

# **Site Report: Vancouver, Neoliberalism, and The Global Necropolis**

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*“Civic sense is what forms the heart of the body politic, and a body politic does not pre-exist, it has to be created and it has to be nurtured. There needs to be something relational about being in this space which is New York, which makes it New York.”*

*– David Harvey*

## ***Introduction***

New approaches to urban development have transformed Vancouver from a once small-town city into a global metropolis. Over the past forty years this civic metamorphosis has been initiated by an embrace of free market ideology that has resulted in the emergence of a city that is simultaneously one of the most liveable, and unlivable places in the world. The objective of this essay is to detail the nature of how Vancouver’s rise to global notoriety has been coupled with a style of urbanization that is not compatible with social equality. This civic bifurcation is imprinted on the city and can be richly explored through an examination of the city’s built environment. As such, in the following paragraphs I will present a series of ‘site reports’ where the transition of Vancouver from small-town to global city is understood in the context of unique locations around the city. Within these site reports, I will also pay close attention to the 1986 World Exposition (Expo 86) as an integral event in understanding the changes that Vancouver has and continues to experience. Situated in the same conceptual framework of what Elvin Wyly and David Wilson refer to as ‘Dracula urbanism’, this project focuses on some of the most significant instances of convergence and divergence within the city’s built environment (Wyly & Wilson, 2023). However, these fissures within urban life are not unique to Vancouver, and thus I

also present the idea that various neoliberal cities are strongly interconnected through their pursuit of global capital. To describe this phenomenon I introduce the term ‘global necropolis’, denoting the way in which neoliberal cities come to look eerily similar whilst sharing common social issues, such to the extent that I believe they can be considered as representing a singular psychogeographic locale. It is my hope that this research essay serves as a partial mapping of Vancouver’s newly acquired and carefully polished identity, while also highlighting the dangers of building urban spaces that serve primarily as products. However, before I begin I think it would be fitting to briefly chronicle the nature of my relationship to the city about which I am writing.

I grew up in the Commercial Drive neighborhood of East Vancouver. Known throughout the city as a textured strip of countercultures and coffeeshops, Commercial Drive is perhaps best understood with consideration of its two affectionately given nicknames, which have, in recent years, been endorsed by the city as useful albeit somewhat contradictory brand identities. By all accounts I grew up in ‘Little Italy’, but at a time when Little Italy was rapidly becoming ‘The Drive’, and it is within this ethos of gentrification that my own identity has taken shape. Arriving from the west side of Vancouver in the early 1990s, the easterly migration of my parents marked one of the earliest waves of gentrification on Commercial Drive, and by the time I arrived in 1997, the area was primed for a more substantial overhaul. The neighborhood was affordable and still markedly blue collar, and thus, it was a natural landing pad for people like my parents. At the time both my father and mother were entertainers, Rachael a stand-up comedian and Bill a jazz musician. When they purchased our old house on Victoria Drive, after teaming up with a family friend, the trio paid a total of \$315,000 in 1994, and when they sold our house in 2017—with money still owed on the mortgage—the price was \$1.7 million. With a compounded annual growth

rate of 7.6 per cent, this figure is consistent with steady increases in property values across Canada, but also an intimation of what commentators have referred to as the “Wild West” era of B.C. politics (Levin, 2017; Todd, 2023). Beginning with the election of a Liberal government in 2001, and eventually ending in 2017, when the B.C. New Democrats took power, this Wild West era was marked by a 16 year period of mostly unregulated property investments where in which not a single neighborhood in metro-Vancouver was spared the effects of skyrocketing unaffordability (Ley, 2023). As young professionals and other white-collar families were priced out of areas like Kitsilano, Fairview and Mount Pleasant, gentrification pushed east across Vancouver like a rising tide. In the Commercial Drive neighborhood, many long-time residents and business owners were unable to keep their heads above water. It was also at this time when the perceived coolness and authenticity of East Vancouver became an aesthetic commodity traded on the real estate market. Suddenly, Commercial Drive was not only affordable, but also a desirable home for those with an appetite for lifestyle. As a young person coming of age in East Vancouver, I watched with distress as the pillars of my community—upon which my own identity rested—were eroded and simultaneously packaged for resale. I felt as though several aspects of who I was had been corrupted and satirized in this process of urban upscaling. Confused and disgruntled I set out to understand this predicament of place and identity, and it is within this same line of inquiry that this project takes shape. But my indignance has matured, and where my frustration was once directed solely at gentrification, I have come to see this process of regeneration as merely a symptom of larger failures in current approaches to urban development. That said, this essay is not intended as a nostalgic requiem to a version of Vancouver that no longer exists, instead, my hope is that the following pages conjure a feeling of urgency to resist the encroaching demise of the city as a unique and public entity.

