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Toronto's 'Vancouverism': Developer adaptation, planning responses, and the challenge of design quality

JAMES T. WHITE AND JOHN PUNTER

Abstract

This paper examines 'Vancouverism' and its recent reproduction at CityPlace on Toronto's Railway Lands. The developers, Concord Pacific, were centrally involved in producing 'Vancouverism' in the 1990s and 2000s. This study examines the design quality of CityPlace and explores the differences between the planning cultures in Vancouver and Toronto. In evaluating the design outcomes it highlights a mismatch between the public sector's expectations, the developer's ambitions and the initial design quality. The paper demonstrates that, despite an increasingly sophisticated system of control, the City of Toronto's ability to shape outcomes remains limited and, overall, the quality of development falls short of that achieved in Vancouver.

Key Words

Urban Design; Design control; Toronto; Vancouver

Words: 8,797 (excl. abstract and key words)

Introduction

Vancouver, on Canada's West Coast, is widely recognised for its design-sensitive approach to city planning and development management (Punter, 2003). It has been described as the 'poster child' of North American urbanism in that it has "retained, re-created or reinvented many of the elements that characterize civilised urban living that have eluded so many other cities in North America" (Berelowitz, 2005, 259). Since the early 1990s, the city has witnessed the transformation of the margins of its commercial core and industrial waterfront into a high-density residential and mixed-use inner city endowed with a network of high quality waterfront public spaces, so much so that critics now complain that this is inhibiting commercial office development in the core. Vancouver's planners have been praised for collaborating with community stakeholders and for securing quality public amenities from developers (Punter, 2002; 2003). New development is characterised by slender condominium towers that respect designated views of mountains and water, integrated with townhouses or commercial units and generous public amenity space (MacDonald, 2005; Soules, 2010). This design-led typology is exemplified by Concord Pacific Place, a 70-hectare ribbon of mixed used development, built by the developer Concord Pacific on Vancouver's False Creek waterfront, that incorporates over 8,000 residential units, commercial space and a necklace of parks and recreational facilities along a celebrated seawall (Punter, 2003, 186-240; Firley and Gron, 2013, 164-177).

Vancouver has become a 'place of pilgrimage' for planners and designers (Blore and Sutherland, 1999; Threndyle, 2014) and elements of Vancouver's built form have been reproduced around the world, beginning in Seattle, San Francisco, San Diego and Dallas and thence to Dubai, Abu Dhabi and some Malaysian, Indian and Chinese cities (Soules, 2010; Khirfan and Jaffer 2014). As a result, various Vancouver developers, architects and planning consultants have discovered a lucrative global market for their skills and expertise (Grant 2009; Khirfan and Jaffer 2014; Khirfan et al., 2013). Commentators have termed the global reach of the Vancouver approach 'Vancouverism' (e.g. Boddy, 2004; Price, 2005; Soules, 2010; Hurley, 2012) and Boddy's exhibition with the same title was launched at the London Festival of Architecture (Ditmars, 2008) and subsequently exhibited at the Canadian Culture Centre in Paris in 2009, at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo and the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver (Canadian for Architecture, 2010). The exhibition showcased the work of venerated Vancouver architects such as Arthur Erikson and

contemporary practitioners such as Bing Thom and James K M Cheng, who were directly involved in the city's design-led residential transformation (Ditmars, 2008).

The apparent influence of Vancouverism is emblematic of the globalisation of development practices, techniques of masterplanning and innovative urban design thinking as cities seek to compete for global investment. Urban design is no longer seen merely as a product of urban prosperity and affluence but as a necessary prerequisite of a successful regeneration strategy (Gospodini 2002). However, it is susceptible to the 'serial repetition' of regeneration solutions (Harvey 1989), and to ever-greater preoccupations with architectural spectacles at the expense of broader environmental sensitivity and wider social inclusion (Cuthbert 2003). This paper focuses on one of the primary actors involved in the production of Vancouverism during the 1990s and 2000s, Concord Pacific, and examines the extent to which the developer employed Vancouverism on a post-industrial site in Toronto known as the Railway Lands.

Defining 'Vancouverism'

Although often simplified to a preoccupation with a particular physical form the term Vancouverism refers to both an architectural/urban design *product* and the *process* of city planning and design review that created it during the late 1970s and the 1980s. The conditions that allowed Vancouverism to emerge were made possible by a British Columbia provincial statute, 'the Vancouver Charter,' which gave the City powers to develop a customised system of administrative governance that was largely unencumbered by Provincial control (Punter, 2003). Under this regime the City, initially governed by a Civic Reform council, chose to delegate significant planning powers to officials and largely depoliticise the zoning and permitting processes. It was therefore fortunate that from the late 1970s until the mid-2000s the municipal planning department had excellent leadership and a very stable group of personnel that developed "a range of innovative and technically sophisticated approaches" (Punter, 2002, 268) to oversee planning issues, including major development around the core.

