and destroying anything that might get in the way of “development”. In response, some have questioned the need for such destruction, and have advocated preserving threatened elements of the natural world and the built environment. In this article, an emerging tool for urban heritage preservation and interpretation – the heritage trail – is explored, along with its possible application to a specific area, Vancouver’s False Creek.

False Creek is an ocean inlet that separates Vancouver’s central business district and a nearby high-density neighbourhood from the lower-density neighbourhoods to the south. Through infilling over the past century, the inlet has been reduced to a quarter of its original size.

Before European “discovery” of the Vancouver area, False Creek was the site of an extraordinary range of flora and fauna. In this century, the inlet was gradually appropriated for industry. At peak times – during World War II, for example – False Creek’s sawmilling, shipbuilding, and manufacturing industries employed tens of thousands of workers, while fouling the soil, water and air, and almost wiping out the area’s biological productivity. Since the 1960s, the False Creek area has gradually been redeveloped for housing, parkland, and cultural facilities, beginning with the south shore and Granville Island. More recently, the north shore has been undergoing massive redevelopment – the largest in recent North American urban history – as a result of Expo 86, which attracted a flood-tide of offshore investment in real estate.

The City of Vancouver is currently developing policies for South East False Creek, the last piece of derelict industrial land bordering the inlet. Under pressure from community activists, the city has committed itself to planning a model sustainable community that, if realized, will have regional and possibly international significance.2

A FALSE CREEK HERITAGE TRAIL
Heritage trails are pathways designed to increase understanding of a city or district’s natural and cultural heritage. They range from routes that exist only on paper and can be traced out with the aid of guidebooks to physical entities with distinctive pavement treatments, interpretive signs, and community and public art. Several heritage trails exist or are being planned elsewhere in Canada. One was developed in downtown Edmonton in the early 1980s. There are others in Guelph, Ontario and Whistler, BC. Efforts in Toronto include the work of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust (formerly the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront) – which has been highly sensitive to ecological and industrial heritage concerns in planning for shoreline trails and regeneration of Lake Ontario waterfront – and the work of the Humber River heritage trail group. The Heritage Resources Centre at the University of Waterloo is promoting the development of the Grand River Trail in conjunction with the national Heritage Rivers programme.3

The trail proposed for False Creek would point out historical landmarks, recognize industrial history, and include greenways and waterfront paths (see map on
Possible Route for a False Creek Heritage Trail

1. Burrard Bridge: Major public works completed in the Depression.

2. Sun'ahk: A Squamish village was located here at the time of European arrival. The village was the birthplace of August Jack Khatsalanough, after whom Vancouver's Kitsilano neighbourhood is named.

3. Granville Island: A formerly derelict industrial area that was transformed in the 1970s into a public market, arts venue and "people place". There is still some industry on the site.


5. False Creek South: A ground-oriented, medium-density residential development built in the 1970s, with an equal mix of low-, medium-, and high-income housing.

6. Seawall: A concrete path along the shoreline, used by walkers and cyclists.

7. The Canron and Vancouver Salt Buildings: Two buildings from the industrial phase of False Creek's history. The Canron building was demolished early in 1998 (despite an intense campaign to save it), but the Salt Building will likely be used as a community centre for Southeast False Creek.

8. Eco-Café Sustainability Centre: A demonstration of sustainable technology and urban food-growing and processing techniques, initiated by youth to highlight the kinds of technologies that activists have been fighting for as part of the Southeast False Creek redevelopment.


10. Native Education Centre: An important educational resource for the urban First Nations community.

11. Brewery Creek: A submerged creek that used to flow through the neighbourhood of Mount Pleasant. It is commemorated by a series of cast bronze cairns with plaques. Proposals have been made to daylight parts of the creek, and a small section of dry creekbed has been recreated.

12. Maddam's Ranch: The site of a five-acre farm in the 1890s that specialized in fruit. The fruit was carried by boat and sold in Gastown. The farm was bounded on the east by a now-submerged creek called China Creek because of the Chinese farmers who lived near its mouth (more on China Creek on page 6).

13. Strathcona and Cottonwood Community Gardens: Opportunities for urban food growing, habitat for non-human animals, and recreational green space for the residents of one of Canada's poorest neighbourhoods.

14. Hobo Jungle: A former city dump site that was used as a camp by the migrant unemployed in the dirty thirties.

15. Chinatown: This area has been a focal point for Chinese immigrant activity since the 1870s. In the past three decades, Chinatown and Strathcona residents have resisted freeway and urban renewal schemes and have promoted the cultural and physical revitalization of the neighbourhood.

16. Concord Pacific: The largest residential development in Canadian history. This architecturally sterile and largely upper-income development contrasts unfavourably with the more human-scale and socially mixed development on the south shore of False Creek.