The global necropolis is not a phenomenon that has occurred *sui generis*. Indeed there is a myriad of political, social, and economic circumstances that have accelerated the appearance of a “global-urban condition” in cities like London, New York, and Sydney (McCann et al, 2013, p. 581). These circumstances extend well beyond the scope of this essay; however, I would like to highlight three important phases of urban evolution that I think are both germane to Vancouver and the cities I have mentioned, as well as helpful in understanding the current state of urban life within these cities. Firstly, the industrial city and the post-industrial city each represent a unique phase of urban development that are inherent to understanding the third and current phase—which I think can be aptly called the neoliberal city. That said, Vancouver was not always a globalized metropole, and its transformation into being one is recent history. In fact, we need only go back a few decades to understand the origins of Vancouver’s arrival on the global stage.

### ***Vancouver Before Expo 86***

In the years leading up to Expo 86 Vancouver was still settling into its new identity as a service based economy. This post-industrial city is often fondly remembered with a particular air of provincialism, as though it was the kind of place where the ‘working stiff’ could carve out an existence and support a family; ultimately, this was the reality for many blue collar workers. However, by the end of the 1970s new job creation in Vancouver fell almost entirely into white collar categories, while rates of blue-collar employment decreased incrementally (Ley, 1980). In 1980 the geographer David Ley described this transition to a post-industrial society as one typified by a shift from blue collar to white collar employment and an economy organized around services rather than manufacturing. Further, he describes how this transition gave way to an influential new demographic in Vancouver, stating: “the emergence of a new professional, technical, and administrative elite has given expression to a heightened lifestyle of consumption, and a concern

with the aesthetic and the realms of human sensibility.” (Ley, 1980, p. 247). This new class of white collar professionals formed The Electors Action Movement (TEAM), and census data from the early 1970s indicates how voter support for TEAM was concentrated in Vancouver’s west and southwest neighborhoods (Ley, 1980). As a brief aside, observing figure 1, note the concentration of support for TEAM on Vancouver’s west side, and with reference to the aforementioned migration of white collar professionals between 2001 and 2017, we are able to better understand the displacement of this demographic and their subsequent arrival in East Vancouver. At the core of TEAM’s policy was the city livable, which at the time was an emerging form of urban planning that directly reflected the values of the educated professionals that constituted the party’s base. In prioritizing aesthetics and quality of life, the city livable was a radical departure from the city efficient; a style of urban planning that viewed the quality of urban life as secondary to the optimization of civic efficacy (Minton, 2009; Ley, 1980). In Vancouver, the city efficient reached its acme in 1967 when a plan was launched to build a highway that would have cut through much of the city’s historic Chinatown and Downtown East Side neighborhoods. As David Ley outlines, helping to prevent this project from reaching fruition provided valuable momentum for TEAM and

Figure 1: Source; David Ley: *Liberal Ideology and The Post-industrial City*

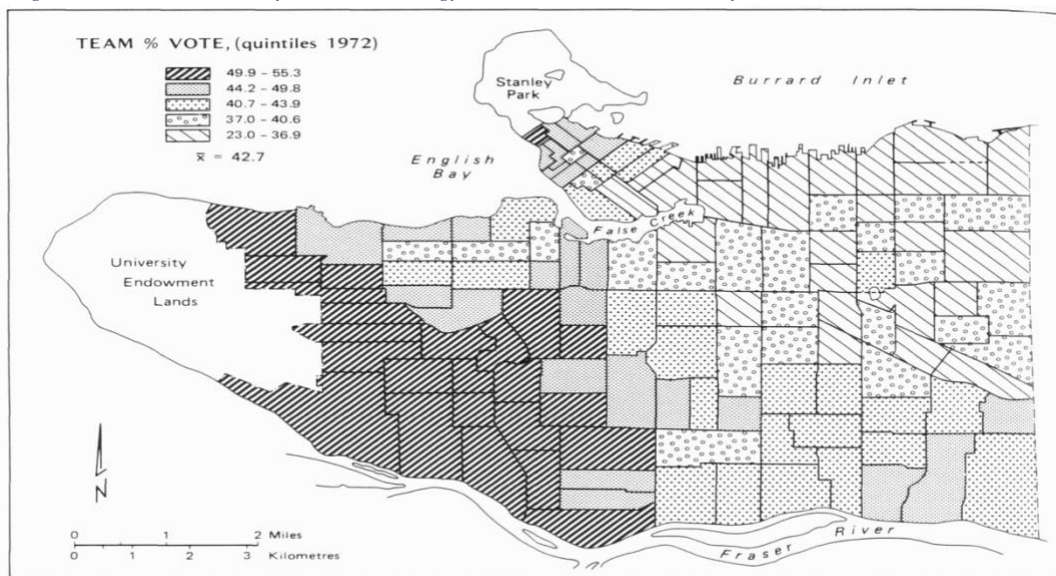


FIG. 1. TEAM aldermanic vote by polling district, 1972.

the city livable movement (Ley, 1980; Stiem, 2016). Although a progressive shift from the city efficient, the city livable movement would inevitably prove incompatible with social equity, resulting in the now current neoliberal brand of urban development, the ‘city unlivable’ (Ley, 1980; Stiem, 2016). That said, I will be expanding more on this topic shortly.