Research has identified the tools and mechanisms that underpin the Vancouver approach and which have supported the creation of a generous public realm and consistently high quality private development (Punter, 2002; 2003; 2003a). Crucially, a coordinated approach to neighbourhood planning and improvement of the public

realm was instigated by the City, bringing the various municipal departments into closer dialogue and leading to strategic cooperation on core design issues, such as the protection of significant view corridors to the surrounding mountains, streetscapes, landscaping and parks, heritage, parking and traffic management. This approach was also underpinned by a thoroughgoing public participation effort that helped planners establish robust policies that focused on creating a more liveable city, with strong neighbourhood centres and plentiful public amenities, through an Official Plan process. What singles out Vancouver from other planning systems, however, has been the remarkably steady realisation of these ambitions through the management and approval of new development since the 1980s (Punter, 2003; Sandercock, 2006).

Planners have ensured that zoning by-laws are used to regulate for more intensive development and a more predictable urban form. Design guidelines commissioned from Vancouver architectural practices add sophistication to volumetric controls. Discretionary planning policies and guidelines for streets, blocks and buildings are clearly translated into zoning regulations that control for set back and height of buildings, land uses, floor space and relationship with the street (Punter, 2002). Fiscal tools are also used to secure a wide range of public amenities from new development and particularly strong requirements have been established for major developments (Punter, 2003) though the City has not been successful in developing its 20% affordable housing quota on reserved sites due to an absence of Federal subsidies. Perhaps the most important element of the Vancouver system is that developers are given an incentive to comply with urban design guidelines. If ambitious requirements for design quality and amenity are met, developers are awarded additional floor space or building height. Design quality is also scrutinised by the city's influential Urban Design Panel. As it has matured, the Panel has acted as a design champion, focusing on strategic urban design issues and tending not to get too embroiled in architectural form and style, while encouraging the developers' architects to seek unanimity of support from the Panel itself (Punter, 2003a).

The emergence of a recognisable Vancouver design language occurred under the umbrella of these processes during the late 1980s and 1990s as the City rolled out an ambitious strategy for the Downtown called 'Living First' that would guide various anticipated large-scale developments, including the Concord Pacific Place project on False Creek (MacDonald, 2005). City planners worked with Concord to "develop the detailed aspects of street platting, park dedications, view corridor building

configurations and tower placement and height” (MacDonald, 2005, 21) with the aim of achieving walkable, liveable streets but also high residential densities. Concord also brought their experience of Hong Kong’s building code to the process with its tradition of permitting slim towers to enhance street daylight and view protection. While Concord funded a detailed approach to masterplanning, perhaps more importantly they brought much greater patience to the development process and a longer-term perspective that supported Vancouver’s more consultative approach to planning. This was facilitated by the fact that the False Creek site had already been remediated by the Provincial Government, significantly reducing pre-development costs (Boddy, 2004).

This design process delivered a tower-podium building typology that was widely employed both at Concord Pacific Place and later across much of the Downtown. MacDonald (2005, 23) describes the model as follows:

...large buildings containing slender ‘point’ towers – 10 to 38 storeys high with floor plates ranging from 5500 to 7315 square feet – over two- to eight-storey podium bases containing...direct entry ground-floor units....developed over underground parking garages that are two to three levels deep.

MacDonald further explains that the podium levels contain either two- or three-storey townhouses or taller podiums, called ‘cityhomes’, that often combine two- or three-storey townhouses with apartments above. The tower-podium buildings might also house variously sized retail units on more frequented streets. Access to the towers and podium apartments is via a street-level common lobby, and each block has a large interior courtyard that provides well-landscaped communal amenity space along with recreational facilities elsewhere in the block. Perhaps the most important feature of the model is the interface between the townhouses and the street (see Figures 1 and 2). Purposefully designed with individual front doors and a slightly raised and enclosed front yard, the ground-floor dwelling units provide a clear articulation of the street wall and create the feel of a medium-density residential street, despite the high density achieved by the associated towers. What emerges is an urban design formula that fuses a traditional street layout with tall and unapologetically modern towers that are used to define the corners of each urban block creating a distinctive aesthetic counterpoint. The buildings at Concord Pacific Place are thus arranged as urban perimeter blocks and, along the waterfront,

sweeping crescents of low- and medium-rise townhouses, some with ground floor retail uses, define a public realm that is very well landscaped and furnished and connected to a network of high quality parks and recreational facilities. This is the legacy which has persuaded a number of other cities to copy elements of Vancouverism.

INSERT FIGURES 1 & 2 ABOUT HERE

Vancouverism and Toronto's Railway Lands

The paper now turns to the case of CityPlace in Toronto and explores how 'Vancouverism' came to influence the planning and design of the vacant Railway Lands, and Toronto's wider planning and urban design practices. The former Railway Lands are located west of Downtown Toronto and set back from Lake Ontario behind the elevated Gardiner Expressway on a narrow 75-hectare strip of land extending west from the central Union Station to Bathurst Street. As Figure 3 illustrates the northern edge of the site is formed by the eight track, below-grade railway corridor that provides suburban and long distance rail services into Downtown, a formidable barrier to north-south movement, while the southern edge is bordered by the equally problematic elevated Gardiner Expressway that separates the site from the city's Lakeshore.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

The Railway Lands: a planning and design battleground (1962-1996)

During the first half of the twentieth century the Railway Lands were used for freight marshalling by the government-owned Canadian National Railway (CN), operating on the western half of the site, and Canadian Pacific Railway (CP), a private limited company, on the eastern half. By the mid-1960s, the railway companies had moved much of their operations to the suburbs and the Railway Lands were identified by City planners as a strategic land parcel that could be used to re-connect the Downtown with the waterfront (City of Toronto, 1962). From the late 1960s until the mid-1990s the Railway Lands became a planning and design battleground as proposals came and went, and increasingly political debates about the organisation of urban form and appropriate land uses prevailed. Very little was actually built. Only

the CN Tower (1976) and the SkyDome stadium (1991) were completed (see Figure 3).

