

MOUNTAINS OF MONEY:
THE CORPORATE PRODUCTION OF WHISTLER RESORT

by

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is two-fold. My primary, theoretical aim is to present an alternative way for geographers to approach the study of tourist resort development. For over twenty years, resorts have been understood through the framework of evolutionary models, the most widely-used being Richard Butler's 1981 Tourist Area Life Cycle. I argue that the time is ripe for a more sophisticated approach which i) identifies the multiplicity of actors involved in the destination-making process and elucidates the interactions between them; and ii) situates the resort within a dynamic, capitalist economy, increasingly dominated by large corporations. I suggest that one way we can do this is to take particular *moments* in a resort's trajectory and examine the responses made by key players in the production of the resort.

My starting point for my investigation into Whistler Resort, British Columbia is the merger in 1996 of its two ski mountains, Whistler and Blackcomb, under the ownership of Intrawest Corporation. A recent wave of consolidation in the North American ski industry has seen increasing numbers of once-independent ski areas coming under the control of four large corporations, Intrawest being one. My second aim with this thesis, therefore, is to shed light on the process of ski resort development in light of the recent industry reorganisation. In particular, I use my case-study of Whistler to interrogate the corporatisation thesis of historian Hal Rothman. Rothman's account of resort development in the twentieth-century American West leads him to view large corporations as extractive forces which pay scant respect to local communities and cultures, treating them instead as marketable commodities. The experience of Whistler, however, suggests a much greater degree of *interdependence* and co-operation between the ski corporation and local stakeholders in the resort - a situation that arises because of its unique administrative, political and economic context.

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No business like snow business
Placing the ski resort

In this introduction, I attempt both to position my research project in a wider literature on ski tourism and resort development, and to familiarise the reader with my case-study of Whistler, British Columbia. As with all place-based accounts, knowledge of the place's complex history, politics, culture and institutions is crucial to making sense of contemporary developments. Nevertheless, as this study is at pains to demonstrate, the intricacy and dynamism of the place-making process - and the ways in which it is intertwined with larger, trans-local processes - ensure that it remains a topic of critical importance across the social sciences.

Resorting to the snow: ski tourism in North America

“A social sport from its beginning, skiing could consist mainly of a vacation of drinking on the mountain and visiting local night spots in the evening. This schedule maximised opportunities for consumption and minimised the need for physical exertion. Pretending to ski and looking the part was enough.”¹

Ever since skiing became an object of tourism, it has been as much about a lifestyle as it has been a sport. Skiing for recreation has its roots in turn-of-the-century Europe, with the

¹ Annie Gilbert Coleman, 'The unbearable whiteness of skiing,' *Pacific Historical Review* (1996) pp. 583-614. The quote is from p. 600.

construction of a ski course at Arlberg, Austria in 1904.² It was not until after the first Winter Olympics were staged in Chamonix in 1924, however, that mass winter sports tourism in the Alps took off.³ A further twenty-five years passed before North America's mountain ranges witnessed the same phenomenon.⁴ This was partly due to their physical inaccessibility from densely populated areas; but largely it was because a ski vacation, throughout the 1930s and 40s, remained a very exclusive affair. The ski *resorts* constructed during this period, such as Sun Valley, Idaho (a project of the Union Pacific Railroad), catered specifically to a clientele of Hollywood movie stars and East Coast business tycoons. Pricing themselves accordingly, they became *the* places for the glitterati to see and to be seen during an emerging 'winter season'. This situation was to change after the Second World War. An overall increase in affluence and leisure time, coupled with a surge in automobile ownership, began to make a winter sports holiday both affordable and practical for a rapidly expanding, mass market of vacationers.⁵ Even as ski resorts multiplied in number and democratised their customer base, they continued, however, to position themselves as elite places where skiers could live out the lifestyles of the rich and famous.⁶ A ski vacation became a principal means through which

² Mary Barker, 'Traditional landscape and mass tourism in the Alps,' *Geographical Review* 72 (1982) pp. 395-415.

³ Gareth Shaw and Allan Williams, *Critical Issues in Tourism: A Geographical Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) p. 193.

⁴ Hal Rothman suggests that "in 1935, only 10,000 Americans could call themselves avid skiers, and most of them lived in the East." The war, however, "provided a catalyst for expanded interest in the sport. Through the military more than 200,000 people nationwide had experienced the sport." Rothman, *Devil's Bargains* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1999) p. 204.

⁵ See Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991) pp. 19-45. Wilson argues that it was the motor car which facilitated the 'spatial diffusion of recreation across landscape' in North America. It was the automobile, for example, that made second-home ownership a possibility and precipitated the urbanisation of mountain landscapes.

⁶ In 1960 there were 1,584,250 skiers in the US; by 1964 this figure had grown to 2,448,000. In Colorado over the 1964/5 ski season 1,102,690 skier visits took place, 393,296 at mountain destination resorts. By the

upwardly-mobile middle-class Americans could acquire intangibles such as “experience, cachet and proximity to celebrity.”⁷ Indeed, according to historian Hal Rothman, it was precisely through the growth of skiing that “recreational tourism moved from local to national, from parochial to central in the iconography of American society.”⁸

Given the imprint that mass ski tourism has made on both the American mountain landscape and the national imaginary, it is remarkable how little scholarship the subject has attracted. Only recently have accounts offering a critical commentary of the American ski tourism phenomenon begun to emerge. Two studies in particular - Annie Gilbert Coleman’s fascinating exposition of the ‘whiteness’ of skiing in post-war America, and Hal Rothman’s in-depth account of the transformations wrought by tourism in the twentieth-century American West - have gone some way to redressing the imbalance.⁹ I thus want to spend some time recounting their arguments here.

Coleman’s basic contention is that the growth of ‘destination’ ski *resorts* in the Rocky Mountains (as opposed to local ski hills catering primarily to day visitors) was not really related to the popularity of skiing as a sport at all;¹⁰ rather, it was about a white American, upper middle-class using the ski vacation as a means through which it could buy a

1967/68 season, this figure for destination resorts had nearly doubled to 749,719. Rothman, *Devil’s Bargain’s*, p. 229.

⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

⁸ Ibid., p. 169.

⁹ Coleman, ‘Unbearable whiteness’; Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains*.

¹⁰ For Coleman, the distinction between the ski *resort* and the local, day-trip ski hill is crucial. “My argument,” she writes, “applies to destination ski resorts such as Aspen, Vail, Taos and Sun Valley. Many ski areas in the West, however... catered to local skiers or day visitors from urban centres. These areas, unlike destination resorts, did not concern themselves as much with European ski culture, generally charged

European identity for itself, without having to leave the American West. Coleman acknowledges that the whiteness of Rocky Mountain ski resorts has “clear historical roots” in Scandinavian and European immigrants, who brought knowledge of skiing and ski-making to the region’s mountains.¹¹ She argues, however, that it was largely through the marketing and advertising efforts of the post-war ski industry that a clear image of ski resorts as European places - places “as white as snow” - became widely disseminated. “Transforming the Rockies into the Alps,” she claims, “proved quite popular among ski industry promoters.”¹²

Everything about the ski vacation experience, from the architecture of the resort buildings to the names of hotels, was programmed by resort developers to seem as authentically ‘European’ as possible. Places like Sun Valley and Vail, for example, made certain to hire as many European ski instructors as they could and employed French chefs to prepare meals in their restaurants. Even ski fashions, such as Bogner stretch pants, were imported directly from Europe and sold using images of blond, ‘European-looking’ men and women: “Bogner pants did not look especially German,” argues Coleman, “what mattered was that they *were* German... For women skiing in the 1950s and 1960s they were almost mandatory.”¹³ White Americans in the post-war years, Coleman concludes, purchased ski holidays and the material paraphernalia associated with them not for any particularly practical - or indeed recreational - reasons but because of the *social meaning* they had

less for lift tickets and were more accessible to middle-class skiers.” Coleman, ‘Unbearable whiteness,’ p. 600.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 588.

¹² Ibid., p. 592.

¹³ Ibid., p. 594.

acquired through their advertising and marketing. Above all else, the creation of ski culture in North America successfully “linked the construction of a European white ethnicity to the consumption of status and image.”¹⁴

If Coleman’s primary concern is to show how participation in ski culture reaffirmed the civility and status of white, middle-class tourists, Hal Rothman’s is to demonstrate how their presence transformed the cultures and identities of the mountain communities that hosted them. In his insightful account, Rothman argues that the onset of tourism in any place, not just the American West, can largely be understood as a ‘devil’s bargain’: initially welcomed by communities as an economic boon, its development as an industry ends up changing them and their sense of place “in unanticipated and uncontrollable ways.”¹⁵

Rothman’s particular concern is the process through which control over tourism, and hence power over place, moves out of the hands of local people and into those of absentee, corporate financiers. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, ski *communities* in the mountainous West - as opposed to the star-studded destination resorts like Sun Valley - were “small, tightly knit places with one core obsession: how to get enough money to eat and sleep comfortably while skiing as many days as possible.”¹⁶ Their constituents were ski *fanatics*, not ski tourists, and their ski lifts were operated by enthusiasts as much for pleasure as they were for profit. With the phenomenal growth of

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 614.