Evidently, Vancouver’s body politic was undergoing an epochal shift in the years leading up to Expo 86. However, despite the city adopting a new set of proto-yuppie attitudes, Vancouver’s urban fabric remained somewhat parochial. As Dominique Des Laurier, a life-long Vancouver resident and Expo attendee described, the city did have a ‘smaller-town feel’, but recalls that this was also a narrative that people like Bill Vander Zalm (B.C. Premier from 1986 to 1991) exaggerated as a way highlighting the need for civic globalization (personal communication, December 26, 2023). In 2017 Tristan Hopper for the National Post described pre-Expo Vancouver as “a mid-sized port city where coffee was served up in greasy diners and the word ‘microbrewery’ didn’t exist.” (Hopper, 2017). While the ‘greasy spoon’ might very well be a fitting totem to encapsulate Vancouver during this time, this symbol also represents a vestigial aspect of the city’s industrial past. By the late 1970s Vancouver was a post-industrial city wherein a new class of white collar professionals held remarkable influence. These individuals organized around the belief that urbanism should strive to make cities more livable and that city-making should be seen as “an art, not a formula” (Tsang et al, 2022, p. 18). That said, a co-opting of this movement has resulted in the birth of the new form of urban development, aptly referred to as the city unlivable, and it was Vancouver’s inaugural appearance on the global stage in 1986 that initiated this transformation of a mostly well intentioned, albeit elitist, urban movement.

## *Expo 86*

Expo 86 was many things for the city of Vancouver, but beyond the frills, excitement, and forced relocation of certain downtown residents, this six month event is best remembered as an extended advertisement for the city of Vancouver, with the target audience being global investors. As underlined by Charles Blackorby et al, Expo was a “promotional exercise” that provided relatively effective “short-run stimulus to a sagging provincial economy” but as a long-term investment “fairs less well”. (Blackorby et al, 1986, p. 231-232). Considering that these comments were made in a book titled “The Story of Expo”, which was published in 1986, one might accuse Blackorby and his co-authors as making a premature assessment. However, 40 years down the road, the notion that Expo has performed poorly as a long term investment is only apparent when considering the nuanced effects of neoliberal globalization on the city. That said, the immediate success of these large scale global events is often quantified in terms of their infrastructural legacies, and in a 2017 interview former Expo chairman and Canadian billionaire Jimmy Pattison recalled how much better off the city was after the fair had ended. Pattison describes Expo 86 as a kind of work party, during which megaprojects like B.C. Place Stadium, the Skytrain, and the Vancouver Convention Centre were fast-tracked as a result of Expo’s ambitious construction deadlines (Pattison, 2017). Ultimately, Expo 86 is accurately remembered as a kind of “globalizing urban growth coalition”, in that the fair served to outfit Vancouver with the infrastructural necessities of a global city, while at the same time initiating a new era of foreign investment and urban development (Sklair, 2010, p. 138). What’s more, in the same interview from 2017, Pattison also acknowledges how the cost of housing in metro-Vancouver has skyrocketed as a result of the foreign capital that Expo successfully attracted, Pattison goes on to conclude by saying that the affordability problem represents one of the less favourable aspect of



Expo's legacy (Pattison, 2017). However, to fully grasp the nature of how Expo aided in Vancouver's transition into becoming an unaffordable, neoliberal city, it is essential that we consider the events that proceeded the closure of the fair.

In 1988 Hong Kong billionaire and real estate developer Li Ka-shing won the bid to purchase the former Expo fairgrounds from the Province of British Columbia. While the official sale price was \$320 million, critics often factor in the high cost of environmental remediation covered by the province, after which the figure sits more realistically around \$145 million (Wallstam, 2019; Warfield, 2003). This transfer of the Expo lands from public to private ownership marks a pivotal moment in the neoliberal urbanization of Vancouver for a number of reasons, but before I delve deeper into how the sale and development of False Creek North has helped to shape Vancouver into one of the most livable, and simultaneous unlivable cities in the world, allow me to draw your attention to an often overlooked aspect of the post-Expo land grab.

### ***International Village Mall***

After Li Ka-shing acquired the 204 acres of land that makes up the northern half of Vancouver's False Creek, the area came under the management of Concord Pacific, a development company founded by Li Ka-shing in 1987. At the time, the three primary shareholders of Concord Pacific were Ka-shing himself, and two other Hong Kong real estate billionaires Chen Yu-tung and Lee Shau-kee. Only a few months after Concord Pacific acquired the Expo site, which made up about of one sixth of Vancouver's downtown area, Lee Shau-kee, then CEO of Henderson developments, acquired a 50 acre parcel of the initial land assembly, for which he paid \$54 million (Wallstam, 2019; Warfield, 2003). By 1990, the Henderson Group announced plans for what they called the International Village Retail Complex; a development that would comprise of a large multilevel shopping mall flanked by four residential towers. The Henderson Group's