The first serious masterplan for the Railway Lands was called Metro Centre and was tabled in 1968 as a joint venture by the two railway companies. Projecting some 60,000 new jobs as well as homes for 25,000 new residents (Metropolitan Toronto, 1970), Metro Centre was envisaged as an audacious mega-structure of interconnected towers and pedestrian plazas constructed on a large podium decked over the railway corridor and linked to a new multi-modal transportation hub centred round a very tall communication tower and convention centre (see Figure 4).

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

City of Toronto planners worked to translate the Metro Centre proposals into a Part II Plan giving it legal status as a supplementary component of the citywide official plan. The Part II Plan was approved by Toronto City Council in 1971, but was appealed soon after to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB)¹ by a concerned group of citizens led by city councillor, and future mayor of Toronto, John Sewell. (Sewell, 1972). The OMB agreed in part with the appellants and requested that the plan be revised (Sewell, 1993). However, with the exception of the communications tower (the CN Tower, completed in 1976) and the consolidation of the railway infrastructure into the present rail corridor on the northern edge of the site, the Metro Centre plans were never implemented (City of Toronto, 1983).

The City of Toronto adopted a new *Central Area Plan* in 1976, which, for the first time, championed Downtown residential development and identified the Railway Lands as a critical development site. The planners' aim was, once again, to "reunite the City with its waterfront" (City of Toronto, 1983, 12), but to extend the city's grid towards the lake with street-oriented development rather than encourage further development like Metro Centre (City of Toronto, 1978). The City established a Steering Group that included the railway companies, to prepare background material for a new Part II Plan (City of Toronto, 1983: see Figure 5). Despite the presumption in favour of residential development established in the *Central Area Plan*, much of the land in the Railway Lands east of Spadina Avenue retained a commercial designation during the

¹ The Ontario Municipal Board, or OMB, is the official planning appeals body in Ontario and hears appeals in a judicial-like setting from development applicants and aggrieved third parties. British Columbia has no such body.

planning process at the behest of the railway companies (Developer 1, 2013). Nevertheless, the land to the west of Spadina Avenue was upheld as residential, and designated as such (City of Toronto 1983). The recommended form of development was dramatically different from the slab-block towers imagined for Metro Centre and was based instead on the precedent of the medium-rise City of Toronto housing project called the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood, located on the eastern edge of the Downtown (Sewell 1993). The revised concept for the Railway Lands thus established a commitment to social housing and proposed a series of intimately scaled blocks clustered around shared courtyards, as well as zoning requirements for ground floor retail and a large public park adjacent to the railway (City of Toronto, 1983; 1986: see Figure 5).

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

City Council voted to support this planning concept in principle, but delayed their final approval for two reasons. First, the Provincial government announced plans to build a domed baseball stadium on the Railway Lands just west of the CN Tower. And, second, a group of councillors, this time led by the local ward representative Jack Layton, raised concerns about the amount of commercial space and the lack of housing east of Spadina Avenue (York, 1985a). While the plan was quickly amended to accommodate the stadium, few other changes were made and, following heated debate, Council approved the revised version in August 1985 by a small margin (York, 1985b). A local action group, spearheaded by the concerned councillors, appealed this decision to the OMB (Holden and Spears, 1986). Despite supporting a small reduction in commercial space, the OMB ruled that the vast majority of the plan, including the stadium, be approved (Smith, 1986). This allowed construction work on the SkyDome to proceed, but left the door open for subsequent discussions about the wider planning principles for the Railway Lands (City of Toronto 1991).

In 1988, the real estate arms of CN (CN Real Estate) and CP (Marathon Realty) submitted separate development proposals for portions of the Railway Lands. CN's plans for the land west of the SkyDome were named 'CityPlace' and proposed approximately 500,000m² of offices and 5,000 housing units (IBI Group, 1988; McNenly, 1987). This provoked significant opposition from Council and led to a development freeze and a full-scale planning and design review (Reid, 1990; Polanyi, 1991). The aims of the review were to increase the number of housing units and provisions for social housing, and reduce commercial space, while also addressing

the urban design challenges posed by the SkyDome (City of Toronto, 1991). The review proposed consolidating commercial development east of Spadina Avenue, creating a mixed-use area between Spadina Avenue and the SkyDome, and developing a residential area to the west with an overall density reduction of 30% across the site (City of Toronto, 1991). An improved urban design framework was also prescribed (see Figure 6). It enhanced pedestrian access to the waterfront, simplified the street and block network and relocated the large open space to the centre of the land parcel west of Spadina Avenue. The framework also established clearer provisions for community facilities and schools.