¹⁵ Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains*, p. 10.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 253.

recreational skiing in the 1960s and 1970s, however, the industry became “too lucrative to be left to locals or idiosyncratic entrepreneurs.” Between the ski seasons of 1967-68 and 1970-71, average pre-tax profits at ski resorts had grown from 1.2 per cent to 10.5 per cent.¹⁷ Multi-national corporations, coming from business sectors as diverse as aerospace and movie production, but all hitherto unconnected to winter recreation, rapidly became alerted to the profits that were to be made from skiing. Moreover, they saw the addition of a ski resort to their portfolio of investments as a way in which they could improve their corporate image, melding their many assets with “a high-status capstone that served as a magnet for customers.”¹⁸

Mount Werner at Steamboat Springs was one of the first of the Rocky ski mountains to be acquired by large-scale outside corporate interests. Purchased by a Texas-based Japanese-American conglomerate, LTV Aerospace Incorporated, in 1969, the new owners brought to the mountain a great deal of capital but almost no knowledge of ski area management. Consequently, LTV “traded on local expertise by hiring nationally known local heroes for the public side of its operations. Locals could use their skills and mastery of the slopes while corporate officials in Texas ran the finances.”¹⁹

The first thing LTV did was to roll out a ten year, \$60m capital improvement plan for the resort, (an amount ten times larger than that invested by any of its previous owners), which included the construction of new lifts, accommodation and a golf course.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 254.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 254.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 260.

Simultaneously, the corporation set about disseminating a new image for the resort - renamed simply 'Steamboat' - that focused on the old ranching town's wild-west heritage and captured an "all-American" theme in the red, white and blue flag that became its logo.²⁰ Though "well-intended," Rothman argues that the plan "directly challenged everything that locals valued about their town."²¹ Up to that point, locals had been able to reconcile the development of the ski mountain with their sense of place: locals skied on the mountain and shopped in the stores at its base. LTV's new amenities and macho imagery, however, made the resort appeal to a new "constituency of destination visitors, a young, largely male, wealthy group typically from Texas or the East or West Coasts."²² Locals were increasingly squeezed, not only from the ski mountain but from their own land as the new popularity of the resort caused values to soar. The transition to a corporate-controlled regime was sealed when the mayor, Marvin Elkins, became a paid employee of LTV, acting as their 'community relations consultant'. "Steamboat Springs," argues Rothman, "[had given] itself over to outside money."²³

Rothman goes on to chronicle the experience of Aspen, following its purchase by Twentieth Century Fox in 1978 and Teton Village in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, after its acquisition by Dutch oil trader John Duess in 1987. In each instance, Rothman's story is the same: corporations brought vast amounts of capital to the places in which they invested and made the tourist's experience of them unparalleled; yet through their

²⁰ This 'All-American' imagery for Steamboat would seem to work against Coleman's argument that ski resorts were presented as distinctly *European*.

²¹ Ibid., p. 260.

²² Ibid., p. 261.

²³ Ibid., p. 261.

packaging and stereotyping of local identities for the consumption of transient visitors, they trivialised, and ultimately sterilised, the very cultures of the communities into which they bought. Local people were, on the whole, unable to halt the process as their leaders - politicians and businessmen - found their interests more closely matched those of the incoming corporate power and severed ties with the communities they once served. Rothman reaches the conclusion that, as a force in the twentieth-century American West, tourism has thus been nothing less than a form of 'internal colonialism,' its principle beneficiaries (large-scale corporations) regarding places as nothing more than bundles of resources to be extracted, manufactured and sold for profit.

From local to external control: cycles of resort evolution

While Rothman writes specifically about the experience of the American West, the process by which control over the tourism industry moves out of the hands of local people and into those of external organisations has been identified for tourist resorts more generally. Geographers, in particular, have been keen to construct models of resort evolution.²⁴ Several have been put forward but one in particular - Richard Butler's 1981

²⁴ Early writers on resorts identified three stages in the evolution of resorts - discovery, growth and decline. See E Gilbert, 'The growth of inland and seaside health resorts in England', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 55 (1939) pp. 16-35; Walter Christaller, 'Some considerations of tourism location in Europe,' *Papers of the Regional Science Association* 12 (1964) pp. 95-105. J Miossec developed his Tourism Development Model (TDM) in 1977. This traced the evolution of a hypothetical destination region by correlating developments in four different arenas: spatial form, transportation linkages, tourist behaviour and the attitude of the host community. The TDM was difficult to apply empirically, however, and failed to generate many follow-up studies. Miossec, 'Un modele de l'espace touristique,' *L'Espace Geographique* 6 (1977) pp. 41-8. For a useful overview of models of destination development and their extent of their applicability see Dianne Dredge, 'Destination place planning and design,' *Annals of Tourism Research* 26 (1999) pp. 772-791.

Tourist Area Life Cycle (TALC - see figure 1) - has captured the attention of tourism researchers.²⁵ Butler's basic thesis is that "destination areas carry with them the potential seeds of their own destruction, as they allow themselves to become more commercialised and lose their qualities which originally attracted tourists."²⁶ He identifies six stages in the cycle which proceed as follows. At the initial exploration phase, visitor numbers at the destination will be few, there will be no visitor facilities and contact with local residents will be frequent. As visitor numbers rise, local people will become more involved in providing services for tourists and will begin to advertise their locality as a destination. The process gathers momentum as the area enters a phase of rapid development. Control over tourist amenities will increasingly be given over to 'outside' organisations. During consolidation, the growth in visitors slows and tourism will have been established as the most important component of the area's economy. In the final stage, stagnation, visitor numbers will have peaked, a well-established tourist infrastructure will be in place and the area will have a strong tourism image but it will no longer be fashionable. From this stage in the cycle, the area may follow one of two trajectories: decline, whereby the area loses its tourist function altogether, or rejuvenation, whereby it reinvents itself by adding new attractions and/or targeting new markets for its products.

²⁵ Richard Butler, 'The concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution: implications for management of resources,' *Canadian Geographer* 14 (1980) pp. 5-12. Another life cycle model is offered by Wolfe; rather than using visitor numbers as indicative of the stage in the cycle, he uses indexes of environmental and economic impact. He argues that in the early stages of tourism, both environmental and economic impacts will be positive; over time, as tourism increases, the balance of environmental effects becomes negative. Eventually, this will also be true for economic effects due to leakage of revenue to organisations outside of the local economy. His somewhat pessimistic trajectory is referred to as the 'Ellis curve'. Like Miossec's model, Wolfe's failed to precipitate the same amount of empirical study as Butler's TALC. R Wolfe, 'Recreational travel, the new migration revisited,' *Ontario Geography* 19 (1983) pp. 103-24.

²⁶ Butler, 'Tourist area life cycle,' p.6.

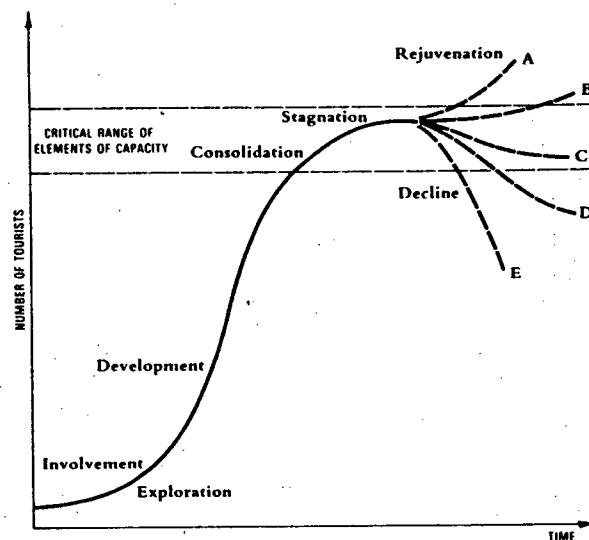


Figure 1: Butler's Tourist Area Life Cycle

The life-cycle model has been used by empirical researchers to describe all sorts of destinations, from Canada's Northwest Territories to Grand Isle, Louisiana²⁷; and while cautioning against the "misconceptions involved if the model is interpreted too literally," Roslyn Russell and Bill Faulkner argue that "even [its] harshest critics... do not reject it outright and generally concede its usefulness as a heuristic device."²⁸ I do not disagree

²⁷ C Keller, 'States of peripheral tourism development - Canada's Northwest Territories,' *Tourism Management* 8 (1987) pp. 8-20; K Meyer-Arendt, 'The Grand Isle, Louisiana resort cycle,' *Annals of Tourism Research* 12 (1989) pp. 449-465.

²⁸ Roslyn Russell and Bill Faulkner, 'Reliving the destination life cycle in Coolangatta: an historical perspective of the rise, decline and rejuvenation of an Australian seaside resort,' pp. 95-118 in Eric Laws, Bill Faulkner and Gianno Moscardo (eds.), *Embracing and Managing Change in Tourism: International Case Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998). The quote is from p. 97. On the difficulty in using Butler's TALC as a forecasting tool for destination managers, see K. Michael Haywood, 'Can the tourist area life cycle be made operational?' *Tourism Management* 7 (1986) pp. 154-167. Haywood argues that it is not clear at what unit of analysis the TALC operates - an individual hotel, a city or town or a region. Furthermore, the TALC ignores the possibility of a tourist area having multiple markets for its products; Butler's approach, contends Haywood, does not consider a resort's "sequential entry into distinctly different market segments, each of which is further segmented according to tourists' degree of innovativeness or other relevant tourist characteristics" (p. 156). For an overview of the models weaknesses in accounting for destination

with the TALC *itself*, for models are always based upon simplifying assumptions which expose them to criticism; but it is, I think, a source of neglect that so much tourism scholarship has failed to move beyond Butler's framework to provide us with more sophisticated 'ways of seeing' resorts. As a result, I believe the existing resorts literature conceals as much as it explains. In particular, I find that the majority of life-cycle accounts of tourist area evolution i) neglect to identify the diversity of social actors engaged, at any one moment, in the resort's production; and ii) fail to situate the resort in a wider, competitive, *capitalist* context. Drawing on the critiques of other commentators, I will now consider each of these claims in turn.