announcement also came with a 24 month completion timeline and a hefty \$500 million investment. However, it was not until December of 1999 that the International Village Mall (IVM) opened its doors for business, and when it did, the mall was filled with empty retail spaces. Twenty five years later, little has changed, with vacancy rates in the mall still sitting around 40% (International Village Mall, 2023; Warfield, 2003). Today the mall's ground floor is dotted with a few mom and pop shops and a striking number of cell phone kiosks, while the second floor's main attraction is a somewhat shabby food court that connects via escalator to the third floor movie theatre. Although not totally deserted, the prevailing emptiness of the mall coupled with the striking availability of retail units represents a far cry from what developers had envisioned for the space. International Village Mall was intended to be an up-scale development that mimicked the luxury shopping centres of Hong Kong, but in its failure to launch, we can observe a peculiar dimension in the growing pains of neoliberal urbanization.

At the helm of the IVM development was a man called Allen Lai, and although Lai was relatively new to the world of luxury shopping centres, he understood the importance of securing a big-name anchor for the malls fashion centre. For IVM this anchor was to be the high-end Italian clothing brand Benneton. Located on the second floor, opposite the food court, the Benneton store would have been located in the so-called 'Fashion Boulevard', which today is the most desolate section of the mall. Save for the one business currently in operation, which is not a clothing retailer, the Fashion Boulevard is almost entirely made up of empty store fronts, above which hang wooden plaques that are inscribed with the names of global fashion hubs like Milan, Paris, London, and New York. This poorly lit section of the mall is where the once ambitious and global vision of the IVM development truly comes to light. This was intended to be a place where the tastes of the global consumer were satisfied by a selection of brands like Versace and Chanel; However, in its

current form, the Fashion Boulevard does little more than confuse the various pedestrians who stray too far from the food court. Indeed the Henderson Group's failure to secure a well-known retailer for the second floor has proved disastrous for the overall livelihood of the mall. In addition to the Fashion Boulevard, the second major drawing card for IVM was to be the ground floor food market. Not unlike Vancouver's bustling Granville Island market or Seattle's Pike Place, the developers sought to establish a kind of globalized bazaar; as described by the Henderson Group in 1995 "It's the excitement of San Francisco, Paris, Hong Kong and Florence all in one stunning food market." (Warfield, 2003, p. 70). But despite Henderson's intent, the food market was met with confusion and timidity from local vendors, and without significant buy-in, the market failed to materialize.

It is not without lack of trying that the International Village Mall has never taken shape as a successful retail centre in Vancouver. This inability to gain a foothold among the city's shoppers is largely the result of a development approach that was both tone-deaf and lacking in any attempt to build something with a relational identity to the surrounding area. In contrast to the vastly successful developments of Concord Pacific, a large portion of which were built on formerly industrial land, the Henderson Group was faced with the challenge of introducing an up-scale mall in an area with an already distinct and pre-existing identity. Whereas Concord Pacific was able to approach developments around False Creek as *tabula rasa*, the location of IVM was by no measure a blank-slate, and the Henderson Group failed to consider how out-of-place their development might seem given its proximity to Vancouver's Chinatown and the Downtown East Side, the latter of which is known as one of the poorest urban neighbourhoods in Canada (Lupick, 2019; Tsang et al, 2022). As Kathleen Warfield observes; "through the transplantation of design and architectural norms, the mall favoured the specific market sector of Hong Kong immigrant consumers and

neglected to recognize the resident neighboring consumer demographics.” (Warfield, 2003, p. 4). A more measured approach would have seen the Henderson Group reflecting on what exactly it was they were trying to achieve with the IVM development. In essence they sought to gentrify an area where most of its residents live(d) at or below the poverty line, and upon taking this into consideration, the Henderson Group may have concluded that a mall was not an appropriate tool for the job. In her book “Naked City”, urban sociologist Sharon Zukin details how gentrification relies on the exploitation of coolness and authenticity as essential ingredients in the up scaling of a neighborhood (Zukin, 2010).

In recent years Chinatown and parts of the Downtown East Side have indeed been gentrified, but a steadily increasing number of boutiques and tapas bars tells us that this has little do to with the mall. On a walk through these neighborhoods one passes through a complicated mixture of long-time Chinatown residents and rough sleepers all while dodging a pendulum of yuppies who pass seamlessly from Uber to gastro-pub. But when arriving at the mall you enter a space that is alien to the facets of style and taste. In other words there is nothing hip or ‘urban’ about the mall, and with the imposing vacancy of store fronts and a design style that appears inconsistent and out-dated, it feels as though the mall is suspended in a state of anachronism while the surrounding area is grappling with the inevitable transformations of a neoliberal city. Hence, the existence of this failed mall represents something of an anomaly in Vancouver’s urban landscape. On the one hand you have a city that is constantly evolving as a result of its successful attraction of global capital, and on the other you have the International Village Mall, a relic of early foreign investment that has failed to market itself to the city of Vancouver, and as a result has been seemingly left behind. Although neoliberal urbanization is sometimes viewed as a process that is unilaterally imposed on cities, there is indeed a certain level of reciprocity at play. As is the

case with IVM, a serious inattention to detail and a planning approach that lacked market research added up to a development that has been poorly received by the city. Therefore, IVM is a unique outlier in Vancouver, a city which can be well described as a place where the imports of neoliberalism have been embraced with little resistance. In the following section I will discuss an area of Vancouver that demonstrates this turn towards neoliberal urbanization and the subsequent class bifurcation of the city that has resulted from a style of urban development that caters exclusively to the affluent.