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

CN Real Estate faced the loss of much of their potential commercial development, but subsequent appeals to the OMB between 1992 and 1994 failed, and ultimately the City won its battle (Developer 1, 2013) and the revised Part II Plans were approved largely unchanged (City of Toronto, 1994a; 1994b). In contrast to the megalomaniac Metro Centre proposals, a new set of more humane planning and design principles had emerged for the residential neighbourhood west of Spadina Avenue that centred on the extension of the city grid south of Front Street. Meanwhile, the development of the eastern Railway Lands has evolved on a site-by-site basis, mostly since the late 2000s and into the 2010s, as a mixed-use extension of the Downtown incorporating high-rise commercial and residential development, and various tourist attractions including the Toronto Railway Museum and a new Aquarium all linked to Union Station and the rest of the financial district via 'PATH', Toronto's underground walkway system.

The land to the west, belonging to CN Rail, was put on the market in 1995 as part of the privatisation of the railway company and its real estate holdings (Developer 1, 2013). All of its lands were transferred to an arms-length Crown Corporation which had a mandate to ensure that surplus federal land holdings were sold efficiently and profitably (Canada Lands Company, 2015). The Canada Lands Company issued a 'request for proposals' in June 1996 to numerous developers and twelve potential bidders were shortlisted and invited to make more detailed applications (Zehr, 1996). In early 1997, Canada Lands announced that Concord Adex², a subsidiary of the Vancouver developer Concord Pacific, had won the bidding process and overcome

² Briefly called Grand Adex at the time of the purchase.

stiff competition from local and international firms. (Zehr, 1996). ‘Vancouverism’ was destined for Toronto’s western Railway Lands.

Concord CityPlace: a new scale of ‘Vancouverism’ in Toronto

During the bidding process Concord conducted discussions with the City about the potential success of an application to amend the zoning regulations and Part II planning principles for the Railway Lands. Concord intended to increase the scale and density of residential development and outlined plans to employ the tower-podium model it was using in Vancouver to achieve these changes. A former Concord executive noted that they had “done enough research and had talked to enough people before closing on the land to realise there was an opportunity to change the [urban] form” (Developer 2, 2013).

Concord emphasised that design quality was an important part of its vision and that the firm’s celebrated Vancouver precedent played a crucial role in the bid. Henry Man, Concord’s chief operating officer, described the firm’s ambitions for the Railway Lands by highlighting the difference between the wide slab block buildings that were common in Toronto and the thin towers constructed in Vancouver, arguing that the result was “more light, more air, more space, [and] more interesting buildings” (quoted in Barber, 1997, A12). Concord also involved James K M Cheng, the architect often credited with devising the Vancouver tower-podium model, in the bidding process to demonstrate their commitment to architectural excellence (Planner 3, 2011) and invited City of Toronto officials to visit their project in Vancouver. The officials were impressed by the attention paid to public spaces and building materials, as well as the quality of the street-level environment achieved by the podium townhouses and commercial units, despite the scale of the high-rise residential towers (Planner 3, 2011). Local representative Jack Layton, who had previously fought against large-scale commercial development, supported the deal with Concord, and was impressed by the commitment to housing and open space (Planner 4, 2011).

Planning and design provisions for ‘Vancouverism’

The increased density facilitated by the tower-podium model meant that Concord could assume greater risk and pay a higher price for the land than other bidders. As a result, the enthusiasm for Concord’s vision was not universally shared, and a

number of high-profile Toronto architects and urban designers were concerned that Concord's ideas departed too severely from the approved plan. Ken Greenberg, a former City of Toronto urban designer and principal author of the revised plans for the Railway Lands during the 1980s, noted that the City had a "weakness for mega-development" (quoted in Steed, 1997, C1). Similarly, Jack Diamond, a respected local architect, warned against approving tall towers. Despite Concord's commitment to a podium base, he thought that an animated street environment would be hard to achieve using the tower-podium model (Steed, 1997).

These concerns failed to dampen the City's enthusiasm and Council approved the height, density and land use amendments requested by Concord in November 1997 (City of Toronto, 1998a). They also established an Urban Design Task Force, with representatives from Council, local community groups and landowners, to allow community input to be fed into urban design guidelines being prepared for the Railway Lands (City of Toronto, 1998a). The Task Force was supported by an urban design working group composed of local design experts, including Ken Greenberg and others, as well as representatives from Concord. The working group made four key recommendations. First, that the building lines and massing be used to establish Spadina Avenue and the new east-west spine of Bremner Boulevard as important streets with strong street walls; second that the new towers, mid-rise buildings and townhouses should have clear typological descriptions; third, that the location of towers should be clearly identified in future guidelines; and fourth, that the shape and position of new towers and blocks should be considered as one composition (City of Toronto, 1998b). These recommendations were carried over into *Urban Design Guidelines*, approved by Council in 1999, that established the framework for a Toronto version of 'Vancouverism' (Figure 7).

INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE

The planning response: what happened to Vancouverism?