Anonymity

"Rather than being passive 'factors' of production or 'sites' of consumption, places 'come alive' with the breath of those who need them for specific purposes: gaining status, getting elected to office or, most crucially for present purposes, making a living off the manipulation of place itself."²⁹

By attributing causal power to 'the resort', studies inspired by the TALC typically render invisible the key players - both institutional and individual - working within them to produce their landscapes and marketing image for the consumption of tourists.³⁰ They assume the force of change is immanent in the cycle itself and consequently ignore questions of *who* constructs resorts (both physically *and* textually), *for whom*, *why* and *for*

development more generally, see Rob Davidson and Robert Maitland, *Tourism Destinations* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), pp. 50-53.

²⁹ Harvey Molotch, 'The political economy of growth machines,' *Journal of Urban Affairs* 15 (1993) pp. 29-63. The quote is from p. 30.

³⁰ Interestingly, David Harvey makes the same complaint about cities, arguing that so much literature reifies them, making it seem as if they are active agents when they are mere things. See Harvey, 'From

what reasons.³¹ In his case-study study of the Cypriot tourism industry, for example, Dimitri Ioannides, voices the need “for a detailed examination of the interaction of internal and external actors as they affect each stage of the [life-cycle] model”,³² yet by continuing to focus on the long-term, cyclical evolution of a destination over time, his account - and many others like it - fail to elucidate the complex processes of hegemony, negotiation and resistance that occur between key players at particular moments.³³ Time and time again we are presented with what are essentially *apolitical* renditions of resort development which succeed only in erasing the “spatial struggles” that occur within landscapes as they and their representation become customised to the values and needs of non-local people and capital.³⁴ Resorts, as Rothman is at pains to demonstrate, arise out of the visions of different players with different motives but a common stake in tourism development.³⁵ Some, such as Aspen, are the projects of pioneering individuals; others, like Vail, Colorado, are constructed according to corporate mandate. Many, like Cancun in Mexico, are the inception of the state, used by governments as catalysts for regional

managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation in urban governance in late capitalism,’ *Geografiska Annaler* B 71 (1989) p. 5.

³¹ Douglas Pearce separates actors in tourism development between the ‘private sector,’ ‘public sector,’ and ‘organisations’ but does not elaborate with examples of how these agents interact in destinations to achieve their goals. Pearce, *Tourist Development* 2nd Edition (Harlow: Longman, 1989) pp. 32-52.

³² Dimitri Ioannides, ‘Tourism development agents: The Cypriot resort cycle,’ *Annals of Tourism Research* 19 (1992) pp. 711-731.

³³ To be fair to Ioannides, he does admit that his paper “raises more questions than it resolves” and “brings to the surface the need for further in-depth research, drawing out the extent of the influence of international organisations, transnational tour companies, and domestic politics and institutions on the industry” (p. 728).

³⁴ I borrow this term from Jarkko Saarinen, ‘The social construction of tourist destinations: the process of transformation of the Saariselka tourism region in Finnish Lapland,’ pp. 154-174 in Greg Ringer (eds.) *Destinations: Cultural Landscapes of Tourism* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

³⁵ See also George Hughes, ‘The semiological realisation of space,’ pp. 17-33 in Greg Ringer (eds.) *Destinations: Cultural Landscapes of Tourism* (New York: Routledge, 1999). In a critique of Butler’s TALC, Hughes argues that places cannot be thought of as evolving naturally. Rather “they reflect an unstable outcome of a struggle between interest groups in which the self-conscious intervention of tourism entrepreneurs, travel writers, governments and tourists have come to play an increasing role” (p. 19).

development.³⁶ In the majority of instances, however, resorts will evolve at the intersection of capital that is simultaneously local *and* global, private *and* public; consequently, their form, function and image as marketed will be the outcome of the relative *power* of the actors representing those sources of capital. And it is precisely these relations of power that I believe tourism researchers must endeavour to elucidate in their empirical studies of resort evolution.

Autonomy

“Resort cycle models need to incorporate analyses of the competitive processes operating within a resort as well as competition between resorts.”³⁷

The second key problem with many life-cycle studies is their tendency to assume that resorts develop in a vacuum. In reality, as Ian Gordon and Brian Goodall contend, the fortunes of any resort will be a result of “its *comparative advantage* vis-a-vis competing resorts [my emphasis];” hence the imperative to situate resorts within a dynamic, global capitalist economy.³⁸ Gordon and Goodhall go on to argue that the organisation of industries such as airlines and tour operators - in other words, the companies which have control over the *supply* of tourists to resorts - will play a critical role in determining a destination’s economic future. Their contention is echoed by Keith Debbage, who suggests that “further insight... may be provided by examination of the resort cycle in the context of corporate strategy, and especially in the context of recent corporate strategies

³⁶ See D Hiernaux-Nicoles, ‘Cancun Bliss,’ in Susan Fainstein and Dennis Judd (eds.), *The Tourist City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

³⁷ Ian Gordon, ‘Crowding, competition and externalities in tourism: a model of resort life cycles,’ *Geographical Systems* 1 (1994) pp. 289-308; the quote is from p. 293.

of mergers and acquisitions.”³⁹ Debbage points to the emergence in the United States of what he calls ‘tourism oligopoly,’ whereby the tourism supply industry is increasingly concentrated in the hands of several large, transnational corporations. Debbage offers recent consolidation activity in the airline and hotel sectors as examples of oligopoly at work, arguing that the strategies of large firms are more concerned with increasing their market share than with the introduction of new products.⁴⁰ Failure to innovate, he contends, can serve to accelerate a resorts’ progression through the cycle if corporations do not generate new reasons for tourists to visit it. To illustrate his claim, Debbage presents the case-study of Paradise Island, a resort in the Bahamas owned since 1966 by the US-based multi-resort conglomerate, Resorts International. Through its huge investment in the tourism infrastructure, marketing reach and, most significantly, exaction of a casino gaming license from the Bahamian government, Resorts International was able to concentrate a quarter of the total Bahamian tourist product on one island. In so doing, however, the corporation contributed to the kind of over-development predicted by Butler in the later stages of TALC, spurring the onset of decline. Moreover, in 1989, Resorts International filed for bankruptcy after an attempted leveraged buy-out, leaving the future of its 7,000-strong work force in the balance. The experience of Paradise

³⁸ Ian Gordon and Brian Goodall, ‘Resort cycles and development processes,’ *Built Environment* 18 (1992) pp. 41-56.

³⁹ Keith Debbage, ‘Oligopoly and the resort cycle in the Bahamas,’ *Annals of Tourism Research* 17 (1990) pp. 513-527; the quote is from p. 520.

⁴⁰ Debbage’s argument is based upon Markusen’s profit cycle. Markusen contends that the initial production of a generic good will initially be undertaken by a large number of small entrepreneurs. As the market for the product expands, the number of competitors will decline as economic pressures encourage companies to cut costs and rationalise production. Eventually, an oligopoly arises where the market is controlled by several large firms which may or may not collude to retain market share. A Markusen, *Profit Cycles, Oligopoly and Regional Development* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985).

Island, Debbage concludes, highlights the intense vulnerability of corporate-controlled resorts to the vagaries of global capital.

Whilst Debbage does not mention skiing in his argument, his comments assume new prescience in light of recent consolidation activity in the North American ski industry. For almost overnight, the industry has become a textbook example of how tourism oligopoly works to dictate the relative competitiveness - and long-term survival - of the continent's tourist resorts.

"The hills are flush with capital": merger mania and the mountain moguls

"We're only beginning to see the strategic advantages of owning a multi-resort network both in terms of synergistic growth as well as economies of scale."⁴¹

Whilst, as Hal Rothman demonstrates, corporate control of North American ski resorts is nothing new, the rapidity with which they have become concentrated in the hands of just a few large industry players is unprecedented. What has been dubbed 'merger mania' by the ski press reached its peak in 1996. In just twelve months, sixteen mountain resorts were consolidated under one of four companies - Intrawest Corporation, Vail Resorts Incorporated (VRI), American Skiing Corporation (ASC) and Booth Creek Holdings Incorporated (see figure 2). These corporate Goliaths now control approximately a quarter of the North American ski market and are set to increase their market share further. They have been only too happy to ride a wave of investor confidence in their industry that has

⁴¹ Joe Houssian, Chairman, President and CEO Intrawest Corporation, cited in Intrawest's *Annual Report*, (1998) p. 11.

seen Wall Street banks offer 90-95 per cent financing of capital acquisitions. The ski corporations have also experienced few problems raising additional funds on the stock market. In 1997, VRI raised \$266m through sales of stock on the New York exchange (NYSE); and Intrawest, which had already traded on the Canadian market, sold \$93m of stock when it listed on NYSE the same year.⁴² The only one of the ‘big 4’ yet to go public is Booth Creek. “Thanks to Wall Street,” announces one ski industry commentator, “the hills are flush with capital.”⁴³