17. Roundhouse: A community arts centre that was originally a locomotive roundhouse (a circular building in which train locomotives were rotated on a large turntable). This last remnant of False Creek's north shore industrial history was saved from demolition by heritage activists.

18. The Living Wall: A project beside the Vancouver Aquatic Centre that combines art works and vertical planters designed by street youth to demonstrate a space-efficient way to grow food and flowers in an urban setting.
The trail would follow an already existing seawall walkway (a concrete path that hugs the shore) around most of False Creek as its main route and would include side trails along city streets. It would incorporate wetlands and other natural features, historical buildings, demonstrations of sustainable technology, works of art on geographical and historical themes, and places for people to reflect and gather.

The trail is not being proposed as one large project, but rather as a piecemeal creation to be achieved through various initiatives. For instance, the planners working on the South East False Creek sustainable community proposal, which envisions a large residential community with a minimal ecological footprint, are taking the trail into account in their open space policies and are considering opportunities for heritage interpretation and eco-remediation.

The TransCanada Trail offers another opportunity, in that the heritage trail group is proposing to help design the portion of the Vancouver route that runs along the south shore of False Creek. The trail group may also be able to co-ordinate with the City of Vancouver’s greenway programme, which envisions a network of greenways around False Creek and through the False Creek flats to the east. At the suggestion of the heritage trail group, the city’s blueways initiative, which aims to complete the False Creek seawall, has incorporated the idea of:

- an urban heritage park or “eco-museum” ... a “museum without walls” consisting of self-guided walking tours around a central interpretative centre which focuses on the biophysical history and properties of the Creek... First Nations settlements and colonialism, the history of industrial labour, [and] struggles for community space.

Other projects may also be incorporated into the trail. For instance, “daylighted” – or re-exposed – streams in the False Creek area that were long ago buried in the path of development could be the focus of stops along the trail, as could some of the public art works being installed in conjunction with large-scale development on the creek’s north shore.

What is distinctive about the heritage trail group’s vision is that it integrates urban history, community and public art, and greenways and blueways – aspects of urban design that are often treated separately.

Urban history
The trail would highlight heritage buildings and sites in ways that acknowledge the significance of groups whose history has been made invisible. As Delores Hayden notes:

[For many years, urban history [has been] dominated by a kind of “city biography” that projected a single narrative of how city leaders or “city fathers” – almost always white, upper- and middle-class men – forged the city’s spatial and economic structure, making fortunes building downtowns and imposing order on chaotic immigrant populations. This narrative tradition in urban history [bears] many similarities to the “conquest” histories of the American West.

In the kind of urban history Hayden critiques, the history of First Nations people is absent. Similarly, all signs of First Nations’ historical presence have been obliterated from the False Creek area. There was in fact a Squamish village established in the early 19th century on the south shore, near the present location of the Burrard Bridge. A reserve was established around this village in the 1870s. The three levels of government wrangled over the land for many decades, and its sale was finalized after World War II. No monument or sign acknowledges the existence of this village.

Nor is there currently any visible record of the tens of thousands of industrial workers who laboured in the sawmills, shipyards, and manufacturing plants around False Creek. Outside of Granville Island, only two significant industrial buildings from that era have been preserved – a locomotive repair shop on the north shore, saved from demolition by activists in the 1980s and now a community centre, and the Vancouver Salt Building in South East False Creek. All the rest are either gone or face demolition.

The historical record presented by the city is socially monocromatic: the city itself is named after an English explorer, and most streets, parks, and neighbourhoods are named after white male politicians and industrialists. There is very little in the built environment that acknowledges the history of anyone else. The False Creek heritage trail would draw attention to buildings and sites with connections to the experiences and contributions of various other individuals and groups including First Nations people, Chinese people, Sikhs, workers, and community and environmental activists.

Community and public art
Public art has conventionally been added as an afterthought to urban sites for decorative effect – an abstract sculpture in front of an office building, for example. The heritage trail group envisions site-specific works that would deepen awareness of particular places. Some works could be by people living in or near the area. Examples of recent community art projects in other parts of the city could be drawn on.

In Mosaic Park, for instance, in East Vancouver, artists and other residents have made a small park with a “creek,” composed of mosaic tiles and found mate-
Design Aspects

- **Trail development along False Creek should aim for ecological sensitivity and improved access to the water.** The seawall should extend along the entire shoreline, and the edge between land and water should be softened by replacing concrete and metal with a naturalized shoreline.

- **Water quality should be improved.** Bioremediation should be used to combat toxic leaching from former industrial sites. Combined sewer overflows should be separated. Saltwater wetlands should be established for their filtering capacity and habitat value.