Construction of 'CityPlace' – the name was retained from CN's earlier proposals – has advanced westward in phases from sites adjacent to the SkyDome. The first towers were completed in 2002 on the north side of the railway facing Front Street (see Figure 8). While they possessed a three storey commercial podium along the street, the relationship with and between the oval towers was awkward, and they were very closely spaced – unusually for Concord. South of the railway the new

towers had to relate to the west wall of the SkyDome and only a single 30 storey building was built, but it has an awkward relationship with both the triangular paved plaza that fronts on to Bremner Boulevard and the wide pedestrian way that accesses the SkyDome. The larger block to the south, built 2003-2006, was anchored by four corner towers of 30 to 49 storeys, but the block was opened up by wide service streets to access a sports club and crèche, though an eight storey residential block does enclose Spadina Avenue in accordance with the Part II Plan (Figure 8).

INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE

The general response to the initial blocks was negative. The *Toronto Star's* architecture critic, Christopher Hume (2002), bemoaned the lack of attention paid to the interface between ground floor retail units and the street and noted that low quality materials, such as raw concrete, were widely used on the building podiums. Lisa Rochon, *The Globe and Mail's* architecture critic, cast the first phase as the “poor cousin of Concord Pacific in Vancouver” and described CityPlace as “a relentless field of point towers with green-tinted glass” (2004, R3). Rochon claimed it was the weakness of Toronto’s planning system that had allowed aesthetic principles to be abandoned. She argued that the planning process that had guided development at Concord Pacific Place in Vancouver had led to a fine urban grain that was “insisted upon by the city’s co-directors of planning...and rigorously evaluated by Vancouver’s urban design review panel” (Rochon 2004, R3).

The expectation that Vancouver architects like James K M Cheng would be involved at CityPlace had not come to pass and, like the Press, City planners were questioning the design quality of the development they had approved (Planner 3, 2011). One senior planner admitted that the City had been naïve. He reflected that there had been a “huge desire politically to get something happening” and that local politicians were excited by the prospect of a respected residential developer with a proven track record for design quality taking over the site (Planner 4, 2011). However, despite the effort put into the 1999 urban design guidelines, city planners had not adequately appreciated the design qualities that made the tower-podium model successful, and had failed to undertake a sufficiently rigorous review of each building (Planner 5, 2013).

Having been captivated by the developer's promise to re-create the architectural language of Vancouver's False Creek waterfront, a senior City planner recalls his frustration that CityPlace was not turning out the same way (Planner 4, 2011). One of the biggest problems was the bulk of the new buildings. While in Vancouver the residential towers had floor plates of approximately 650 to 725 m² and few towers exceeding 30 stories, Toronto planners had approved floor plates between 750 and 800 m² and permitted more generous building heights up to 49 stories (Planner 2, 2011: see Figure 7). This meant that the slender towers outlined in Concord's vision for the site had not materialised (Barber 1997). The early towers appeared to be "crammed together" (Developer 2, 2013) and, because of their bulk and especially their height, dwarfed the street level townhouses (see Figure 8). This problem was amplified by a failure to consistently use the townhouses to define the edges of the blocks, meaning that some of the podiums appeared fragmented and weakened the streetscape. In addition, not enough attention had been paid to the street experience (Planner 4, 2011). Many of the vehicular access points to the underground parking garages were wide and unsightly, and the quality of materials used to construct the sidewalks and other elements of the public realm were of a generally low quality and failed to live up to the aspirations set out in the design guidelines.

Whether Concord had chosen to employ key Vancouver-based architects or not, the initial design failings at Toronto's CityPlace were brought about by a combination of overall density increases, lax design control and a tendency on the part of the developer to reduce risk and save money in an unfamiliar real estate market. The planning and design achievements on Vancouver's False Creek were reliant on a clear vision of the required three dimensional form, maximum tower heights enshrined in an Official Development Plan, additional design guidelines prepared by respected architectural practices, judicious development management, skilled design review and a tough negotiation stance adopted by public officials (Punter, 2003). None of these were evident in Toronto. In addition, Concord's False Creek project is undeniably enhanced by Vancouver's natural setting beside the water and the dramatic framing yielded by the Coastal Mountains (Berelowitz 2005).

Toronto city planners certainly had a strong planning and design vision for the Railway Lands, indeed one that had been crafted over many decades and which had its roots in the response to Metro Centre. However, they were swift to alter the development formula and adapt the urban design guidelines to accommodate Concord's ambitions for the site without sufficient oversight. A senior planner

involved in the initial approvals reflected that “we should have been much tougher...in terms of the level of quality and architecture and design and public enhancements and community facilities” (Planner 4, 2011). The differences between the cities’ planning systems meant that planners in Vancouver had more discretionary power to shape development outcomes and could utilise the views of an expert design review panel. Furthermore, the Vancouver Charter ensured that there was no provincial body for developers to appeal to like the Ontario Municipal Board, meaning that developers in Vancouver could not use the threat of legal action to force an end to planning negotiations as often happens in Toronto. A former City of Toronto urban designer argues that Toronto is, inevitably, “less ambitious in terms of city objectives” than Vancouver (Designer 1, 2011), and that the existence of the OMB allows the development lobby to wield more power over the planning process, with fears about economic development tending to trump concerns about long-term urban design quality (Designer 1, 2011).