	American Skiing Co.	Booth Creek Inc.	Vail Resorts, Inc	Intrawest Corp
Year formed	1996 ⁴⁴	1996	1962	1976
Year floated	1997	n/a	1997	1990
CEO	Les Otten	George Gillett	Adam Aron	Joe S. Houssian
Total assets (1997)	\$640m	\$165m	\$814m	\$750m
Resorts owned (year acquired)	Sunday River, MA (1980) Sugarbush, VT (1995) Attitash /Bear Peak, NH (1995) Sugarloaf, MA (1996) Killington, VT (1996) Mt. Snow, VT (1996) Steamboat, CO (1997) Heavenly, CA (1997) The Canyons, UT (1997)	Northstar-at-Tahoe, CA (1996) Sierra-at-Northstar, CA (1996) Bear Mountain, CA (1996) Waterville Valley, NH (1996) Mt. Cranmore, NH (1996) Grand Targhee, WYO (1997) Snoqualmie Pass, WA (1997)	Vail, CO (1962) Beaver Creek, CO (1980) Arrowhead, CO (1993) Breckenridge, CO (1997) Keystone, CO (1997)	Blackcomb, BC (1986), Tremblant, Que (1991) Panorama, BC (1993) Stratton Mtn, VT (1994) Snowshoe, W. VA. (1995) Whistler, BC (1996) Copper Mountain, CO (1996) Mont. Se. Marie, Que (1997) Mammoth, CA (1997) Sandestin, FLA. (1998) Blue Mtn., ONT (1998)

Figure 2: The ‘mountain moguls’ and their acquisitions⁴⁵

⁴² Ken Castle, ‘The new mountain moguls,’ *Ski*, November 1999, pp. 86-95; the quote is from page 92.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁴⁴ ASC was formed in 1996 when Otten’s privately held LBO Resort Enterprises merged with S-K-I Ltd., a publicly-traded company twice its size. Sally Johnson, ‘The new king of the ski moguls,’ *New York Times*, 23rd March 1996, p. 35.

The motivation for the recent consolidation activity is quite different from that which tempted multi-national corporations to diversify into the ski business in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1980, the dramatic growth in attendance at ski resorts - which had been fuelling profits and captured the attention of corporate CEOs - had levelled out at approximately 50 million skier visits a year. Even with the expansion of the snowboarding market in the 1990s, this figure has remained more or less unchanged for twenty years.⁴⁵ To compensate for a stagnating market, the ski corporations have been seeking to capitalise on the 'synergistic growth' and economies of scale that arise from controlling multiple-resort networks. Intrawest and American Ski Corporation have both been pursuing a strategy of *geographical diversification*, acquiring resorts in all four corners of the continent. Intrawest, for example, now owns Copper Mountain in Colorado, Mammoth in California and Stratton in Vermont; ASC, meanwhile, snapped up The Canyons in Utah and Steamboat in Colorado to balance out the East-coast bias of its resort portfolio. Diversifying geographically can be understood as a risk minimisation strategy. Despite investments in snow-making technology, ski resorts are still largely at the mercy of the weather and a poor snow year can set profits tumbling - as was the case with Colorado in the 1998/9 season. By owning resorts across the continent, the risk of unfavourable weather - which is one of the things the corporations cannot control - can at least be mitigated: a good snow year in Colorado can compensate for a poor year on the

⁴⁵ The data for this table was compiled from information contained within Castle, 'The new mountain moguls.'

⁴⁶ Johnson, 'The new king of the ski moguls,' p. 35.

East Coast and vice versa.⁴⁷ Another motivation behind geographical diversification is insulation against regional economic downturns: despite targeting 'destination' (fly-to) ski markets, the economies of many ski resorts are still correlated to those of nearby urban areas that feed them. Indeed, Intrawest specifically acquires resorts that are within two hours drive of a major city.⁴⁸ A third advantage that arises from a widely-dispersed network of resorts is the degree of market exposure it offers the ski corporations. Instead of trying to grow new markets, Intrawest uses data collected at its various resorts to cross-market them to an *existing* customer base. In the past, for example, pass-holders of Blackcomb Mountain in British Columbia have been offered discounts at Intrawest's Tremblant resort in Quebec.

It is this potential for marketing-based economies, not risk mitigation, that has propelled the consolidation activity of VRI. Vail's strategy has been to purchase neighbouring resorts and thereby control the bulk of the Colorado ski product, the most popular ski destination in the US. Through merging with Keystone and Breckenridge in 1997, the corporation succeeded in creating the largest single lift-serviced area on the continent. More so than Intrawest or ASC, VRI has benefited from the economies of scale that come from putting the marketing and administrative functions of several resorts under one roof; furthermore, VRI is using its new bulk purchasing power to control not only the regional ski product but how people access it - the so-called 'channels of distribution'. This it does by purchasing millions of dollars worth of airline seats on flights from major US cities to

⁴⁷ Record snow levels at Whistler/Blackcomb in the 1998/9 season, compensated Intrawest for losses encountered at their East Coast and Colorado resorts.

⁴⁸ Intrawest *Annual Report* 1998.

the nearest airport, Eagle, and selling them at a considerable discount in conjunction with package vacations to its resorts.⁴⁹ The growing Vail 'empire' has, not surprisingly, been compared by one commentator to "a Disney World in the mountains," with the whole ski experience from airport check-in to mountain-top meals meticulously managed by one, central authority.⁵⁰

While industry consolidation has, in large part, been mostly good news for the skiing consumer - bringing with it higher levels of service and massive capital investment in previously run-down ski areas - the frenzied activities of the "mountain moguls" have nevertheless generated concern in the North American ski press. With the exception of Booth Creek Holdings - which has "so far foiled at its attempt to gain a star resort or two" and has, instead, been focusing on "cornering regional markets with close-to-home mid-sized resorts" - all the ski corporations are using their market presence to tempt skiers to stay and play at their 'destination' resorts.⁵¹ Smaller, day-trip ski areas, which have "historically fed skiers up the food chain to the mega-resorts," are feeling the squeeze and are disappearing fast: there is a genuine fear that the "mountain moguls [will] beget 'ghost towns'" of ski hills which can no longer eke out a profit.⁵² A further, more normative concern is the standardisation and cultural homogenisation that the onset of corporate ownership of resorts may entail: "unlike the men who built their resorts from

⁴⁹ Bob Barnett, 'Merger mania,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, January 24th 1997, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Castle, 'The new mountain moguls,' p. 91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵² In 1960 there were 1400 ski areas in the US. By 1991 the number had decreased by two-thirds, to 525. Of those, 25% were listed for sale. Peter Williams, 'Emerging North American tourism market - demassifying travel,' pp. 1-7 in Alison Gill and Rudi Hartman (eds) *Mountain Resort Development: Proceedings of the Vail Conference*, April 18th-21st (Burnaby, Simon Fraser University, 1991). The quotations are from Castle, 'The new mountain moguls,' p. 91.

scratch,” warns one ski commentator, “these new industry pacesetters meet in the boardroom, not riding the boards... ...What happens when they lose the vision and personal commitment of an independent owner-operator?”⁵³ The ski corporations are bottom-line driven organisations with a primary responsibility to their shareholders; their passion is for profit, not powder.

If these concerns sound familiar, it is because they repeat precisely the argument made by Rothman that “the individuality of places disappeared as corporations that regarded identity as a selling point took control.”⁵⁴ And it is Rothman’s wider ‘corporatisation’ thesis that I wish to explore more thoroughly through an engagement with one of the sixteen ski resorts that became part of Intrawest Corporation’s growing empire in 1996: Whistler.

Introducing Whistler

Clash of the titans: the era of competition

“The competition has been fun and exciting to this point, but it’s a different game now. We’re at the point where the landscape is changing very quickly. We’re in a different league now.”⁵⁵

Whistler is located in the Coast Mountain range of British Columbia, 120km north of the city of Vancouver, Canada (see figure 3). From a skiing perspective, Whistler is one of

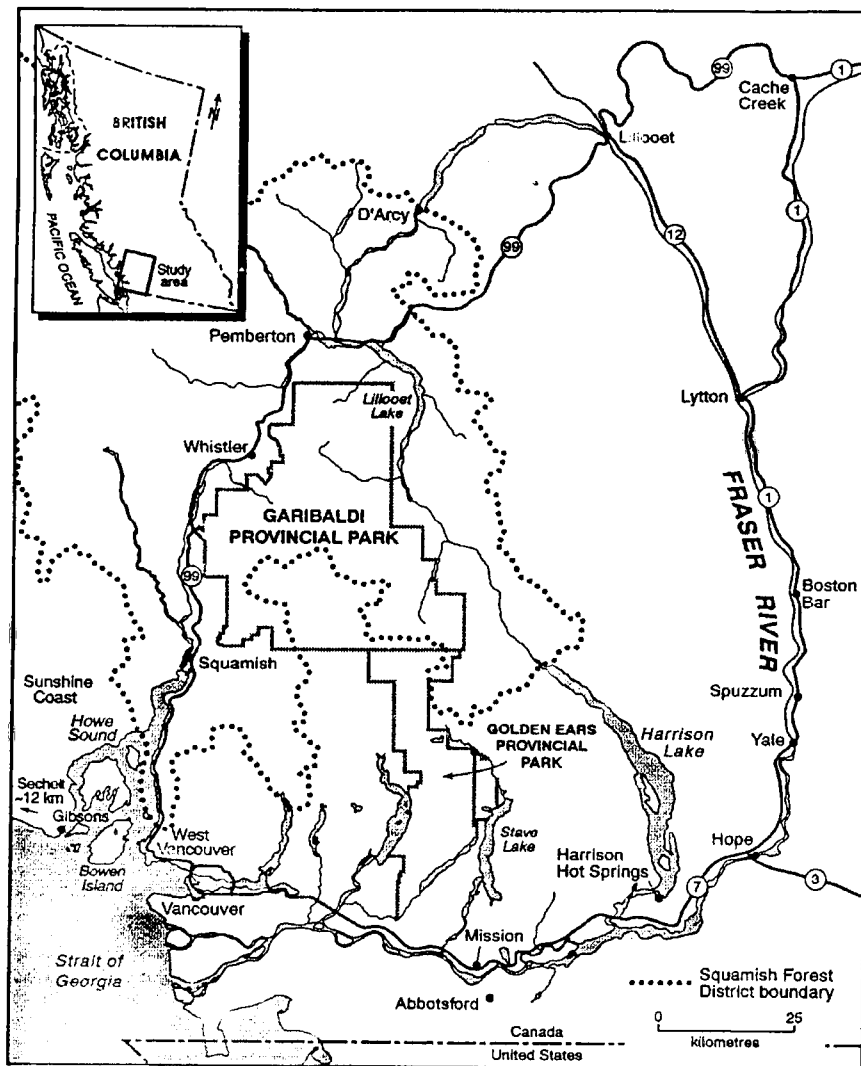
⁵³ Ibid., p. 91.

