

CHANGING PLACES: A CHARACTER BUILDING EXERCISE

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been considerable debate about the relations between urban form and sustainability, much of which has advocated the adaptation of existing cities to become more compact. Higher concentrations of urban development are said to reduce the need to travel, encourage the use of more sustainable modes of transport, and promote the more efficient use of land. It has also been suggested that higher density neighbourhoods typically have greater levels of social cohesion and vitality¹. One of the principal means of achieving a more compact urban form is through the process of urban intensification – most commonly defined as the more efficient use of land and the intensification of development and activity in a given place².

Worldwide, as cities have deployed strategies of urban intensification, an increased public awareness and sensitivity to the specificities of place has emerged as a response: this is manifest in the way that a perceived threat to the ‘character’ of a place is increasingly used to defend certain areas from change. Whilst a strong attachment to the character of a place clearly has many positive dimensions, resistance to change can have a paralysing effect on processes of urban development, and has a bearing on broader debates about ethnic diversity and social integration: community solidarity in debate over place can act to exclude difference³. The issue then represents a major challenge for urban planners and designers: how can existing places be intensified without their character being damaged or destroyed as a result?

The residential suburb of Collingwood, in the City of Vancouver, is a place which has in the past fifteen years been subject to extremely high levels of intensification, but where residents and community leaders claim that urban change has actually helped maintain the character of the neighbourhood. In fact, the community’s conceptions of neighbourhood character were key in shaping the design and development of Collingwood Village; an eleven hectare mixed-use project comprising 3,000 residential units in buildings of up to twenty-six storeys. This scale of intensification was made possible by the Collingwood community’s somewhat unorthodox conceptions of neighbourhood character, which actually led them to negotiate for an increase to building heights in the project. Furthermore, an openness to physical change which was fostered through consultation on the proposals now seems to have effected a related shift in attitudes towards social and cultural difference, with the neighbourhood having recently been documented as a model of cultural integration.

This paper then sets out, in a very practical way, to understand how the process of intensification was able to proceed in Collingwood, without the existing character of the neighbourhood being damaged. Conceptions of character are explored from the viewpoints of residents, community leaders, planners and developers: how was the neighbourhood’s character conceived prior to change, how did these conceptions of character mediate the process of urban design and development, how is Collingwood’s character conceived today? Findings are based on empirical research undertaken in late 2007, which involved semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, document analysis and detailed mapping of Collingwood’s past and present urban form.

PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE

In the early 1990s, eleven hectares of under-utilised industrial land in the centre of Collingwood was acquired by a private property developer, and an application was submitted for its rezoning and redevelopment as a mixed-use project. An extended process of public consultation followed, in which the developer and city council worked alongside the Collingwood Neighbourhood House (CNH); a not-for-profit community

1 See Jenks et al. (eds.) (1996), Newman and Kenworthy (1999), Jenks and Burgess (eds.) (2000), de Roo and Miller (eds.) (2000), Williams et al. (eds.) (2000) for comprehensive discussions of the case for and against more compact urban forms.

2 Jenks (2000), in Williams et al. (eds.) (2000)

3 For example, Sandercock (1998, 2003), Fincher and Jacobs (eds.) (1998)

organisation, to establish a set of objectives and directions for the site's redevelopment, and for the future of the neighbourhood more generally. A series of meetings, workshops and public displays were staged in a variety of locations across the neighbourhood: these involved participants in a series of visioning and educational exercises which were designed to expose them to the 'trade-offs' of the development process, and to demonstrate that proposals for change, in fact, represented something of an opportunity for neighbourhood improvement. Nearly fifty percent of Collingwood's residents at the time spoke a language other than English as their mother tongue⁴, and translators and multi-lingual consultation material were available.

Attendees at the sessions were provided with details of the levels of development density that were necessary for the financial viability of the project, and were invited to use sets of building blocks to create different design forms within these financial constraints. Financial details and their implications were made available for use at the sessions, and representatives from the developer and city council were involved in face-to-face discussions and negotiations with members of the community. The aim of the process was both to broaden the community's knowledge of the development process, as it related to Collingwood and Vancouver, and to deepen the developer and city council's understanding of the neighbourhood and its community.