Addressing design quality questions at Concord CityPlace

Planners were keen to find a solution to the problems identified in the first phase of CityPlace and reach an amicable agreement with Concord about how the design of future blocks might be improved. As early as 2002 the City decided to convene an expert ‘charrette’ – a form of intensive design-based workshop – with Concord’s design consultants (Designer 2, 2011). Conscious of the bad press it was receiving, Concord was happy to get involved. A former executive notes that it made good business sense to open up the design process to scrutiny because Concord was only at the start of what was intended to be a long-term, large scale investment in the Toronto real estate market. The charrette also presented Concord with an opportunity to conduct open negotiations with the City and explore how improvements to the tower-podium model and the public realm might be exchanged for increased densities (Developer 2, 2013).

The charrette, which was not open to the public, was held as the initial buildings on Front Street were nearing completion and the blocks east of Spadina Avenue were either under construction or making their way through the planning approval process. Led by the City’s urban design team, the charrette explored how a more refined design language might be achieved on future blocks (Planner 2, 2011) and led to the publication of revised urban design guidelines, and a new master plan, that were written in conjunction with Concord and their design consultants, IBI Group (City of

Toronto and IBI Group, 2004). The guidelines focused on the undeveloped lands west of Spadina Avenue and numerous Vancouver precedents were employed to illustrate the elements of 'Vancouverism' that were either missing or had failed to live up to the planners' expectations. These included the form and scale of interior courtyards, the elevation and ground floor treatment of townhouses and ground floor retail, and the need for higher quality street furniture and other elements of the public realm (see Figure 9).

INSERT FIGURE 9 HERE

The most important component of the new guidelines, however, addressed the poor relationship that had emerged between many of the new towers and their podiums. The guidelines aimed to demonstrate how a more successful adaptation of the tower-podium model might be realised, first by attending more closely to the relative height of future towers and their corresponding podiums, and second by putting more effort into the interface between building edges and the streetscape (see Figure 10). Further detailed advice was provided for Spadina Avenue and Bremner Boulevard because the City of Toronto's urban design team wanted to see both streets emerge as "great urban boulevards" (City of Toronto and IBI Group, 2004, 34) with a taller and more robust 6 to 8 storey street frontage that was similar to the 'cityhome' typology used on certain blocks in Vancouver. A senior City urban designer explained that this was part of a specific effort to find a "different typology" that "work[ed] for Toronto," and stemmed directly from "the realisation....that while certain things worked well in Vancouver, their direct translation perhaps [was not] right for Toronto" (Planner 2, 2011).

INSERT FIGURE 10 HERE

Enhanced design review

The 2002 charrette and the guidelines that followed marked a significant turning point for design control at CityPlace, not only in terms of providing clearer written advice, but also the impetus for a more 'hands on' approach to discretionary control to be spearheaded by the City's urban design team. In this respect, the most important design review tool developed by the City has been its '1:50 programme', which requires developers to provide detailed architectural elevation drawings of the first three storeys of a new building at 1:50 scale so that a rigorous discretionary

assessment can be made of the form, massing, materials, colours and finishes. This change was made possible by amendments to the *City of Toronto Act* in 2006, which saw greater planning powers awarded to Toronto by the Provincial government (Ontario, 2006). The new powers were well received by the planners, particularly those in the urban design team, because they began to address some of the challenges associated with raising design and development quality (Planner 2, 2011). At CityPlace, the 1:50 programme has enabled the City's urban design team to play a more influential role at the early stages of the planning process and address potential design issues such as the interface between buildings and streets, architectural and material form, and other relevant design issues, expeditiously.

By engaging in a positive dialogue, Concord and the City of Toronto have also avoided lengthy and costly appeals (Planner 1, 2009). This stands in contrast to earlier stages of the Railway Lands project, where many of the key decisions about land use, design and density were subject to highly politicised appeals to the OMB, and last minute settlements with developers. The newly elected local councillor, Adam Vaughan, was instrumental in helping the various parties involved in the planning and design process avoid the OMB by engaging directly with Concord, planners and local community groups to solve problems collectively (Designer 3, 2013). Nevertheless, a senior Toronto planner admits that the threat of appeal, whether explicitly stated or not, always hangs over negotiations with developers, including those with Concord, thereby weakening the City's bargaining position and leading to protracted negotiations about building height, density and public amenity contributions that are opaque and do not always lead to the best planning and design outcomes (Planner 1, 2009).

A shift in design quality?