### *False Creek*

Only a brief walk from the International Village Mall one finds themselves immersed in the spectacle of North America's largest master planned community (Kataoka, 2009). In False Creek North almost everything seems to be made of glass and tinted with green, and the mid-rise towers are podiomed with townhomes, some of which exit onto manicured park space, while others overlook the sea wall. Emanating from this place is the spirit of Vancouverism, a form of urban planning that has evolved as a contemporary response to the outdated precepts of last century's Manhattanism (Boddy, 2014). Although linked by their connection to the post-Expo land deal, the International Village Mall and False Creek North share little else in common. Where IVM is an instance of foreign investment gone awry, False Creek North is a product of that same capital influx, but one that has enjoyed unprecedented success. As a community—or commodity—developed almost entirely by Concord Pacific, the company and its developments have collected an extensive list of planning and architecture awards over the years. Some of these include:

- The 2020 BILD Award for The Best International Project of The Year (The ARC)
- 2016 Award of Merit IDI Design (Concord Alexandra)
- 2010 UDI Best of Show (The Erickson)

- 2010 Georgie Award for Best High Rise (The Erickson)
- The 2006 Urban Development Institutes Building of The Year Award (One Pacific)
- 2006 Georgie Award; Best High Rise (King's Landing)
- 2000 Gold Nugget, Best Mixed Use Project (The Aquarius)

Although this list indicates a surface level representation of Concord Pacific's success, there is, after all, no form of flattery higher than imitation (Concord Pacific, 2024; Bernard, 2016). Hence, the most distinguished honor that False Creek North has received is its recreation in the desert of Dubai. "The Maraya Project: Reflecting Urban Waterfronts", published in 2022 by Henry Tsang, Glen Lowry, and Simon Levin, is described by Tsang as an art exhibition catalogue as well as a document of research that illustrates an eight year collaboration aimed at tracking the reappearance of False Creek North in the Arabian desert (Tsang et al, 2022). In detailing how this peculiar pastiche came to be, Tsang et al state that "it was the transformation of the post Expo 1986 World's Fair site that attracted the attention of Dubai-based Emaar Properties to realize their interpretation of False Creek" (p. 8). Moreover, in order to achieve an accurate recreation, the Emiratis recruited the original master planner of False Creek North, Stanley Kwok.

*Figure 1: The Maraya Project (Henry Tsang, Glen Lowry, M. Simon Levin), 2011.*



The result has been the emergence of a ‘False’, False Creek, making up what Emaar Properties has dubbed the Dubai Marina, one of the city’s first master planned developments. Tsang and his co-collaborators regard this reproduction of False Creek North in Dubai as a testament to the fluidity of design, lifestyle, and capital in today’s globalized economies, stating on the subject:

Cities as apparently distant and disparate as Vancouver and Dubai have become key sites in unfolding the narrative of neoliberal mobilities. The historical flow of ideas, people, and money between Vancouver to Dubai is a story that binds developers and planners to the goals of capital; it chronicles a zealous faith in returns on investment—rather than addressing concerns around unaffordable housing, public amenities and usability and the importance of growing civic involvement (p. 8).

The above quote strikes at the core of what defines Vancouver as a neoliberal city, and more broadly, speaks to fundamental aspects of the global necropolis –namely, a prioritizing of economic growth over public good (Minton, 2009). The Maraya Project is also persuasive in its designation of False Creek North as a shallow token of the city livable movement, reading the development as foremost a marketing ploy to attract the “capricious flow of international investment” (Tsang, et al, 2022, p. 8). Thus we find one example of how the city livable movement has become the city unlivable movement, in that the former has been corrupted by the pursuit of maximum capital returns—a process largely made inevitable in the urban context as a result of economic reforms ushered in by senior governments since the 1980s (Harvey, 2008; Minton, 2009; Punter, 2019).