⁵⁴ Rothman, ‘Devil’s Bargains,’ p. 258

⁵⁵ Hugh Smythe, President, Intrawest Resort Operations, quoted in Barnett, ‘Merger mania,’ p. 13.

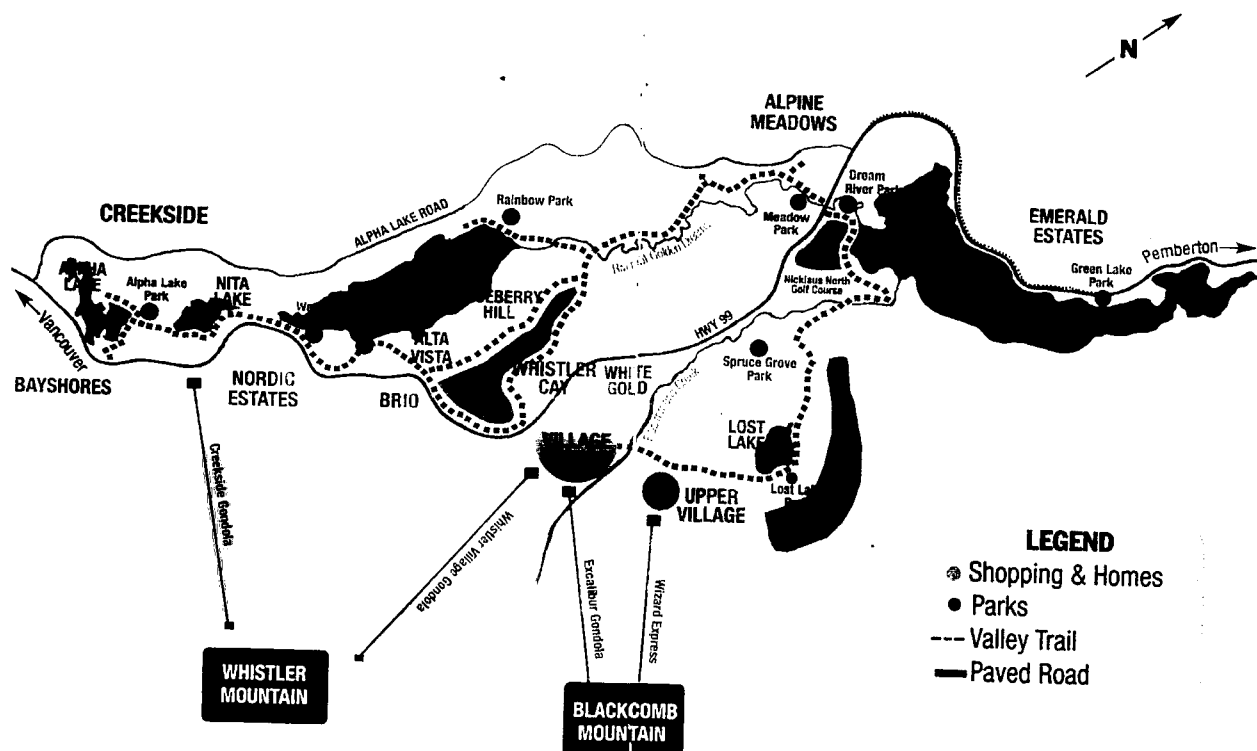
the few North American resorts whose central village acts as the base area for *two* ski mountains, Whistler and Blackcomb (see figure 4). Until 1996, these mountains were owned and operated independently of each other. Whistler Mountain, the “elder brother,” opened for skiing in 1966 and remained in the hands of two private family-run companies for 30 years; Blackcomb Mountain, its younger sibling, welcomed skiers for the first time 14 years later. Developed by Fortress Mountain Resorts, a subsidiary of the Aspen Ski Company and the Industrial Development Bank (IDB), under the guidance of Hugh Smythe, Blackcomb was always viewed as the ‘corporate outsider’ by Whistler locals - a view reinforced when it was purchased by Intrawest in 1986. The acquisition came about following a chance encounter at a Young President’s Luncheon between Hugh Smythe and Joe Houssian, the chief executive of a rapidly expanding urban real estate corporation headquartered in Vancouver. The encounter happened to coincide with Aspen Ski Company’s sale of its 50% stake in Blackcomb. Smythe persuaded Houssian to purchase the stake by emphasising the potential for real estate development at the mountain’s base. Two years later, Houssian bought IDB’s 50% share to make his company, Intrawest, the sole owners of Blackcomb.

Until Intrawest’s arrival in Whistler, the two ski mountains had engaged in “friendly competition.” Whistler Mountain, the ‘favourite’ of locals and long-time skiers from Vancouver, had always led the way in ticket sales, gaining 65% of the market share



◀ **Figure 3:** Location of Whistler, British Columbia

▼ **Figure 4:** Map of Whistler Valley



compared to Blackcomb's 35%.⁵⁶ Immediately after its acquisition of Blackcomb, Intrawest acted on its plans to make the mountain not just a local, or even a regional, but a *destination* ski resort by rolling out a plan for \$26m worth of on-mountain improvements, including a new haute cuisine restaurant, acres of snow-making coverage and a specially designed children's play area. The effect, according to one industry commentator, was "thunderous": Blackcomb's sales climbed 73% in one season - the largest gain ever recorded for an established North American ski area - and for the first time, a stunned Whistler Mountain was left trailing behind.⁵⁷

The effect of Intrawest's investment was to precipitate a programme of improvements on Whistler Mountain designed to match those on Blackcomb one-for-one. Yet, "everything Whistler Mountain did, Blackcomb did better."⁵⁸ Intrawest's listing on the Toronto stock exchange in 1990 delivered a huge influx of capital into the corporate coffers which the private owners of Whistler Mountain Corporation could not replicate; furthermore, Intrawest's expertise in real estate development was providing them with another stream of revenue which they reinvested straight back into their mountain. Whistler Mountain was confronted with another hurdle in December 1995, when its Creekside chair-lift collapsed, killing two skiers and injuring many more. The lift serviced a base area popular with day-tripping Vancouverites and its closure for the remainder of the season crippled the company's finances. For the first time since 1987, Whistler Mountain's owners

⁵⁶ Charlie Meyers, 'Clash of the titans,' *Ski*, April 1989, pp. 25-31.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁸ Michael McCullough, 'Instant karma,' *BC Business*, October 1997, pp. 22-30; the quote is from p. 25.

listened to Intrawest's offers to purchase the mountain and merge ski operations. In December, 1996, a deal was struck and Intrawest finally took control of both peaks.

Reactions to the merger

"But as I drove home Wednesday night - Whistler felt different.
Whistler wasn't Whistler.
It was a new place.
Over the next few weeks we will hear views.
Perspectives will develop.
Things will change.
Things will never be the same."⁵⁹

"While one hand of the corporation reaches out in the world, buying up resorts in Canada, the US and Europe, the other digs deeper into the local economy of its flagship resort, Whistler BC."⁶⁰

The merger was a defining moment in the history of Whistler. It marked the end of a era of competition that had defined the place's very economy and culture. As one ski journalist put it in 1989, "in a tight little valley where loyalties - and employment - frequently split households, it's difficult to find a neutral observer."⁶¹ Given this context, the reaction from Whistler locals was understandably mixed. Many people interpreted the move as an inevitable given wider consolidation activity in the industry and felt relieved that Whistler Mountain had remained in Canadian hands: reportedly Vail Resorts had also approached its owners with an offer.⁶² There was an overwhelming sense of 'better the devil you know': far from being faceless outsiders, several of Intrawest's top brass - including Chief Executive Joe Houssian and Head of Resort Operations Hugh Smythe -

⁵⁹ Loreth Beswetherick, 'A new chapter in Whistler's history,' *Whistler Question*, 23rd December 1996, p. A8.

⁶⁰ Stephen Vogler, 'Whistler's got it all,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, 2nd July 1999, p. 23.

⁶¹ Meyers, 'Clash of the titans,' p. 30.

lived in Whistler and were familiar characters around town. Moreover, their company had proven itself to be highly professional and successful - it had, after all, been the force that achieved for Whistler the accolade of "number 1 ski resort in North America."⁶³

Nevertheless, Whistlerites were all too aware that the Intrawest of 1996 was a very different beast from the small real estate developer of 1986. Now a multi-resort conglomerate, Intrawest needed to milk as much profit as possible from its 'flagship' resort to fund acquisition activity elsewhere; and with the merger, it was in a far better position to do so.⁶⁴ Almost overnight, Intrawest had become not only the resort's largest employer and retailer but, with lands at Whistler Mountain's base ceded to it, its largest land developer. In the late 1980s Houssian had realised that good money was to be made in resort real estate and had established a Resort Development Group (RDG) - entirely separate from Resort Operations (under which management of the corporation's ski mountains fall) - to plan, administer and market real estate in all the resorts he purchased (see figure 5 for Intrawest's organisational structure). Within Whistler, the RDG's activities on Blackcomb's base lands had acquired for it a reputation amongst locals as a particularly bottom-line driven entity, a tough negotiator to have at the table. Consequently, it was the potential for further land development by the RDG - more so than Intrawest's operation of Whistler Mountain - that generated considerable concern in the resort.

