UNSETTLING THE CITY, REORDERING THE CITY:

A Review Essay

Tom Hutton

The Vancouver Achievement: Urban Planning and Design
John Punter
Vancouver, UBC Press, 2003. 448 pp. Maps, illus. $85.00 cloth.

Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property
Nicholas Blomley
New York and London: Routledge, 2004. 207 pp. Paper US$26.95.

PRIOR TO COLONIAL CONTACT, First Nations settlements in the Lower Mainland took the form of communities centred on resource harvesting and associated cultural practices. Demarcation of territory between First Nations within the Lower Fraser bio-region was based largely on custom, settlement, and informal rights, although these could be contested from time to time. Some of these settlements were quite large in the context of the times, but in general the natural plenitude of resources (for food, fuel, and habitation) was such that the Aboriginal peoples could share this abundance and devote considerable energies towards establishing highly developed social and cultural systems.

In the period since colonial contact, governments and public agencies have forcefully supplanted this custom-based ordering of property rights with increasingly formal, legalistic, and coercive instruments of regulation and control. These efforts have not lacked at times for attention to public rights and the collective welfare. But in general we can follow a sequence of regulatory regimes that have ordered space and territory, and limited the rights of access to environmental resources in the Lower Mainland. This sequence includes the explorers' initial claims of national sovereignty in the name of European states, the surveying work of the Royal Engineers in the service of colonial authorities, and the introduction of modern planning and management systems. Planning has, to be sure, recently entailed experiments in social, community, and economic development planning, but the management and regulation of *land* and territory-based resources remains a salient domain of planning activity and a major policy field for local authorities otherwise subordinate to senior levels of government.

The impress of planning and local policy can of course be discerned among landscapes throughout Vancouver and

the Lower Mainland. But the City of Vancouver's Central Area stands as a territory of particular and acute importance.[1] The regional significance of the Central Area is associated with its distinctive natural features (bordering Burrard Inlet, English Bay, and False Creek); its specialized economic, cultural, and administrative functions; and its unique status as an arena for cycles of transformative change. These cycles of change have produced new landscapes, social structures, and patterns of activity in situ, but they also encompass signifying features of transformation for the region as a whole. Over the last four decades, the Central Area has experienced a series of restructuring episodes, from "regional central place" and "industrial city" during the mid-twentieth century, to postindustrial city over the 1970s and 1980s, to its present complexity of territory, land use, and social morphology (see Hutton 2004). The inner city in Vancouver, as in other advanced urban societies, has emerged as a salient locus of structural change.

Vancouver's inner city has experienced a comprehensive transformation since the Central Area Plan (1991), which restricted the space allocated to specialized commercial development in the Central Business District (CBD) and favoured high-density residential development throughout much of the metropolitan core. This latest phase of inner city redevelopment has also introduced new social groups and actors into the city's core, including ascendant occupations and a reconfigured spatial division of labour, a changing ethnic mix, immigrant entrepreneurs, and cohorts of gentrifiers (Ley 1996). These groups have asserted their claims to the inner city and have forcefully imposed dislocation pressures on long-established groups, including First Nations and residents of single-room occupancy hotels (SROs). The city's policies for a new urban structure and land-use regime for the Central Area have been judged a major success both by local experts and international adjudicative bodies, but the very success of this redevelopment has brought with it new social conflicts and tensions.

Two recent books, written from quite different vantage points and interpreted through contrasting analytical lenses, offer a number of instructive insights into both the processes and outcomes of transformative changes in Vancouver's central city. The first, John Punter's (2003) *The Vancouver Achievement: Urban Planning and Design*, represents the most substantial evaluation to date on the role of planning and local policy concerning the reformation of land use and landscapes in Vancouver, including treatments of the planning record in suburban as well as in central city settings. This encompassing of metropolitan experiences provides an admirable breadth of analysis and context for the more detailed case studies, but there is a spatial emphasis on the high-profile redevelopment of the central city and a focus on urban design as the lead policy field. This focus is appropriate as it entails an evaluation of the "Vancouver Achievement" at its declared strongest point, while the reshaping of the Central Area certainly constitutes the defining hallmark of the planning effort in Vancouver. Punter's

[1] The "Central Area" as used here includes the districts conventionally incorporated in City of Vancouver planning exercises, including Kitsilano, Fairview, Mount Pleasant, and the Downtown Eastside (including Strathcona) as well as the downtown peninsula. The current review of Central Area development trends and policies now includes a larger spatial domain, extending eastward to Clark Drive, acknowledging the continuing re-territorialization of the restructured city.

The Vancouver Achievement, in the comprehensiveness and depth of its analysis, supported by an extensive fieldwork program entailing interviews and documentary review, is itself a considerable achievement.