NEIGHBOURHOOD CHARACTER

For many long-standing residents and community leaders attending the consultation sessions, Collingwood's character was conceived through historical narrative. The area had originally been settled by Europeans in the 1870s, and had grown rapidly through the late 19th Century and early 20th Century as a commuter hub and commercial centre on the inter-urban rail line between Vancouver and New Westminster⁵. Collingwood had been one of the earliest settled parts of Vancouver, and the neighbourhood's character was closely linked to several families and businesses which had been established in the area since its early days. The name of the settlement itself was believed to have originated with principals of the inter-urban rail company who had previously lived in Collingwood, Ontario, and had named the original inter-urban rail station 'Collingwood East'.

Concepts of neighbourhood character were also bound up in Collingwood's social fabric: the neighbourhood was seen to have traditionally benefited from a close-knit, stable and highly engaged community; one which was epitomised by an attitude of inclusiveness, tolerance, and a strong working-class spirit. Collingwood had always been part of 'Eastside' Vancouver; historically a lower-income and less desirable area than the 'Westside', but this Eastside status and the neighbourhood's working class spirit were seen to have fostered high levels of commonality and a strong sense of community.

Collingwood was not associated with particular styles or features of urban form, either by residents, community leaders, planners, architects or developers. The neighbourhood's building stock was relatively uniform in that it was largely one and two storey single-detached dwellings (see Figures 1 and 2), but this did not feature significantly in conceptions of neighbourhood character: where direct links were made between the neighbourhood and physical form, these were typically to describe the building stock as '*non-descript*', or to link built form with particular socio-economic characteristics of the area - as one of the architects working on the Collingwood Village project stated:

'the neighbourhood was largely single-homes, largely blue-collar and families, and I guess the character you'd hang on that is the result of working - strong family ties, strong community ties, the kind of folk who really care about the place they live in. But the homes weren't remarkable, they didn't have the architectural character that you would hang your hat on - kind of ordinary, post-war and earlier single-family homes'

The neighbourhood's character was then conceived primarily through its traditionally strong sense of com-

4 Statistics Canada (1986)

5 The inter-urban rail line was closed in the 1950s, but subsequently reinstated in the mid 1980s as part of Vancouver's Skytrain rapid transit system.

Figures 1 and 2: Typical Streetscapes in Collingwood



munity, and its role as a busy commuter hub and commercial centre earlier in the twentieth century. At the consultation sessions, however, there also emerged a widespread sense that these previously defining characteristics had been eroded in the post-war period, due largely to changing demographics and a sustained period of economic disinvestment. Between 1971 and 1991, more than 12,000 overseas immigrants had arrived in the neighbourhood, and by the mid 1990s less than half of Collingwood's residents had been born in Canada⁶. The neighbourhood's population had expanded considerably in this period, but its community had also become increasingly fragmented: there were few facilities to assist with the integration of new immigrants, levels of interaction between groups were low, and xenophobia was prevalent amongst long-standing residents. Parallel to this rapid demographic change, Collingwood's commercial and industrial sectors had, like many other inner-city areas in North America, suffered significant decline: levels of commercial and industrial vacancy in the neighbourhood by the early 1990s were high, and crime had become a major problem.

For residents and community leaders at the consultation sessions, conceptions of Collingwood's character in the early 1990s were then bound up in a sense of juxtaposition between contemporary circumstance in the neighbourhood and its more vibrant and prosperous past: social fragmentation, intolerance and economic decline were seen to be in stark contrast with its vibrancy and social cohesion earlier in the twentieth century. Conceptions of Collingwood's character amongst participants at the sessions were also perhaps slightly unorthodox, in that they were based more in social, attitudinal and experiential understandings of the place than they were in physical appearance or form: even where features of physical form did feature in conceptions of the place, these were typically linked to social or economic measures.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