- **Indigenous plants such as crabapple, hemlock, Douglas fir, salal, and salmonberry should be re-established and the return of native fauna encouraged.** Naturalized buffer zone areas are especially crucial between developed areas and the creek.

- **The historical inhabitation of the False Creek area by First Nations people should be highlighted.** In addition, their current needs and cultural values should be integrated into the planning and design of the trail and associated facilities.

- **The contributions of people of many national origins who settled in surrounding neighbourhoods should be emphasized.** A False Creek Heritage Interpretation Centre could provide space for each cultural group to tell its own story.

- **False Creek’s industrial and transportation history, and the role and struggles of working people in Vancouver’s development, should be recognized.** A transportation and/or industrial museum (Montreal’s Ecomusée du Fier Monde provides a possible model) and an oral history project could present the experiences and stories of workers and labour organizations.

- **Open space should be planned into new development, rather than treated as “space left over after planning.”** Open space should form the heart of the South East False Creek redevelopment, with buildings used to further define the public realm and to provide “eyes on the street.” Works of public and community art, commissioned and juried by community and arts groups, should complement the open space system.

- **There should be an integration of disciplines and of expert and practical knowledge, including (though not limited to) the following:**
  - urban planning
  - environmental design
  - architecture
  - engineering
  - landscape architecture
  - restoration ecology
  - the arts
  - history
  - education.

- **Future residents of South East False Creek, and current residents of adjacent communities, should be able to contribute to the design of the trail.**
tions, their responsibility to live in ecologically respectful ways is obscured.

One way of encouraging an awareness of human life as part of, and interconnected with other parts of, the natural world is through art. As Julia Walton, the originator of the Budd Inlet Historic Trail in Olympia, Washington, argues:

"By providing visibility in public spaces through art and narration, we can emphasize the value and interdependent nature of urban life and ecosystem components. We can remind ourselves that action is needed."

For instance, an art work that addresses the life cycle of herring—fish that have recently attempted to reestablish themselves in False Creek despite the degraded habitat—could raise awareness of our obligation to accommodate the needs of other species. Signs could tell the story of the creek from the herrings' point of view.

Another way to encourage awareness of our connectedness with the rest of the natural world is to restore natural elements previously destroyed or covered over. One objective in daylighting streams—re-creating original stream corridors and connecting them up with natural drainage systems—is to make visible the effects, especially on fish, of contaminants introduced into storm sewers and thus to make evident, on a small scale, people's responsibility to prevent such effects from occurring. Several projects involving the daylighting of streams in the False Creek area have been proposed by city planners and engineers. The trail would link these sites and highlight their significance.

The ecological reclamation, healing, and restoration component of the heritage trail could promote a wilder, less controlled aesthetic than is usual in urban landscapes—one that breaks down the rigid dualism between humans and the rest of nature conveyed by the controlling and corralting of nature in, for instance, monocultural lawns and sharp-edged hedges. In Vancouver, indigenous plants such as salal, salmonberry, Douglas fir, crabapple, and hemlock could be replanted and the return of indigenous animals encouraged.

Allowing urban spaces to revert to unchecked indigenous vegetation has direct, concrete ecological benefits in the form of lowered dependence on inputs of water, fertilizers, pesticides and fossil fuels. But the symbolic aspects are also important. The severely limited biological diversity of the modern urban landscape expresses certain values and attitudes towards the natural world. The heritage trail opposes such attitudes, and challenges industrial culture's homogenization of places.

The trail could point out the characteristic attributes of the False Creek area (indigenous species, local food chains, and locally significant indicators of ecological health) and could show how these attributes have been affected by human activities over time. For instance, the trail could draw attention to the exotic species, such as Himalayan blackberry and Scotch broom, that have crowded out indigenous plants in the area.

The heritage trail could also promote urban sustainability by making visible the cultural and economic forces that have shaped and degraded the natural world and the built environment. In Walton's words:

"Making environmental history visible through public art and design of public spaces can highlight the effects of public decision making over time and in terms of definable periods of land use and public values. As past decisions impacted the environment, so will future ones."

The trail could draw attention to, for instance, the extra costs imposed on the redevelopment of South East False Creek by the extensive contamination of soil and groundwater caused by nearly a century of industrial use.

The trail has the potential to encourage questioning of the sort of decisions that have left regrettable gaps in the city's tissue. A case in point is the Canron building: although this building no longer exists as a physical structure, its site could be a major stop on the trail, with documentation both of the building's historical significance and of the battle to save it. Visitors can then consider for themselves the implications for future conflicts over preservation and, more broadly, the shaping of public space.

Finally, the trail could contribute to urban sustainability by celebrating struggles to achieve social and ecological justice. Without specific monuments recognizing the ability of individuals and communities to bring about social change, the urban built environment can imply an eternal present.

