

HOMES AWAY FROM HOME

Lessons we can learn from Seattle

Draft report: It offers ideas on changing zoning, clever new forms of affordable housing

MICHAEL GELLER
SPECIAL TO THE SUN



In July 2009, a Vancouver Sun op-ed headlined Vancouver and Seattle: Which is greener? commented on debates in the two cities about which had the better built environment.

The debates featured former Vancouver councillor Gordon Price, director of SFU's City Program, and Peter Steinbrueck, a Seattle architect who had also served as a city councillor.

Particularly stimulating and entertaining was that Price spoke in favour of Seattle, while Steinbrueck praised Vancouver.

Each acknowledged the difficulty of being a booster for the other city. However, the two urbanists had little difficulty identifying the shortcomings of their respective home towns.

Steinbrueck thought Vancouver was better because of its absence of downtown freeways, extensive SkyTrain network, greater number of downtown residents — especially families — and its thin highrise towers on town-house podiums and extensive public waterfront access. Price, meantime, praised Seattle for its expansive Pike Place Market, distinctive character neighbourhoods, beautiful downtown office buildings, ferries, streetcars, free downtown buses, and more varied and dramatic architecture.

Fast forward six years, and most would agree that each city can continue to offer lessons to the other.

Some were offered earlier this year, when the Planning Institute of British Columbia held its annual conference in Seattle, in which I participated. Titled Beyond Borders, the conference examined topics such as financial tools to create affordable housing, the correlation between good planning and health, and planning for climate change.

Given that Vancouver city council recently created the Vancouver Affordable Housing Agency (VAHA) I was particularly interested in the activities of the Seattle Housing Authority. Established in 1939, it provides long-term rental housing and rental help to more than 26,000 people in the city and owns and operates a variety of buildings on more than 400 sites.

One of its current undertakings is the regeneration of Yesler Terrace, a 22-acre public housing development which, at the time of its completion in 1941, was Washington State's first, and the first racially integrated public housing project in the United States.

It is now the last of Seattle's public housing projects to be converted into a mixed-income neighbourhood, and will comprise new eight-storey buildings; five levels of wood-frame above three storeys of concrete construction.

Given that Seattle allowed five-storey wood-frame construction long before the B.C. Building Code was amended to allow six storeys, I wonder how long it might be before we consider this cost-effective building system.



This example of a Seattle 'four-pack' places four townhouses on what was a single family lot. Vehicle access is from a paved middle auto-court.

I also explored what have been derogatively referred to as Seattle's "four-pack" and "six-pack" developments, much-maligned in-fill townhouses that have replaced older character houses on 50- and 60-foot lots.

The units are built in two rows, one fronting the street, and one fronting a lane. In between is a paved auto court that leads to garages beneath each unit. Sometimes, the homes have their principal entrances off the auto court. Alternatively, the entrances are off the street and lane.

While the paved area between the units can often be narrow and somewhat bleak, the concept is clever in that it allows four to six more affordable in-fill townhouses to be built on what were small single-family lots.

Given zoning regulations, the housing often appears boxy since it maximizes bulk and density, not unlike the Vancouver Specials. It can also be out of scale with nearby single-family houses. However, with design guidelines, I believe this type of in-fill housing could be appropriate for many Vancouver single-family neighbourhoods.

Vancouver could also learn a few lessons from a report on affordability released by the Seattle mayor's office recently.

Like its Canadian neighbour, Seattle is facing serious housing affordability challenges. And just as Mayor Gregor Robertson established the Affordable Housing Task Force in 2012, last fall Seattle Mayor Ed Murray created a 28-member Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda committee, which also included developers, urbanists, housing activists, lawyers and architects.

The committee's draft report, released last month, sets out a



This cost-effective form of medium-rise public housing in a Seattle mixed-income neighbourhood, combines five storeys of wood-frame construction above three levels of concrete construction.

comprehensive housing plan that proposes 50,000 new housing units over the next 10 years, 20,000 of which would be affordable.

However, one of the recommendations that has attracted

considerable public debate is a potential end to single-family zoning.

The report notes that 65 per cent of Seattle is currently zoned for single-family dwellings, but given the housing demand, the

committee considers this neither realistic nor sustainable.

It therefore recommends that properties along the perimeter of single-family-zoned neighbourhoods, as well as single-family neighbourhoods near transit and village centres be "up zoned" to accommodate new housing forms. They would be scaled to fit with adjacent single-family properties and include small cottages, courtyard housing, row houses, duplexes, triplexes and stacked townhouses.

The mayor also proposes a real estate excise tax of 0.25 per cent on real-estate transfers in the hopes of capturing some of the value from rising land prices and redirecting it toward affordable housing.

Other proposals include reforming parking policies in frequent transit service neighbourhoods, and streamlining the city's regulatory and design process.

As I reviewed the committee's proposals, I could not help but think back to the recommendations that came out of Mayor Robertson's Affordable Housing Task Force. While the city did act on the recommendation to create the VAHA, many of the other recommendations await implementation.

I'm hopeful, Vancouver and other B.C. municipalities can learn from our neighbour to the south and revise zoning to create new housing choices for those of us seeking alternatives to single-family homes or apartment buildings.

Michael Geller is a Vancouver architect, planner, real estate consultant, developer and adjunct professor at the SFU Centre for Sustainable Community Development. He writes a blog at www.gellersworldtravel.blogspot.com and can be reached at geller@sfu.ca