This competition to attract foreign investment also has the knock-on effect of homogenizing the built environments of global cities. As can be seen with False Creek North and the Dubai Marina, urban theorists describe this phenomenon as “inter-referencing”; a process whereby cities vie for attention on the global stage through the creation of large-scale developments that use similar design languages and make reference to one another (McCann, et al, p. 582). Urban geographer Eugene McCann et al consider cities like Amsterdam, Barcelona, London, New York, Sydney, Shanghai, and Vancouver to be among the most frequently “over referenced” (McCann et al, 2013). Moreover, in his 1968 book titled “The Right to The City”, sociologist Henri Lefebvre predicted how places that are treated primarily as products will all eventually come to look similar, and in certain cases nearly identical (Minton, 2009: Lefebvre, 1968). This phenomenon not only homogenizes the city’s built environment, but also the people who inhabit these mirrored spaces. Not unlike how America’s early malls created a uniformed habitat of both consumer demographics and corporate consumer opportunities, the neoliberal city may be ethnically diverse, but it is socioeconomically unvaried (Kunstler, 1994: McCann et al, 2013). In this sense, False Creek North is an emblem of Vancouver’s recent ascension into the upper echelon of inter-referencing cities that constitute the global necropolis. Put differently, it is the epicentre of Vancouver as a globalized, neoliberal city (Tsang et al, 2022).

This is of course further apparent when considering the origins of how the area came into being. As mentioned earlier, False Creek North is built on the 204 acres of former Expo grounds that Li Ka-shing acquired from the province in 1988. As Maria Wallstam observed in 2019, “Comprising one sixth of Vancouver’s downtown, the sale was the biggest land purchase in the province’s history” (Wallstam, 2019, p. 26). It is this kind of land assembly that should also be highlighted as antithetical to the existence of the city as a unique, democratic, and public entity



(Minton, 2009). Hence, not only is the body politic undermined and urban identity homogenized in this process of transferring the city from public to private ownership, but as David Harvey writes “the neoliberal turn [restores] class power to rich elites.” (Harvey, 2008, p. 32). In False Creek North this is true by nature of the developments that Concord Pacific continues to produce, which are mostly upscale and unaffordable for a large portion of Vancouverites. Based on available real estate data, the average listing price of the Concord developments cited above is \$3,725,000 (The Canadian Real Estate Association, 2024: Straw Homes, 2024: West Coast Real Estate Hub, 2024). When compared to Vancouver’s median annual salary of \$90,000, False Creek North is regarded as an area of the city that is financially out of reach for a large portion of Vancouverites (Todd, 2023). I also should note that in the original Expo land deal the city secured options to buy six lots in False Creek North at a below market rate for the development of 650 social housing units. However, the city of Vancouver was unable to secure funding from senior governments for these developments, and as of 2023 the city has sold three of those lots back to Concord Pacific while construction of the remaining three sites has yet to begin (Renger, 2023: Culbert, 2018). Housing advocate John Shayler summarized the situation accurately when he warned of a situation where the residents of Vancouver are left with “empty promises and empty land” (Culbert, 2018).



*Figure 2: Highlighted buildings are those developed by Concord Pacific, making up most of False Creek North*

That said, we are poised to consider who exactly is being referred to when talking about Vancouver's 'residents', because after all, it's not as though the luxury developments of Concord Pacific are all sitting empty. While acknowledging that much of Vancouver's high end real estate is owned by absent investors, False Creek North is by no measure a ghost town (Ley, 2023). Instead, this master planned community is one that provides a highly desirable form of urban living, but only for those who can afford it; and also those who have the inside scoop on buying opportunities. It is worth noting here that Concord Pacific chose to market the first condominiums completed in False Creek North in Hong Kong. These units sold out almost immediately, which prevented Vancouverites from having an opportunity to purchase them (Punter, 2019). This, quite clearly, is not a secure formula for creating a city with a robust urban fabric, and surely the body politic is something that relies on the diversity of residents who make up our communities. However, in the neoliberal Vancouver, 'diversity' is another term in need of clarification, and thankfully, the urban planner Larry Beasley provides us with a definition in his 2019 book "Vancouverism". In the context of False Creek North—and the broader revitalization of the downtown peninsula during the early 1990s—Vancouver's approach to development was epitomized by a focus on residential design, aesthetics, and quality of life, but encompassing all of this; " [was] the principle of urban diversity...accommodating a great variety of people and...one hundred percent focused on the 'low income left out'" (Beasley, 2019; Punter, 2019, p. 948).

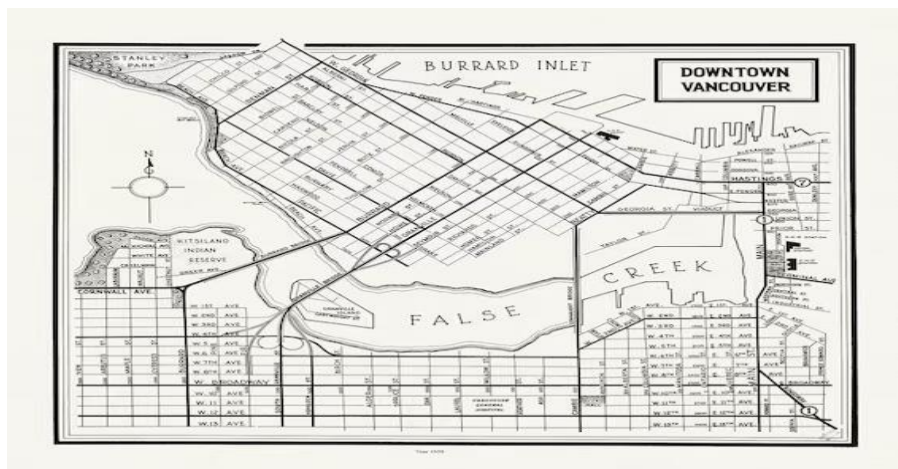


Figure 3: An Historic Map Showing False Creek North and South: Source; Historic Maps of Canada.