One of the goals of heritage trails is to elucidate past struggles and to indicate insights that can be gained from them. Examples might include struggles to improve working conditions and resist exploitation, to preserve forests and other green space, to protect low-income neighbourhoods from proposed freeways, and to establish parks and community gardens. Preserving the physical evidence connected to these struggles and using the visible traces as a vehicle for their telling can inspire people in the present and in the future to build on their activist legacy.

As Edward Said argues, cultural interventions are important because they provide "a visionary alternative" to the current situation. "What one must train oneself [to do] is to think the alternative, and not to think the accepted and the status quo or to believe that the present is frozen." By emphasizing people's ability to effect change, and by conveying a sense of present and future alternatives, the trail demonstrates a rejection of the position that today's reality is the only possibility.
Current Status

For the past two years, an informally constituted False Creek Heritage Trail Group has been promoting the trail and talking to a variety of municipal agencies and interested non-profit organizations, including city councillors, the planners responsible for South East False Creek, the City's Greenways and Blueways (seawall) teams, the Engineering Department, Trails BC, Heritage Vancouver, and the Vancouver Heritage Commission.

Existing seawalls, greenways and city streets will provide rights of way for much of the trail. Policy suggestions have been submitted to the city's planning department on how to incorporate the trail into the open space design of South East False Creek, and a proposal has been floated to coordinate the trail's development in conjunction with the TransCanada Trail, which is scheduled for completion in the year 2000. The trail has been publicized through public forums, displays and literature tables at a variety of venues, and efforts have been made to raise funds to carry the project to a more formal level.

Despite these encouraging beginnings, some challenges exist.

- One of the goals of the project is to celebrate the history of under-represented groups, such as First Nations and workers. Though avenues of communication have been sought with First Nations organizations and the labour movement, no collaboration has resulted thus far.
- Although naturalized landscaping, using indigenous vegetation and drought-resistant plants, will likely be put in place in parts of the South East False Creek development, such approaches may be resisted in existing neighbourhoods where lawns and ornamental flowers are the norm. There may be concern, for instance, about the resulting "untidiness" or the proliferation of wildlife.
- Opportunities for naturalization along the trail proper may be limited. Seawalls are built to accommodate substantial pedestrian and bicycle traffic. Alternatives to concrete and asphalt for high traffic areas have not yet been identified. Even if earth paths were adopted, high levels of use would reduce their permeability through compaction.
- While it is desirable to replace rip-rap (rough-hewn stone used for bank stabilization) and concrete edges along the creek with more naturalized treatment, there are concerns about the possible impacts if contaminated soils and sediments are disturbed.

CONCLUSION

In integrating urban history, community and public art, and greenways and blueways, heritage trails can encourage an awareness of human life as part of the natural world and its processes, can make visible the social forces that, through influencing public and private decision-making, have shaped and degraded the natural world and built environments, and can celebrate efforts to achieve social and ecological justice.

Projects such as heritage trails can contribute to replacing fragmented, dualistic cityscapes with "landscapes that heal, connect and empower, that make intelligible our relations with each other and with the natural world." In doing so, they can help foster subjective conditions for more attentive and respectful treatment of the natural world and, more broadly, for changes toward a more socially and ecologically just culture.

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This article is based on a paper presented at the Environmental Studies Association of Canada Conference at the University of Ottawa, Ontario, June 1998.

NOTES
7 Carolyn Lair, public art consultant, personal communication, Vancouver (May 1997).
9 "Is "Sustainable City" an Oxymoron?" Local Environment, 2:3 (1997), pp. 307, 309.
10 Ibid., p. 304.
12 Ibid.

RÉSUMÉ

Les sentiers du patrimoine sont conçus dans le but d'améliorer la connaissance du patrimoine naturel et culturel d'une ville ou d'une région. Dans la gamme des sentiers, on compte des projets qui n'existent que sur papier et qui doivent être retracés à l'aide de guides jusqu'à des lieux physiques comportant chaussée, panneaux d'interprétation, art public et œuvres réalisées par des membres de la communauté.

Il existe actuellement au Canada plusieurs sentiers du patrimoine, ainsi que plusieurs projets de sentiers. Cet article décrit un projet de sentier proposé dans la région de False Creek (une ancienne zone industrielle située au cœur de Vancouver) par des citoyens engagés. Il intègrerait un chemin rivière en béton qui existe déjà et qui fait le tour d'une grande partie de False Creek, et comprendrait des sentiers connexes. On y trouverait des terres humides et d'autres caractéristiques naturelles, des édifices historiques, des présentations sur les technologies visant la durabilité de l'environnement, des œuvres d'art sur la géographie ou l'histoire, ainsi que des lieux de rencontre et de réflexion.