

Pete McMartin: The Amenity Paradox: Is Vancouver a victim of its own success?

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 27, 2014



Is Vancouver's attractiveness threatening the quality of life for those who live there?

Photograph by: RICHARD LAM, PNG

I came to Vancouver from Toronto in 1976, straight out of university. I had never been west, had no idea what to expect, but Vancouver was a siren song to the eastern consciousness — beautiful, balmy, fabled for its hedonism. I imagined a city bathed in a light the colour of chardonnay.

Then I got here.

I was shocked at the drabness. The downtown was dull. The residential neighbourhoods were pretty but lacked the vibrancy of Toronto's immigrant enclaves. Yes, the scenery was beautiful. But one does not live in a postcard.

And while I had always thought Toronto to be too morally rigid — it was Toronto The Good then — Vancouver was even more so. Beneath that image of hot tubs and sailboats lurked a parochial and prejudiced small town.

Then — and this took a couple of decades — it all changed.

The city experienced its first significant wave of immigrants. The downtown grew up, literally. The cuisine culture exploded to become among the best in the world, and the city began to produce writers and artists whose work transcended the boundaries of the old restrictive regionalism. Even the city's air quality improved. Vancouver became a vastly more attractive place in which to live.

But has that attractiveness reached a point where it threatens the quality of life here?

"Whenever I give a talk to organizations about life in Vancouver," wrote developer and urban planner Michael Geller in an email to me, "I often ask the audience whether they think Vancouver is better today than, say, five years ago.

"Invariably, the majority think it is not as good as it used to be. Admittedly, these are often more mature people, who tend to reminisce about the good old days ... but I don't think we should ignore their views."

Their complaints have become louder and more numerous of late. Real estate is unaffordable. The traffic is intolerable. Immigrant sensibilities clash with those of the locals. It's becoming too crowded.

These complaints are hardly unique to Vancouver. Last week, the Sunday New York Times Magazine ran an article on Portland, and how those who had flocked there for its amenities and idiosyncratic way of life were now fretting about the rising cost of real estate and creeping gentrification. This was being visited on Portland by newcomers from cities like Seattle and San Francisco, who had been attracted by the very same amenities and idiosyncratic way of life.

"As more of these newcomers flood the city," wrote Times reporter Claire Cain Miller, "they threaten to remake (Portland's) slacker image."

Two Portland academics, professors Jason Jurjevich and Greg Schrock, coined a term for this phenomenon. They called it the Amenity Paradox, which can be stated thus:

The very attributes that make a city attractive to live in eventually erode that livability.

In Portland, Schrock told me, the concern was mostly with younger millennials, and how that slacker way of life — for want of a better term — might be affected by a changing labour market.

The dynamic is of a different sort in Vancouver. Established residents fear that global money will make Vancouver affordable only for the very wealthy, that all that money will hollow the city out and cause Vancouver to lose its economic and demographic diversity.

"It's funny that you should mention the Amenity Paradox," said author and urban planner Lance Berlowitz. "I was thinking about that very thing last month when I was in Barcelona. It's one of my favourite cities and I've been there many times, and local people I know there were complaining that they can no longer afford to live in the city, that it has become too tourist-oriented, that, like Paris, it has become a caricature of itself."

That is not the case in Vancouver. As much as our Chamber of Commerce would convince us of our global significance, we are not anywhere near being in the league of Barcelona, Paris, or even Toronto, for that matter. And we have a long way to go in terms of becoming truly urbane.

Wrote Bob Ransford, consultant and bi-weekly columnist for The Sun on urban design:

"We are quite delusional about what we are in Vancouver. We're a small regional city that has seen a population spike, changing quickly some of our old ways. Those old ways were not that impressive. We're like the 14-year-old — neither an adult nor a child, but we think we're pretty special and we pretend we're more gorgeous than any other teen — yet we're terribly insecure.

"The waves of immigration that attract newcomers are what have always shaped and will continue to shape this little town that we carved out of the rainforest. Will we lose something as we grow? Yes. We'll lose everything that made us provincial, disconnected, uninteresting, narrow-minded, restrained and insecure. We're growing up. Is that ruining Vancouver? I certainly don't believe it is."

Added Berlowitz:

"Sometimes, I tear my hair out at how conservative Vancouver really is, how overburdened we are with rules and laws and customs, that we're really holding ourselves back as a city."

It will take time, maybe a couple of generations, he said, to get over that.

"I still think — as I wrote in my book (Berlowitz is author of Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination) — that Vancouver is one of those places that is actually on an improving trajectory."

It's not an opinion we hear often enough.

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