The consultation sessions had then caused many community members to reflect on Collingwood's character as it had been early in the twentieth century, and this now prompted a desire amongst long-standing residents and community leaders for the previously defining characteristics of social cohesion, tolerance and commercial vitality to be restored - a positive future was, for many community members, based in a reflection on the past:

'The place had run down so bad...more shootings and stabbings than in downtown - that's the character, the neighbourhood had gone down, down, down in the Joyce area...and then everything else around it starts to go down and deteriorate with it, right? And that's when this thing [the proposal for Collingwood Village] was seen as a way of getting the vibrancy back again...people had been here a long time and they wanted it back to how it was when the streets were safe'

Through the initial stages of the consultation process, community members had been made aware of the potential benefits of intensification for the neighbourhood, and they now realised that an increase to resident

population could improve the viability of local businesses, whilst also generating higher levels of pedestrian activity and passive surveillance - that intensification could then boost levels of vibrancy and safety. In terms of community cohesion, there was acceptance that no simple solution to the neighbourhood's fragmentation existed, but community leaders suggested that tolerance could perhaps be fostered through interaction between groups; something which was seen to depend on the provision of new community facilities, social mix, and a safe and accessible public realm.

The logic behind this argument was that communal gathering places and recreational facilities would generate increased citizen engagement, and would therefore build cohesion and begin to address issues of inter-cultural tension - xenophobia was seen to be associated with a lack of understanding and interaction between groups, and the hope was that by bringing previously disparate groups together through participation in community activities, and by increasing the chance of their unprompted encounter in the public realm, this widespread sense of 'them' and 'us' could be eroded.

In terms of the physical form of buildings, streets and spaces, there was significant resistance to high-rise development. This was linked primarily to concerns about social interaction - participants at the consultation sessions believed that levels of interaction in high-rise apartments were lower than in areas of single-detached dwellings, and feared that high-rise development would therefore worsen the neighbourhood's social fragmentation. Relating also to physical form, there was concern that large areas of grass or playing fields would be unmanageable, and could act to attract crime.

DESIGN PROCESS

For employees of the CNH, the proposals for Collingwood Village had already begun to build community cohesion: the public consultation process itself had, for them, been a point of dialogue from which to reach out to the neighbourhood's marginal groups; a tool for '*community building*'. Due to the city council's involvement, there had been resources available for translation and multi-lingual publication, which had provided an opportunity for CNH employees to engage groups which might otherwise not have been able to participate. The sessions had also brought community members from varied social and cultural backgrounds together for a shared purpose, and had in this way broken down some ethno-cultural barriers.

Participants at the consultation sessions had based their primary desires for the neighbourhood on its former character of social cohesion, tolerance and vibrancy. The realisation of this character was now seen to be contingent on improvements to social infrastructure, open space and the creation of a safe, socially-mixed and interactive urban environment. There was, in particular, a desire for the work of the CNH in community building to be extended through larger premises and an expanded range of services and facilities, and for the public realm to be designed in such a way as to encourage pedestrian movement, interaction and encounter. Participants also wished for a new community policing centre, school, day-care centre, and new areas of public open space.

Community leaders, at this point, were fully aware of the financial implications of various development scenarios, and understood that the provision of community infrastructure depended largely on the developer's profit margins: that certain levels of development density were necessary in order that the desired levels and quality of infrastructure could be provided. The exercise with building blocks had, for many community members, brought a realisation that the concentration of development density into taller buildings with smaller footprints would maximise the area of open space, whilst still allowing the developer to achieve the required profit margins. Community leaders then had to decide which of physical appearance or social infrastructure was most important in achieving the desired neighbourhood character: if buildings were lower then their surface area coverage would be greater; if overall development densities were lower, then the desired levels of community facilities could not be provided. Although high-rise development had been resisted earlier in the consultation period, community leaders now opted to negotiate for an increase to building heights, in exchange for increased levels of open space and the provision of high-quality community infrastructure: they prioritised social infrastructure over physical form.

COLLINGWOOD VILLAGE

Collingwood Village was completed in 2006, and its towers dominate the neighbourhood's skyline. Building heights rise to twenty-six storeys, and development densities are 250 dwellings per hectare; far higher than in adjacent residential areas. There is a significant scalar and architectural contrast between buildings in the project and its surrounding context: Figures 3 and 4 are photographs of the development and surrounding residential areas, Figures 5 and 6 show building heights before and after the development of Collingwood Village.