Development west of Spadina Avenue began in 2007 with two tall towers and a block of medium rise apartments mirroring the east side of the street. Three storey town houses enclosed the western side of the block. The four blocks north of the park, which back on to a promenade above the railway, each have a tall tower and a medium-rise tower, but the important frontages on to Bremner Avenue and the park are ten storey blocks with three storey townhouses providing front doors onto the street, and seven storeys of apartments above (17 storeys where the medium rise tower is placed). These deep plan buildings occupy the greater part of the block and render the internal courtyards far less of a residential amenity than they are in

Vancouver, and more of a light-well cum entrance area. The access streets are wide but quiet and traffic calmed. Nevertheless, they lack the human scale and landscaping of their Vancouver equivalent. To the rear these four blocks have a service street and a wide promenade that overlooks the railway cutting and the inner city beyond. Some of the townhouses here have small outdoor spaces and living space below street level. Parking is entirely underground, but the streets accommodate much short-term car parking. Two of the main towers, of 40+ storeys (Parade 1 and Parade 2), are linked by a two-storey 'Sky Bridge' at the 30th floor containing two luxury apartment suites on the upper level and a social area on the lower level in a marketing gimmick that detracts from the overall design quality. To the west, two towers (20 and 31 storeys) have been constructed by Toronto Community Housing and Context Developments and provide 300 social housing units, along with a branch of the Toronto Public Library on the corner with Bathurst Street that provides a welcome variation in form.

The townhouses within the gently curved podium blocks which front on to Bremner Avenue are interspersed with small commercial units indicating a flexibility of use, while a medium-sized supermarket has been accommodated close to the intersection with Spadina Avenue (see Figure 11). The landscaping of the boulevard is disappointing with tall grasses on the median and two lines of trees planting on the north side, one in a narrow kerbside green strip, and another on the raised forecourts of the townhouses. The trees may mature to soften the streetscape but the boulevard has been left wide and the median with only grasses to accommodate a possible future extension to the city's streetcar network.

INSERT FIGURE 11 HERE

A 3.2 hectare land parcel was reserved for a public park in the centre of the site and it opened in 2008. Its construction was funded through contribution agreements established in the site zoning by-laws. Concord commissioned the Vancouver-based landscape architects Philips Faarvag Smallemberg, and the celebrated Canadian novelist and artist Douglas Coupland, to deliver the park. The completed landscape has a 'Canadiana' theme with various kitschy elements that endeavour to evoke a sense of the Canadian outdoors, including a sculpture of a red canoe that sits (longingly?) on a promontory overlooking the Gardiner Expressway and Lake Ontario beyond (see Figure 12). Named Canoe Landing Park in 2009, the Park also contains

more traditional elements such as a dog walking area and a large expanse of green space suitable for various sporting uses.

In 2014, the City of Toronto and the two local school boards (secular and Catholic) selected an architectural team to produce plans for the school and community centre site that will enclose the east side of the park. This project, which will include a public elementary school, a Catholic elementary school, community centre and day care facility, is also partially funded through contribution agreements set out in the zoning by-laws that preceded the 1997 land purchase. These community facilities will help to populate and animate the park which has been under-used and windswept to date, but which will continue to be blighted by the elevated Gardiner Expressway, and its 6-10 lanes of traffic, and by the slab-like apartment blocks beyond which obscure the views of the Lakeshore.

The very last parcel of land that will be developed at CityPlace is located in the Central Railway Lands and faces Spadina Avenue. It currently houses the Concord presentation and sales centre, but will ultimately be the location of 'Signature Towers' (Developer 3, 2013) which will incorporate a ten storey podium facing Spadina Avenue and Bremner Boulevard. Two very tall residential towers, planned at 64 and 75 storeys respectively, emphasise the change of scale being promoted and highlight the differences with Concord Pacific Place in Vancouver.

INSERT FIGURE 12 HERE

The design quality of CityPlace has largely improved under the enhanced design control regime introduced after 2002. As an architect who worked on a number of the Concord land parcels bluntly concludes: "the east side is really pretty bad, [but] the west side is better, and the park is good" (Designer 3, 2013). A former Concord operative agrees that, west of Spadina Avenue, the development has come together more successfully and, as Figure 11 illustrates, a tighter urban grain has been achieved, and the relationship between the towers and taller podiums is more robust (Developer 2, 2013). Certainly, the poorly executed facsimile of 'Vancouverism', which was widely criticised during the early stages of the development process, is now much less apparent and critical assessments in the press have become more positive as the development has progressed (e.g. Hume, 2008; Bentley Mays, 2013).

A senior urban designer at the City of Toronto who has overseen the design of Concord CityPlace for many years asserts that the City is "...reassured when we....hear a lot of positive comments about [CityPlace] turning into a neighbourhood" (Planner 2, 2011). Nevertheless, the prominent location of CityPlace, highly visible from the Gardiner Expressway, especially on the approach to Downtown from the west, means that it often comes under attack, particularly for the scale and height of the residential towers, and a perception that the development attracts short-term renters rather than long-term owner-occupiers (Hume, 2012), while many of the apartments lie empty as pure investments. These perceptions are amplified because the development has evolved in the midst of a wider 'condo boom' that has dramatically altered the skyline and urban composition of Downtown Toronto (Lehrer et al., 2010). No doubt Concord's proposed Signature Towers will serve to reinforce these concerns.