⁶² Barnet, 'Merger mania,' p. 13.

⁶³ Whistler/Blackcomb was awarded this accolade by *Ski*, the premier industry journal, in 1995. It had already been ranked number 1 by *Snow Country* in 1992.

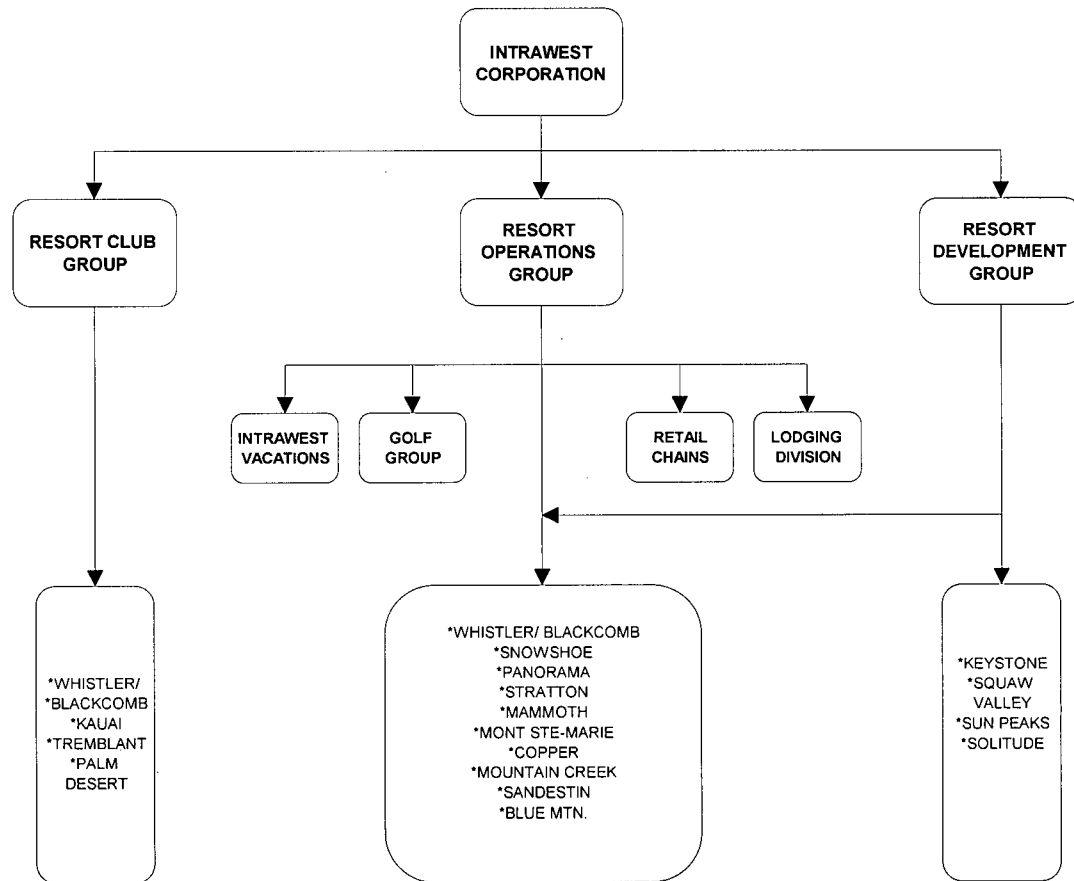


Figure 5: The organisation structure of Intrawest. At some resorts e.g. Keystone and Sun Peaks, Intrawest is only the developer; it does not operate the ski area. The Resort Club Group currently runs four timeshare properties in resorts, both mountain and warm-weather, across North America.

Given Intrawest's stake in Whistler following the merger, local journalists were quick to proclaim the resort "a modern day company town," arguing that the place's future was now tied to that of a publicly-traded corporation.⁶⁵ These claims, however, were not entirely correct; for Intrawest is not the only powerful player determining Whistler's trajectory. Indeed, the resort's future would now be largely dependent on the ability of its

⁶⁴ Whistler/Blackcomb is by far Intrawest's most profitable resort, comprising 50% of its portfolio.

⁶⁵ Vogler, 'Whistler's got it all,' p. 23.

municipal government and local tourism organisation to influence and regulate the corporation's activities. It is thus to these key players, and their powers, that I now turn.

More than a corporation: Whistler's key administrative players

"Just as ski resort development in the US has all but ceased, when overcrowding is bringing the hassles of urban life to the ski slopes, when the quality of the ski experience is showing signs of erosion, the Canadian government is encouraging ski development on crown land with a co-operative bureaucracy, special privileges and money."⁶⁶

i) The Resort Municipality

Whistler's twin ski mountains are not the only elements that make the place unique. The other is its administrative set-up. Shortly after Whistler Mountain was opened for skiers in the 1960s, the provincial government of British Columbia became alerted to the opportunity a ski resort presented for development in an area in which logging was the sole form of economic activity.⁶⁷ It was Al Raine, the coach of the Canadian Olympic ski team, who first envisioned a four-season resort village at the base of Whistler Mountain and a second, yet to be developed mountain, Blackcomb. He set about lobbying the NDP provincial government to investigate the possibility and, as a result of his efforts, was appointed its official ski industry co-ordinator, "with special instructions to focus on Whistler."⁶⁸ Upon Raine's recommendation, Whistler was designated as a 'resort municipality,' the first of its kind in Canada, on September 6th, 1975. This status differed

⁶⁶ Janet Nelson, 'Blackcomb, giant on a fast track,' *Ski*, November 1980, p. 112.

⁶⁷ David Hall, *Whistler - Development of a Resort*, (Victoria, BC: Economic Planning Group of Canada, 1984), p. 18.

⁶⁸ Neville Judd, 'Has Whistler peaked?' *The Vancouver Courier*, 24th January 1999, p. 4.

from regular incorporation in the power it gave the resort's council to borrow without voter assent. The move was taken to prevent non-Whistler residents, who owned 80% of the property in the Valley (primarily ski cabins around the mountain's base), from voting down spending for services and infrastructure that would be crucial to the success of the resort.⁶⁹ Whistler residents, totalling just 531 in number, could never by themselves generate the tax revenues to service a population twenty-times their size on busy weekends.

At its outset, the Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) was administrated by a mayor and four councillors, elected for two-year terms in office. One of the councillors, however, was appointed by provincial government minister responsible for administering the RMOW Act. This formation served two purposes. Through its elected members, councillors could act on behalf of local residents (although, as I explain later, it was a long while before residents' needs were foregrounded), while the presence of the provincial alderman made certain that the provincial government's interests were represented. This meant ensuring Whistler's recreational potential was developed for the benefit of *all* British Columbians. To assist him in this task, the alderman was granted the power to exempt the RMOW from any act applying to municipalities in general. In addition, he could vary the composition of council, amend the Official Community Plan and impose and collect charges for municipal services.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Non-Whistler residents still own roughly three-quarters of the property in the resort.

⁷⁰ Hall, *Whistler - Development of a resort*, p. 22.

To administer the development of the new resort village, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the RMOW, the Whistler Village Land Company (WVLC), was incorporated on 7th April 1978. Such a vehicle was chosen because it ensured control would be exercised locally; furthermore, as the company had limited liability under the British Columbia Companies Act, it meant the municipality and Whistler taxpayers were exempted from any financial burden. The set-up proved a remarkable act of foresight given the turn of events in 1982. Up until then, the WVLC had taken advantage of a buoyant property market to construct the first two phases of the Village and sell the rights to the third. With the onset of recession at the end of 1981, however, developers' confidence in the project evaporated. Not a single investor for the fourth phase of the Village could be found and the WVLC's sole source of income vanished overnight. As the recession deepened into the summer of 1982, the company had no option but to declare itself insolvent.

It was at this point that the provincial government once again demonstrated its commitment to Whistler by stepping in with a rescue package. It took over all of the WVLC's assets and liabilities for \$1 and established WLC Developments Ltd. as its successor. Like its forerunner, WLC Developments was a privately incorporated company with all its shares owned by the province. The company's primary task was to service and sell all remaining land parcels in the village centre. In addition, it was to underwrite the construction of a golf course and conference centre - amenities considered vital to Whistler's long-term success as a four-season, and not just a ski, destination.

The early 1980s marked the peak of the province's involvement in Whistler. As the economy improved and the resort came closer to achieving a critical mass of tourist development, the provincial government reduced its day-to-day involvement in Whistler's administration, dropping the stipulation that an appointed alderman must sit on council. When the final phase of Whistler Village ("Village North") was completed in the late 1990s, WLC Developments was wound up and the province finally bowed out of the resort - leaving governance in the hands of the municipal council which, in line with Whistler's population, had expanded to comprise elected seven officials.