Figures 3 and 4: Collingwood Village and surrounding residential areas



Figures 5 and 6: Building heights before and after the development of Collingwood Village



Because of the high development densities achieved by the project, the levels and quality of infrastructure desired by participants at the consultation sessions were provided by the developer: Collingwood Village incorporates new premises for the Collingwood Neighbourhood House, an elementary school, a day-care centre and a community policing centre. There are three small parks, as well as several pockets of landscaped

open space between buildings. The new neighbourhood house facility includes a gymnasium, kitchen, showers, and meeting spaces available for hire, as well as offices for employees. The layout of the project is shown in Figure 7.

A primary design consideration was the mitigation of adverse impacts on adjacent residential areas. A pre-existing elevated transit line provides a visual and noise buffer to the north of the site, and the tallest buildings are positioned close to this line in order to minimise overshadowing. Building heights are tapered to three and four storeys closer to the existing building stock, in order to minimise the visual contrast between the project and adjacent residential areas. Figures 8 to 11 are photographs of typical streetscapes and spaces.

Figure 7: Collingwood Village Project Layout



Figures 8 to 11: Streetscapes and spaces in Collingwood Village





Few physical features of Collingwood were seen to be characteristic of the neighbourhood, and the urban planning and design of the project then set out to create a form which was conducive to social interaction, encounter, and safe pedestrian movement, rather than one which necessarily reflected Collingwood's pre-existing built form. The notion was that character would come through social interactions, experiences and a reflection on the past - one of the project's architects stated:

'There really was no sense of place, no core to the neighbourhood, so the opportunity of building and intensifying and densifying around the Joyce Street Skytrain station was an opportunity to kind of recreate a heart to their community. The whole notion of calling it Collingwood village was a play on the history of the area and reinforcing it as the heart of East Vancouver. But from a character - architectural, urban planning perspective, there was really nothing to work with'



Buildings were positioned to frame streets and public spaces, and to provide a clear, but interactive, distinction between public and private realms. Streets were aligned with the existing grid-based street network, and there were intentionally no through-routes: all streets have a 'T-junction'. An east-west 'character street' worked as the organising principle for the project's layout, with cross-streets used to create a more fine-grained pedestrian network and to break the project down into several smaller blocks – the desire here was to create a series of linked neighbourhoods within the project that would reduce its overall bulk. Several streets in Collingwood Village are named after long-standing families or businesses in Collingwood.

IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT

In order to minimise inconvenience for residents of surrounding areas, the project was planned and developed in four distinct phases. Community facilities and open space were provided in each phase, in line with the scale of development in that phase. The new neighbourhood house formed part of phase one: this was seen to be a way of demonstrating to community members the benefits of intensification at an early stage of development. Construction of the project began in 1995 and was completed in 2006 - in total, 2,760 dwelling units were built, of which 420 units (15%) are non-market housing⁷. 552 units are designed for families with children, and there is a mix of owner-occupied and rental units – the developer continues to own and

⁷ Defined by the City of Vancouver as 'housing owned by government, a non-profit or co-operative society. Rents are determined not by the market but by the residents' ability to pay'

manage 704 units in the project.

MAINTAINING CHARACTER

Collingwood Village brought extensive physical and social change to Collingwood, and yet long-standing residents, community leaders and city planners today claim that the neighbourhood's character has been maintained. The high levels of community engagement which were generated through the process of consultation on the project, and the community facilities and open spaces which Collingwood Village now provides are believed to have helped build community cohesion and shift xenophobia. An increase in population has benefited local businesses, with rates of commercial vacancy having fallen considerably in recent years. Passive surveillance of the public realm and the new community policing centre have improved levels of safety, and the layout of the project itself has facilitated pedestrian movement to and from the neighbourhood's main commercial areas and transit nodes. Collingwood's character is today conceived through notions of inclusiveness, community and vibrancy; much as it had been conceived previously through historical narrative: the sense in the community is that Collingwood's character had been threatened by changes occurring in the 1970s and 1980s, but that the effects of intensification have been to ensure that these changes were reversed, and that the neighbourhood's traditional character was therefore maintained.