As mentioned prior, this style of urban development was first initiated by The Electors Action Movement. Among the most notable projects that TEAM undertook during the mid-1970s was the redevelopment of False Creek South. As described by David Ley, “False Creek [South] is a microcosm of the livable city vision.” (Ley, 1980, p. 254). Borrowing conceptual influence from Canadian/American urban theorist Jane Jacobs, False Creek South’s redevelopment was dedicated to the principles of creative diversity and integrated functions. In this new part of the city automobiles were to be hidden underground and a balance of low-rise, high-rise, townhomes, and house boats would create a medium density neighborhood that was highly walkable, with the seawall wrapping around its northern parameter (Ley, 1980). Moreover, Ley highlights that, “The most dramatic component of the vision for False Creek [South] was to be social mixing of lifestyles, income groups, and tenure types.” (p. 254). Taken at face value False Creek South can be remembered as a successful experiment in that the area still consists of low-income subsidised units as well as co-operative housing designated for families, and at-market condominiums. However, Ley insists that by contesting the city efficient TEAM failed to dawn an age of urban equity, and instead introduced a new and unintended form of elitism that has served as a catalyst to sharp increases in property prices within the city centre. In effect, these increases in property

value “serve to attract the wealthy and penalize social groups with limited market power” (p. 257). Keeping in mind that this critique of False Creek South and the city livable movement was published in 1980, it would seem that Larry Beasley and his associates were either ignoring the relevant literature or were cognizant of the ramifications of city livable planning yet carried on under the guise of inclusivity and diversity.

Regardless of what the case may be, the city livable tack has also proven incompatible with the rise of neoliberalism in Canada. The geographer John Punter notes, “In the 1980s ‘Reaganomics’ in the USA encouraged Canadian governments to reduce housing funding, leaving the City to implement senior government housing policies that were ‘full of holes’” (Punter, 2019, p. 948). Considering this, the later developed False Creek North represents a more evolved version of the same development style as False Creek South, but with the added ingredient of neoliberal austerity budgets. In other words, the two sides of False Creek are not reflective of a bifurcated city, but rather they are close cousins in the evolution of Vancouver as a neoliberal city. To particularize False Creek as on the one side inclusive and utopian, and on the other side unaffordable and elitist, would fail to consider the scope of Vancouver’s civic division. An example of this is provided again by David Ley, who details how the redevelopment of False Creek South resulted in the gentrification of the adjacent Fairview Slopes neighborhood, stating that “the redevelopment of False Creek [South] has replaced a noxious area by a highly desirable one, and the old residences of the Fairview Slopes have been demolished and replaced by expensive town houses.” (Ley, 1980, p. 256). Ley concludes by asserting that at every turn liberal ideology has “disfavored a vulnerable income group and favoured the more privileged.” (p. 256). Indeed, in its entirety, False Creek is symbolic of each notable dimension of Vancouver’s

transformation into a neoliberal city, and in the wake of Expo 86, this unique location demonstrates how the city livable has become the city unlivable.

### ***The City Unlivable***

Despite Vancouver consistently being ranked as one of the most livable cities in the world, many of its residents struggle to afford the basic necessities of life, such as shelter and food, while others face the threat of a toxic drug emergency. (Hopper, 2023). This phenomenon is described by Serena Kataoka as the “livable city paradox” (Kataoka, 2009, p. 45). In striving to develop Vancouver as a place where the culture of ‘living first’ is actualized through a balance of work and play, the city has become a reflection of elitist diversity, where access to this refined lifestyle is open to ‘anyone’, granted they can afford the astronomically high cost of living. As exemplified with False Creek, the already inequitable facets of the city livable movement were further exacerbated in the wake of Expo 86. This ideology—now bolstered by neoliberalism and less compatible with urban equality than ever—reached a milestone in 2016 when Vancouver had been the most unaffordable city in North America for a decade (Ley, 2023, p. 151). Confronted with exorbitant housing prices and income levels that are well below other cities of its class, Vancouverites sought to ameliorate the situation by voting in new leadership at both the civic and provincial levels. Thus, the aforementioned ‘Wild West’ era of free market politics came to an end in 2017 when the right wing Liberal government was ousted by the socialist New Democratic Party (NDP). However, the damage inflicted to the Vancouver housing market has proven largely irreversible, despite mitigation efforts from the NDP. Furthermore, this change in government has done nothing to revise the city livable ideology that permeates Vancouver. As the city continues to appeal to the same principles of heightened urban lifestyle as it was in the 1970s, while also failing to provide at scale non-market housing, along with a steady influx of foreign capital and

so called ‘millionaire migrants’, the cost of living in Vancouver has spiralled out of control (Ley, 2010, 2023).