The politics of Whistler

The evolving politics of Whistler's municipal council reflects its maturation as a 'resort community' and not just a resort. As landscape architect Sherry Dorwards explains, there is a crucial distinction:

"A resort village has few permanent residents, little political life, and a singular source of income. Some evolve into resort communities, however, and as this transition takes place, more attention needs to be given to providing those services needed by a growing population of local residents."⁷¹

In the early phase of the resort's development - referred to by Whistler researcher Alison Gill as its "growth machine" years - the focus of the municipality's work was very much on the 'resort' part of the equation.⁷² It had to be. The priority was to achieve a *critical*

⁷¹ Sherry Dorward, *Design for Mountain Communities: a Landscape and Architectural Guide* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990) p. 13.

⁷² Alison Gill, 'From growth machine to growth management: the dynamics of resort development in Whistler, BC,' *Environment and Planning A*, forthcoming.

mass of tourism development which would underwrite the resort's future economic success. Municipal politicians, for example, did not exercise rights granted to them by the Resort Municipality Act to make developers pay to provide employee housing; and they directed the majority of municipal resources towards servicing the new village and enhancing recreational facilities such as parks and trails. Throughout this time, local people survived without many amenities such as a community centre or high school. Nevertheless, they accepted their predicament: their stake in the resort's success was as high as the politicians' they elected.⁷³ According to Gill, this situation changed in the late 1980s when Whistler underwent the transition from a ski resort to a four-season destination. The resort was beginning to provide year-round employment opportunities and more and more people were making Whistler their home (see figure 6).⁷⁴ Concurrently, Whistler's growing contingent of permanent residents became more organised, lobbying municipal politicians to address community issues such as schooling and housing.

The newly elected mayor in 1990, whilst standing on a 'pro-development' platform, rapidly delivered on manifesto promises to provide a new high school and recreation centre by exercising his right to impose impact fees on developers. By this stage in Whistler's evolution, he considered it 'safe' to do so. The resort had established itself as a player on the international tourism stage and its new-found attractiveness as an

⁷³ See Dave Williamson, 'What came first: the community or the resort?' pp. 22-27 in Gill and Hartman *Mountain Resort Development*.

⁷⁴ Between 1990 and 1996, Whistler was actually the fastest growing municipality in its class size in Canada.

investment opportunity meant concessions could be demanded of development companies without fear of driving them away.⁷⁵

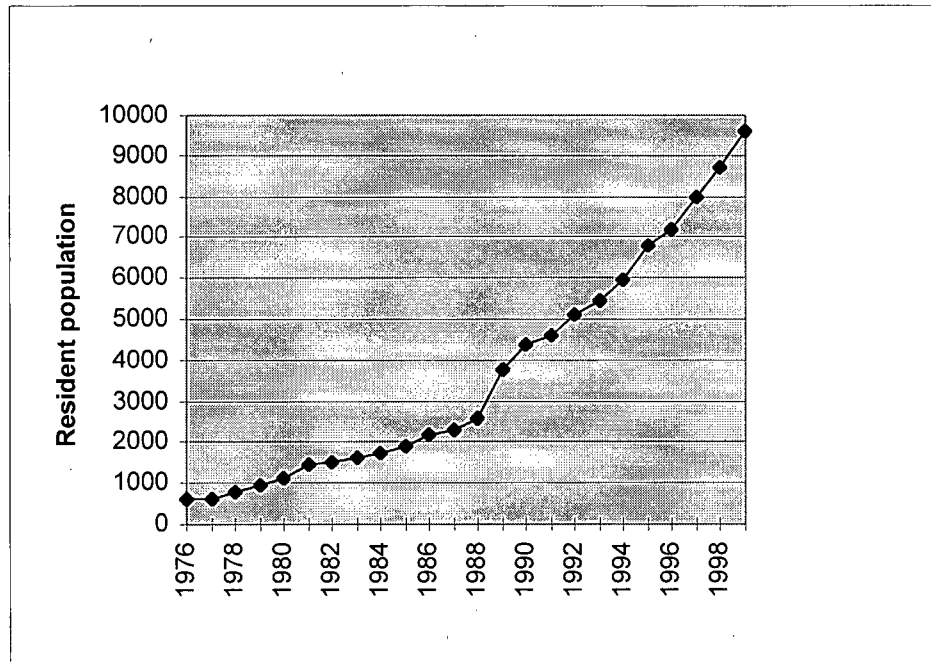


Figure 6: Whistler's resident population

(Source: RMOW, *Whistler Community and Resort Monitoring Report*, 1999, p. 11)

Through the extraction of so-called 'planning gain', Whistler has built up an inventory of community amenities which are enviable for a resort of its age and size.⁷⁶ Obtaining

⁷⁵ There are interesting parallels here with processes of property-led development in London and New York, as described by Susan Fairstein in *The City Builders* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1994). Fairstein argues that public officials in these cities in the 1980s "expanded the concept of exactions beyond its original meaning". Whereas developers had always been required to satisfy the infrastructure needs created by their undertakings (such as sewers and streets) or contribute to providing 'impact fees' to mitigate any externalities arising from the project, more recently planners have required them to "contribute to off-site improvements, including affordable housing and day-care centres, as a condition for approval of their proposals." (p. 109). In the face of considerable down-loading by federal and state/provincial governments, local planners rely on these concessions to acquire the community amenities they need. Fairstein points out that developers, anxious to get on with their projects, are frequently willing to supply such concessions if they will help to speed up otherwise laborious approvals processes.

amenities in this manner, however, was still predicated upon physical growth. In recent years, an increasingly 'development-weary' population of Whistlerites has begun to demand a greater commitment to growth management and sustainable community development. The changing sentiment was expressed in the November 1996 election, when, for the first time ever, a candidate campaigning on the back of a pro-community (as opposed to a pro-development) manifesto was chosen as mayor. He was accompanied in council chambers by what Gill describes as "three pro-community councillors, two neutral members and only one pro-growth advocate." The ideologically-split composition of council, as we shall go on see, would disrupt the general consensus about the benefits of growth that had characterised previous administrations. Developers in Whistler, warns Gill, "must now seek new coalitions with locals."

ii) The Whistler Resort Association

"The concept of a Resort Association arose from the need to put in place a vehicle which would make the transition from a group of buildings to a functioning, efficient resort capable of competing in world markets."⁷⁶

The other key administrative player in Whistler, alongside the municipality, is the Resort Association. Most destinations establish some form of tourism alliance because destination marketing exhibits the characteristics of a public good: it is impossible to exclude non-contributing stakeholders - so-called 'free riders' - from the benefits (i.e. extra business) arising from it. In the absence of co-operation between businesses, there

⁷⁶ See Caroline Hicks, 'The Whistler model,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, 3rd December 1999, pp. 14-15. Hicks argues that "it seems apparent that the success of the Whistler experience is becoming the equation for success all over North America, if not the world."

will thus be a tendency to under-supply the good, as each relies on the marketing efforts of others.⁷⁸ Moreover, if the overall message about a place remains uncoordinated by a central agency, advertising campaigns by individual product suppliers in a destination may have the effect of confusing, not stimulating the market.

As the category 'public good' implies, it is often left to the *state* to perform the co-ordinating role in destination marketing, through the formation of national, regional and local tourism organisations.⁷⁹ Businesses with similar products (such as hotels) or overlapping markets (such as ski lift operators and ski equipment shops) within a single destination may, however, form marketing alliances and co-operatives independent of a formal, state-run organisation.⁸⁰ The Whistler Resort Association - the body which enabled Whistler "not only to build the product, but to make it known throughout the world in a decade" - is relatively unique in that its form and structure lie somewhere between these two arrangements.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Hall, *Whistler - Development of a Resort*, p. 33.

⁷⁸ Here I follow Palmer and Bejou, 'Tourism destination and marketing alliances,' *Annals of Tourism Research* 22 (1999) pp. 616-629. Stakeholders are understood as being individual actors offering both complementary and competitive products but all with a vested interest in growing or sustaining tourism to the destination.

⁷⁹ Stephen Britton offers a discussion of why the state plays a critical role in co-ordinating the public good of tourism marketing in 'Tourism, capital and place,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9 (1991) pp. 451-478. See also Douglas Pearce, *Tourist Organisations* (Harlow: Longman, 1992) for detailed case studies of the structure and responsibilities of national tourism organisations.

⁸⁰ See Alan Jefferson and Leonard Lickorish, *Marketing Tourism: A Practical Guide. Second Edition.* (Harlow: Longman, 1991) pp. 193-201; and Victor T.C. Middleton, *Marketing in Travel and Tourism* (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 1988) pp. 97-107.

⁸¹ Mike Vance, 'Development history of Whistler resort,' pp. 71-85 in Adrian Chantler (ed.) *Whistler and Water: Building a City in the Mountains* (Richmond: Canadian Water Resources Association, 1993). The quote is from p. 77.

The WRA was established by an amendment to the Resort Municipality Act in 1979 upon the insistence of both the municipal government and the operators of Blackcomb Mountain, Aspen Ski Corporation.⁸² While founded as an independent, non-profit organisation, and hence not a 'state' institution as such, the WRA was granted the power - after lengthy debates in the provincial legislature - to levy a 'tax' in the form of a compulsory membership fee to all businesses located on resort lands, making it comparable to a fourth level of government (after federal, provincial and municipal).⁸³ The difference between the WRA and the municipality is that it is exclusively accountable to its members and not the Whistler tax-payer in general.⁸⁴

When it was established, the largest members of the resort association were the two ski mountains and the Whistler Village Land Co., each contributing just over a third of its total budget. The scale of their contributions was reflected in their being awarded positions on the board of the associations - one representative from each of the mountains and one from the WVLC (either the mayor or a councillor). The remaining four positions were elected by members. When WLC Developments took over the WVLC in 1982, this arrangement changed. Its representatives took over two seats on the board of directors (replacing one of the elected members) and were awarded the right to overrule the two mountain directors, thereby acquiring veto power over any of the board's decisions. This

⁸² Aspen Ski Corporation had seen how effective such an association could be at its resort at Snowmass, Colorado.