Although Punter's praise for the somewhat monochromatic design features of the city's Central Area megaprojects is muted, he is favourably impressed with the overall quality and coherence of design principles that have guided the reordering of space in the urban core. The high quality of urban design in Vancouver's Central Area has been facilitated by sensitivity to site characteristics, imaginative provision of open spaces, and a generally sympathetic treatment of environmental values and issues. Punter attributes the success of urban design in Vancouver, in part, to the engagement of design experts and the broader public, but he also acknowledges the sustained commitment of professional staff in the City Planning Department as well as the leadership of influential political figures. Vancouver Planning Director Larry Beasley's recent Order of Canada award for his longstanding rôle in the reshaping of the Central Area represents a national recognition of achievement, and praise from other quarters has been equally unstinting. For many outsiders (and locals) Vancouver's central city represents a planning model of almost paradigmatic status.

But there are, of course, other sides to the Vancouver story, which, as well as the exemplary record of urban design achievements elucidated by John Punter, have included a series of territorial dispossessions and displacements. Some of the most consequential (and contested) sagas of displacement are articulated by Nicholas Blomley in his monograph entitled *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (2004). As in Punter's analysis, Blomley's principal domain of critical analysis lies in Vancouver's Central Area, where we find both the bleakest stories of deprivation as well as the most celebrated planning achievements.

As Blomley observes, Vancouver's history has been replete with dispossessions that have asserted the claims of new social groups and interests over those of longstanding communities and residents. He asserts that "the very creation of the city, and its continued remaking, seems all too often to be associated with acts of dispossession and eviction" (xvii). This cycle of displacements started, as Nick Blomley reminds us, with the imposition of colonial rule (and rules) in the nineteenth century, marked by the production of cadastral maps imposing grid patterns on the pre-existent landscape and communal property of First Nations communities. This particular (and overarching) injustice has never been rectified through a process of consultative mediation and compensatory settlement, and it has been subject to overlaying dislocations. These have included the removal and internment of Japanese-Canadian residents, the pervasive gentrifications of the past three decades or so, and the more far-reaching redevelopment of the Central Area since the early 1990s.

In his critical interrogation of the defining series of displacements that have configured (or disfigured) the central city's social spaces and landscapes, Blomley advances a number of definitions and usages of the term "settlement." These are designed not only to acknowledge formal and "hegemonic" interpretations of settlement but also to suggest more contested meanings, and to propose more radical and progressive possibilities of rebalancing urban property rights in favour

of marginal groups and individuals. In Blomley's view, "property is deeply social and political, structuring immediate relations between people as well as larger liberal architectures, such as the division between public and private spheres" (xvii).

As might be anticipated, the struggles and conflicts associated with the Downtown Eastside (DTES) figure prominently in Blomley's narrative, where the "Cartesian space" of reordered central city landscapes intersects with what Lefébvre describes as the "mixed space" of the marginalized inner city. A series of vivid case studies testifies both to the unremitting dislocation pressures faced by the DTES as well as to the robust capacity of DTES citizens to assert their rights and interests. Blomley's personal engagement in defining the struggles of the DTES adds resonance and power to vignettes of contestation, including the Create a Real Available Beach (CRAB) episode and the conflicting visions for the old Woodwards building and site at Hastings and Abbott. For Blomley, gentrification represents not an inevitable (though insidious) process of social upgrading in a city where "professionalization" and the rise of a hegemonic elite services class constitute defining social trajectories but, rather, "class warfare" (78) in its most visceral form.

What I have described above are two starkly contrasting treatments of transformative change in Vancouver's Central Area. The Punter and Blomley books address different dimensions of the Vancouver experience, underscoring the dualistic nature of the city's imagery. The glittering point towers and convivial consumption spaces of the reordered inner city are widely seen as the most striking evocation of Vancouver's international profile as a "livable city" par excellence and as a fitting tribute to progressive planning. The deprivation within the DTES is almost equally (in)famous as a repudiation of liberal values and social justice. To reduce the complex outcomes of change in the core to just these two features is unacceptably essentialist, and, indeed, conditions embodied within each territory are too complex to permit such characterization. That said, the interested reader needn't choose between the polemical style of Nicholas Blomley, situated firmly within the modern critical studies genre, and the more technical/analytical style of John Punter's volume. Each stands in its own right as a significant contribution to a multiperspectival understanding of the important (for both positive and negative reasons) Vancouver experience. A careful reading of both books will disclose defining facets of the city's historical and contemporary development as well as oppositional "truths" and conflicting social values of modern civic life. The landscapes of Vancouver's Central Area have been (re)ordered in an impressive style, but at a high cost, and these costs have clearly fallen disproportionately upon groups and individuals least able to bear them. Contrary to some popular impressions, very considerable resources have been allocated to alleviating the deprivation of the DTES and to encouraging the public benefits of redevelopment within the Central Area. But an effective policy model that deals with both current need and historical redress remains elusive and is perhaps beyond the scope of local government.

REFERENCES

Blomley, Nicholas. 2004. *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property.* Vancouver: UBC Press.

Hutton, Thomas. 2004. "Post-Industrialism, Post-Modernism and the Reproduction of Vancouver's Central Area: Retheorising the 21st Century City." *Urban Studies* 41 (10): 1953-82.

Ley, David. 1996. *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City.* Oxford: Oxford Geographical and Environmental Studies, Oxford University Press.

Punter, John. 2003. *The Vancouver Achievement: Urban Planning and Design.* Vancouver: UBC Press.