Residents and community leaders now see the character of the neighbourhood to be exemplified by the success of the Collingwood Neighbourhood House, which has expanded rapidly since moving into its new premises at Collingwood Village. The CNH was recently the subject of a film documentary, in which the organisation was praised for its role in facilitating cultural integration in the neighbourhood and building community cohesion⁸. The CNH was one of the first institutions in Vancouver to develop a multicultural policy, and its services and facilities have been designed to be culturally non-specific, and to promote inter-cultural exchange through arts, food and children's activities. Christian, Muslim and various Chinese religious groups share the CNH facilities as a place of worship and study, and in 2005-2006 there were over 164,000 single uses of the CNH facilities, from a population of 48,000. The CNH currently employs 100 people, 39 of whom are full-time staff, and there are an additional 300 volunteers⁹. These high levels of use, and the organisation's '*in-difference to difference*'¹⁰ are now seen to epitomise the engagement and inclusiveness of the Collingwood community more generally.

LESSONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the early 1990s, Collingwood's traditionally defining characteristics of social cohesion, inclusiveness and vibrancy were seen to be under threat from social fragmentation and economic disinvestment, but a sense of the neighbourhood's former sociability and vibrancy led the community to embrace change as an opportunity for this former character to be maintained. Throughout the process, Collingwood's character was understood through social measures, rather than features of physical form or appearance, and this ultimately led the community to accept high development densities and higher buildings in exchange for community infrastructure and open space: they sacrificed physical appearance for social infrastructure.

Community leaders were sophisticated in their approach towards negotiations: they lobbied for the nomination of a single contact at the City Council, and they established a working coalition of community interests, which provided them with a unified and therefore more powerful negotiating position. The developer was genuinely committed to community participation, and the charisma of a number of the group's employees was cited as a factor in gaining trust and respect from the community. The transparency of the consultation process, and particularly the exercise in which building blocks and financial details had been made available to participants generated an improved understanding and appreciation of development issues and scenarios: residents and community leaders now believe that their involvement in shaping the process has given them a sense of ownership; that the Collingwood Village project was '*coming from the community, rather than*

8 Attili (2006)

9 Cavers, V. (2005)

10 Sandercock (2003)

being done to the community'.

The openness to physical change fostered through the consultation process has surely also been a factor in shifting xenophobia and inter-cultural tensions in the neighbourhood. There had originally been significant resistance to the prospect of high-rise development in the neighbourhood, and yet community leaders ultimately negotiated for taller buildings as a way of maintaining the neighbourhood's existing character: this acceptance of physical change and the realisation of its potential benefits seems now to have prompted a more receptive attitude towards social and cultural difference, as manifest in the success of the CNH and the neighbourhood's recent documentation as a model of cultural integration.

Collingwood is today understood in much the same way as it had been prior to redevelopment, although its character is now seen to be reflective of both contemporary circumstance and historical narrative. Amongst residents, community leaders, planners, architects and developers, there is now much pride in the neighbourhood and in the Collingwood Village project: despite having undergone dramatic physical and demographic change, it is claimed that the neighbourhood's character has been maintained. Urban intensification in Collingwood provided the resources for improved community facilities, and the process of consultation and education helped foster trust and acceptance of change - certainly in a physical sense and perhaps also in a socio-cultural sense. The neighbourhood's character was, throughout the process of change, understood through existing and desired socio-economic measures: rather than being seen as potentially damaging to the neighbourhood's existing character, increased building heights then became a way of maintaining that social character. The community's role in shaping intensification has, in this way, helped secure the provision of community facilities and open space, and has generated a sense of community ownership. An openness to physical change appears now also to have fostered more widespread acceptance of socio-cultural difference.

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All quotes in this paper are taken directly from the author's interviews with residents, community leaders, planners, architects and developers in October 2007.

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