Conclusions

In summary, the 'Vancouverism' precedent helped Concord to secure the purchase of the western Railway Lands. City of Toronto planners and politicians bought into the success of Concord Pacific Place in Vancouver, thereby smoothing the way for amendments to be made to the zoning and planning regulations in Toronto that ultimately led to the approval of the tower-podium model. Yet, 'Vancouverism' was not the only urban design and city planning methodology to influence the eventual form of CityPlace. Toronto's own strategic planning and urban design goals relating to land use mix, street standards, the disposition of parks and open spaces, and contributions to social housing and other community amenities were all established in earlier planning policies and zoning by-laws, and were largely retained as CityPlace was built.

To a large extent, Toronto and Vancouver actually employ similar tools and mechanisms to shape development outcomes using site-specific planning policies and urban design guidelines (the Part II Plans in Toronto) that are then translated into zoning by-laws to ensure the regulatory framework is design aware, if not design-led. Toronto planning and urban design officers likewise play an active role in the review of major development applications and negotiate with developers to secure public amenity contributions in exchange for building heights and density. However, the difference between the two systems seems to lie in the thoroughness of these processes and the *culture* of planning and design decision-making.

Vancouver planners have used Official Development Plans to create predictable urban forms, and to prescribe maximum building heights, and have largely succeeded as tough negotiators, proving to be 'battle hardened' against the sustained pressures from developers (Punter, 2002, 281). In contrast, Toronto planners overseeing the early stages of CityPlace tended to demand less during negotiations and permit higher densities. While this approach successfully kept planning appeals at bay – a key constraint that Vancouver planners did not have to contend with – it was also instrumental in undermining the visual quality of the tower-podium model, and restricting investment in the amenities of the public realm.

The City of Toronto did slowly embark upon an increasingly interventionist approach to design review and development management at CityPlace, and the standard of architectural and urban design quality improved as a result. But, the redevelopment of Toronto's Railway Lands will never match the enduring quality of development on Vancouver's False Creek waterfront, not least because of a much lesser quality of setting, views, poorer connectivity with the core of the city, less proximity to water, and greater highway intrusion and railway severance than in Vancouver. Nevertheless, the City of Toronto responded proactively to the early design failings at CityPlace by engaging more closely with the developer via a charrette, and establishing a much clearer vision that was a better response to the locality and incorporated perhaps less 'Vancouverism'. Changes made to the 2006 *City of Toronto Act* also enabled City planners to engage in more discretionary design review, particularly through the 1:50 drawings requirements, and ultimately led to the creation of a permanent, city-wide urban design panel in 2009 broadly based on the Vancouver panel. Despite not being mandatory, the Toronto panel scrutinises the design quality of major developments in and around the Downtown, and offers the informed views of established design practitioners. It is important to note, too, that Concord responded positively to the early concerns that were raised about the quality of their design product at CityPlace and demonstrated a willingness, as they had in Vancouver, to work closely with the City on the delivery of the latter phases of the project.

The uneven quality of Toronto's 'Vancouverism' highlights the challenge of reproducing a successful planning and design formula in another city, even when the developer is willing to adjust their design and development practices to a new context, rather than exploit a less sophisticated process of planning control/design review for financial ends. At the outset of this paper, 'Vancouverism' was identified as a

complex planning and design model that is not solely defined by the tower-podium model and associated public amenities, but also by a contextually-rooted and sophisticated package of "...policies and guidelines, processes and procedures" (Punter, 2002, 267). Evidence from the early phases of Concord CityPlace in Toronto has demonstrated that a stripped-down reproduction of the tower-podium model, using taller and bulkier towers and inferior materials, created a design language that lacked the subtle qualities celebrated in Vancouver. A particular weakness is the extent of the erosion of communal landscaped space within the blocks north of the park, and the lack of enclosure of the more generous internal courtyards east of the park. However, the evolution of a more design-informed approach to development has benefited CityPlace and Toronto's planning practices at large, through setting new standards for developers. It has improved the diversity and quality of the end products and, in some cases, produced new design ideas and typologies, but perhaps without the refinements that distinguish high-density residential development in Vancouver. Ultimately this paper argues that the reproduction of an urban design concept, such as 'Vancouverism', is a contextually grounded process that is shaped more by local politics, institutional practices and development norms than it is by the power of a particular design ideology or model.

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Appendix: Research Interview Codes

The codes assigned to the participants help identify their involvement in Toronto's Railway Lands while protecting their personal identity.

Developer 1: Real estate executive involved in planning the Railway Lands (1980s and 1990s).

Developer 2: Former Concord executive involved in planning and design at CityPlace (1990s and 2000s).

Developer 3: Concord Adex executive involved in planning and design at CityPlace since the mid-2000s.

Planner 1: Former City planner involved in CityPlace (2000s).

Planner 2: Current City urban designer involved in CityPlace since the mid-2000s.

Planner 3: Former City planning manager involved in the Railway Lands (1990s).

Planner 4: Former senior City planning official involved in the Railway Lands/CityPlace (1990s and 2000s).

Planner 5: Former senior City urban designer involved in CityPlace (2000s).

Designer 1: Former senior urban designer involved in the Railway Lands (1980s).

Designer 2: Planning consultant involved in CityPlace planning and design process.

Designer 3: Architect involved in the design of various blocks at CityPlace.