

# Seattle exerts a little peer pressure

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Globe and Mail Update

If cities can possess personalities, then Vancouver's greatest faults are insularity combined with an overly-fond regard for its own early accomplishments. This city is a natural but naive beauty, burnishing the notes of praise inscribed in her high school yearbook, even as she stumbles into a darker, more complex world, where good looks will need to be balanced with smarts and ambition.

There is no better reality check on any personality out of control than a sibling. Vancouver is lucky to have a sister city, one that we have literally grown closer to with the now-continuous conurbation that runs from Lion's Bay to Tacoma.

When it comes to downtown housing and city-building, Seattle now provides a precious mirror to Vancouver's strengths and weaknesses.

Never blessed with a near-downtown neighbourhood like our West End, Seattle failed in its first attempt at new medium-density downtown housing. Through the 1980s, developer Paul Schell built a number of Vancouver-inspired residential towers around Pike Place Market.



An aerial view of the new Olympic Sculpture Park. *(PHOTO BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER AND WEISS/MANFREDI ARCHITECTS)*

Mr. Schell's projects seemed to have everything going for them: the hippest location in town (Starbucks number one is just down the street); guaranteed views of the harbour and the Olympic Mountains; easy access to burgeoning downtown employers like Amazon.com, established just around the corner. Because of deep-seated suburban values

combined with an explosion of downtown homelessness under Ronald Reagan-era cut-backs, however, Mr. Schell and his partners lost their shirts with unsold units.

Paul Schell went on to become Seattle's mayor. Once in office, he did what he could to encourage downtown housing, efforts extended by current mayor Greg Nickels and such long time city councillors as Peter Steinbrueck (son of much-loved preservationist Victor Steinbrueck, who turned the city around in the 1960s by helping save both Pike Place Market and Pioneer Square.) Constantly using Vancouver as a positive model, their success in building a near-downtown residential neighbourhood is now most evident in Belltown, which extends north along Western, 1st and 2nd Avenues from Pike.

The world has come to see the new neighbourhood with last week's opening of the Seattle Art Museum's \$100-million Olympic Sculpture Park, installed on reclaimed waterfront industrial land and framed with new housing developments. We like what we see.

It is useful to compare this all-new park and surrounding neighbourhood with Vancouver's own largest downtown park and housing development — Concord Pacific.

What is most surprising to Vancouverites is that the built-out blocks of Belltown now have residential densities equal-to or higher-than those of Concord Pacific, but without a single skinny condo tower in sight.

*f*è How could this be? This may come as news to our downtown developers and city planners, but there are ways to achieve medium density-downtown living other than with our relentless formula of skinny condo towers on townhouse bases. Seattle imposed a 125 foot height limit for the area, making for lower, squatter housing blocks, the first wave constructed by Vancouver-based developers unafraid of downtown risks.

These lower-but-continuous condo buildings have the benefit of strongly defining Belltown's streets, and artfully frame the zigzag pathways and global-class collection of sculptures in the hillside park designed by New York architects Weiss and Manfredi. The clarity in built form here is completely unlike the hodge-podge along Vancouver's remade Pacific Boulevard or Richards Street.

Those Belltown condos with a view have a terrific one, but typical of American society, many new residents have almost no view at all, and precious little natural light to boot. This all-or-nothing American strategy contrasts with the shifting views through the tall grass of Vancouver's skinny towers, where the state mandates that we all get a slice of view, even if it is an increasingly narrow one.

Thanks to social housing requirements, Concord Pacific is more socially and ethnically diverse, but then, so is our city. I haven't used the word "Yuppie" in years, but it sprang to my lips when walking amongst the new Belltown residents, they and their next-door neighbours — similarly affluent empty-nesters just in from a life in the suburbs.

The sharpest difference between Belltown and Concord Pacific lies in how their parks and public art are treated. Funded almost entirely by Li Ka-shing's company in return for an ultra-generous land deal, Concord Pacific's parkland is wrapped around housing blocks and is either blandly competent (the less-is-more David Lam Park) or aggressively inept (the concrete-strewn George Wainborn Park.) The public art sprinkled around these spaces was vetted by civic committees who similarly ensured that good taste prevailed over strong tastes.

By contrast, SAM's Olympic Sculpture Park is concentrated into one park, and indeed, one Z-shaped concrete pathway within that park, and features a Rolodex full of the most famous names in contemporary sculpture. Fired by huge private philanthropy, the Seattle park is well on its way to global renown — just like such aggressive home-grown corporations as Boeing, Microsoft, Amazon and Starbucks. Vetted, buffed and patrolled by civil servants, the Vancouver parks and sculptures are pleasant distractions for those who live there.