In his most recent publication, David Ley describes how the livability crises in Vancouver has been felt at almost every level of the social stratum, stating “With widespread gentrification, displaced tenants adjusted their housing goals downwards, and those on the bottom rung of the housing ladder fell off, leading to abiding homelessness.” (p. 151). Coinciding with deregulations in the real estate market introduced by the Liberals in 2001, the number of homeless in Vancouver surged by 136 percent between 2002 and 2011 (Crowkiller et al, 2012). More recent figures from the 2023 homelessness count show how Vancouver’s unhoused population increased 32 percent since the last survey in 2020 (Homelessness Services Association of B.C., 2023). While a certain percentage of these numbers can be attributed to the domestic migration of previously homeless populations into the city, it cannot be denied that Vancouver’s real estate market is unhousing people at an alarming rate. Moreover, 71 percent of unhoused individuals surveyed in 2023 reported having a substance addiction, and the majority of those respondents also cited unaffordability as the primary cause for their most recent loss of housing. Thus, in light of the toxic drug emergency that has gripped the province since 2016, the livability crises then becomes a matter of life and death. In 2023 British Columbia recorded 2,511 deaths from toxic drug overdoses, with the largest portion of those deaths taking place in the Vancouver Coastal Health region (B.C. Coroners Service, 2023). This is the highest number of drug related deaths ever reported by the B.C. Coroners Service within a single year. Considering the scope of this situation, we can see how efforts to make Vancouver a livable city have resulted in the emergence of a city that is livable for some, while existing as deadly for others. The city unlivable thus carries with it a very literal meaning in that Vancouver’s turn toward neoliberal urbanism is actively killing some

of its most vulnerable residents, while many others are struggling to make ends meet. As Vancouver continues to successfully attract global capital, the resulting form of urbanization is challenging the city's existence as an environment conducive to living. Herein lies the crux of the livable city paradox, as well as a notable dimension of the global necropolis; the city as a place coated in death and simultaneously draped in gold.

However, this kind of civic bifurcation is not unique to Vancouver. Indeed the emergence of a 'global-urban condition' in cities like London, New York, Sydney, and Hong Kong is linked by the common thread of neoliberal urbanization (McCann et al, 2013, p. 581). United by their pursuit of global capital, these cities not only share aspects of their built environment that are strikingly similar, but they are also becoming increasingly unlivable for large swaths of the urban population. Hence, the global necropolis refers to the transformation of cities into places where the urban condition is defined by austerity, and in some cases death, while providing an opulent lifestyle to a small group of elites. It follows then that perhaps the most important theme of the global necropolis is that of class struggle. In his towering essay "The Right to The City" David Harvey details how, "the metropolis is now the point of massive collision—dare we call it class struggle?—over the accumulation by dispossession visited upon the least well-off and the developmental drive that seeks to colonize space for the affluent" (Harvey, 2008, p. 39). In Vancouver, this glaring divide between the rich and the poor seems only to be worsening as the city continues to ascend in global notoriety. With Vancouver selected to be a host city for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, class tensions are likely to intensify. As was the case with Expo in 1986 and again during the 2010 winter Olympics, Vancouver has made a habit of further marginalizing its most vulnerable populations in the pursuit of heightened global status.

## *Conclusion*

Since its modest beginnings as a terminus on the Canadian Pacific Railway, Vancouver has undergone a series of notable transitions. As I have discussed in the above text, Vancouver's current permutation was initiated in the mid-1970s when a new class of white collar professionals introduced the ideology of the city livable movement. Blind to the implications of building cities strictly on the principles of aesthetics and lifestyle, the city livable has now become the city unlivable. This transformation is marked most significantly by Expo 86, which provided a neoliberal retrofit to the city, overhauling the ideological and material landscape of Vancouver. In the wake of Expo 86 the tenets of urban livability were reinterpreted; whereas previous approaches to the city's urbanism were elitist yet still symbolically accommodating to the lower stratum, the neoliberal Vancouver champions inclusivity, but only for those with who can foot the bill. In what David Ley refers to as an "act of supreme symbolic and material significance", the sale of the former Expo grounds has completely reshaped Vancouver's built environment (Ley, 2023, p. 153). Through an examination of sites like False Creek North and the International Village Mall we are able to better understand the legacy of Expo 86 and the role that it has played in Vancouver's arrival on the global stage. Among this consortium of global cities there exists a number of alarming similarities. Linked by an insatiable need for capital reinvestment the global necropolis denotes a process of urbanization that is turning cities into homogenous dead zones. Plagued by rampant livability crises, the urban experience is increasingly becoming typified by class struggle. In Vancouver, the polarization between the rich and the poor is among the most striking features of the city, and as an issue that has only worsened over the past 40 years, it is clear that Vancouver's current approach to urban development is incompatible with social equality.



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