⁸³ According to Hall, "the method selected to make membership compulsory, and maintain security not offered by a municipal by-law, was to have it constituted through a British Columbia Act of Parliament." Hall, *Whistler - Development of a Resort*, p. 34. Compulsory membership of the WRA overcame the problem of 'free riders' and enabled the association to achieve economies of scale in marketing which would have been out of the range of individual businesses.

⁸⁴ Many of the association's members, as Whistler residents, are of course municipal taxpayers anyway.

move was, not surprisingly, resented by other directors who felt intimidated by the presence of the province and saw them as 'meddling' in what should be a locally-controlled organisation. To their relief, the winding up of WLC Developments in the late 1990s saw the end of the government's involvement with the WRA. The board, meanwhile, had grown to comprise twelve members: two representatives from the municipality (the mayor and municipal administrator), two from the combined Whistler/Blackcomb (the mountain operations manager and the director of finance), the president of the association, an ex-officio director from the Chamber of Commerce and six elected officials representing the resort's key business areas. Furthermore, in October 1999, the WRA reinvented itself as 'Tourism Whistler' - an identity change which I will address in a later chapter.

From lines to triangles: conceptualising Whistler's key players

With the province's role in Whistler Village's development complete, and the operations of Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains merged, the production of the resort now lies in the hands of three key players. Each player represents a different stakeholder group: IntraWest is primarily responsible to its shareholders but also to the staff and 'guests' of Whistler/Blackcomb; the Resort Municipality of Whistler first and foremostly represents the interests of Whistler's residential community; and Tourism Whistler serves the resort's business community. I illustrate these relations in figure 7 below.

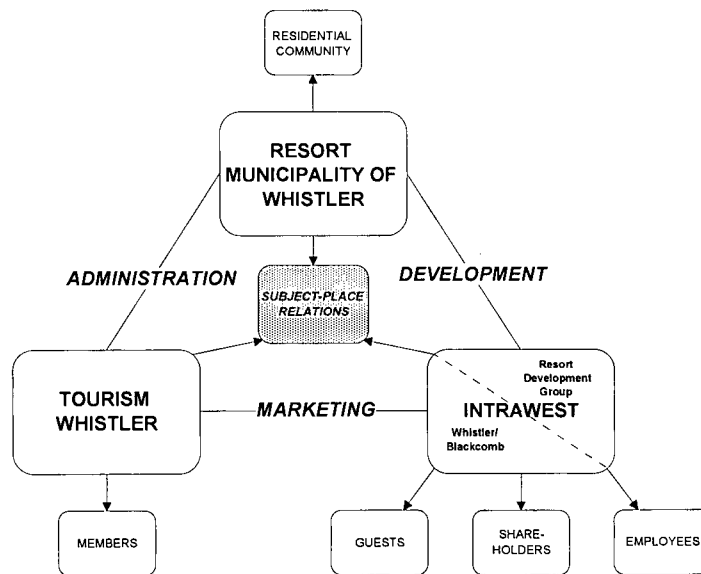


Figure 7: Key players in the production of Whistler resort

Although this diagram is useful as a conceptual tool, it nonetheless compartmentalises groups of actors and relationships between (and within) them which are by no means clear cut. Employees, shareholders and guests of Intrawest, for example, are also residents of Whistler, just as Intrawest is also a member of the Resort Association. Indeed, the effect of the mountain merger was to confuse an already complex situation, precipitating a period of readjustment and self-reflection for all three of the key players. Each organisation began to question their precise role within Whistler. Where did their jurisdiction end and that of the other players begin? How were they going to work with each other to represent their stakeholders equitably? And where, ultimately, did the balance of *power* in the resort lie? Answering these questions, however, was not only on the agendas of the three key players but was also what motivated me to begin investigating the contemporary production of Whistler resort.

Outline of the thesis

The principal aims of this study are two-fold. Thematically, I want to provide a detailed case-study of the 'corporatisation' process described by Rothman, in light of the massive consolidation in the North American ski industry. Taking the merger of Whistler and Blackcomb as my starting point, I show how Intrawest negotiates the resort's culture, institutions and democratic structures to achieve its corporate goals. Moreover, by demonstrating how the other key players in Whistler negotiate the corporation to achieve *theirs*, I interrogate Rothman's coding of "the corporation" as *a bad thing*, an intrinsically colonial force which robs communities of both their sense of place and the riches of their natural environments, acknowledging instead a relation of *interdependence* between the corporation and community. By studying a resort in a Canadian context, my research adds another dimension to a field of inquiry that, to date, has been dominated by the experience, and profoundly different regulatory environment, of the American West.

My second, more theoretical aim is to establish an agenda for research in tourism geography that moves away from the anonymous, static resort life-cycle models that have preoccupied researchers in the sub-discipline for over twenty years. I actually identify the *people* behind the institutions, whose visions shape the resort, and contextualise their work and goals within a complex and evolving political and corporate culture. This I achieve by adopting a methodology that is more akin to investigative journalism than standard social science. In particular, I draw on the research techniques of urban geographer Susan Fainstein. For her book, *The City Builders*, an exposition of property-

led regeneration in the London and New York of the 1980s, Fairstein utilises a plethora of resources, ranging from company reports to newspaper articles. Her primary source of information, however, is informal, unstructured interviews with property developers, city officials and leaders of community groups.⁸⁵ Armed with critical insights gleaned from these discussions, she recounts the stories of how and why several development proposals did - or indeed, did not - come to fruition, interrogating the motivations of the various actors involved in their construction and skilfully elucidating the relationships between them. Fairstein describes this approach as 'realist', her aim being not to "delineate a general process that occurs at all times and all places. Rather... to understand the mix of general and specific factors that create a city at a particular time, with the expectation that other cities displaying similar characteristics will share similar outcomes."⁸⁶

In a similar way, I draw upon local newspaper reports, annual reports, vision statements, marketing materials and over twenty interviews with key personnel in Whistler to reconstruct the 'stories' behind several projects that have involved the three key players in various arrangements since 1997. As the narrative progresses, it is my hope that the nature of the relationships between the players, together with their changing roles, will gradually unfold before the reader. I begin in chapter two with the corporate strategy of Intrawest. By telling the story of how the corporation 'envisioned' a new base village for the resort, I analyse the ways in which its eight-stage, "recreation and revenue" methodology actually gets configured in place. In particular, I focus on how Intrawest envisions its resort villages to appear 'local' whilst simultaneously programming all

⁸⁵ Susan Fairstein, *The City Builders*.

elements of their design so that they work to raise the corporate bottom line. In chapter three I switch to focus on the alternative vision and goals of an increasingly business-minded municipality. By tracing the evolution of two contentious 'deals' made with Intrawest by the municipality regarding development of resort lands, I elucidate not only the bargaining that characterises the 'partnership' between the them, but also the power struggles that occur *within* the ideologically-divided town council. Finally, in chapter four I turn to interrogate Intrawest's relationship with the Resort Association. I take the widely-felt sentiment in Whistler that a corporation as powerful and successful as Intrawest "doesn't need" the WRA as a trigger for an investigation into how the two organisations are in fact working in a 'strategic partnership' to overcome the seasonality associated with ski resorts, and to create an *exclusive*, four-season destination. The chapter and study concludes with the (failed) attempt by the three players to unite under a single external identity, in the form of a shared logo for the resort. I use the story to argue that, with a commitment to 'partnership' on the part of all three players, the boundaries of democratic representation in the resort are becoming increasingly blurred, with various stakeholders increasingly unclear as to exactly *who* is supposed to be acting on their behalf.

In telling the story of Whistler, I am acutely aware, just like Fainstein, that its setting is unique and the many characters and events that pepper it will not be reproduced in resorts elsewhere. Nevertheless, I believe the various sub-plots I uncover throughout my narrative will speak to more general issues facing mountain resorts across the continent,

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

particularly as they come under the control of large-scale corporations. Above all, I contend there is much we can *learn* from the experience of Whistler. For, as we shall see, not only is Whistler attempting to become a model of sustainable resort management, but it also perfectly illustrates the tensions and compromises created by a global tourism industry that treats places as products, communities as commodities and environments as experiences.

- 2 -

“Make the people of Whistler proud” *The corporate vision for Whistler Creek*

“An analysis of how the tourism production system markets and packages places and people is a lesson in the political economy of the social construction of ‘reality’ and social construction of place, whether from the point of view of visitors and host communities, tourism capital (and the ‘culture industry’) or the state.”⁸⁷

The merger of Blackcomb and Whistler Mountains in December 1996 finally paved the way for Intrawest to put their ‘Recreation and Revenue’ methodology to work on their long-time competitor. The eight stage process, outlined in their *Annual Report* (see figure 8 below), lies at the core of Intrawest’s corporate strategy and spells out in no uncertain terms to their shareholders how they intend to make money from their mountains. Stage one of the method, “enhancing the resort experience,” entails making a substantial investment in the mountain product. For Whistler Mountain, this involved \$35m worth of improvements to its lift infrastructure and ski terrain. Such large-scale, capital investment is not, however, what sets Intrawest apart from its competition.⁸⁸ To find the distinction, we have to look not at the mountain but to the valley; for it is here, at the mountain’s base, that Intrawest implements stage two of its method, the construction of an ‘animated’ village. Intrawest’s ‘animated’ villages are, in fact, the key cogs in its revenue-generating

⁸⁷ Britton, ‘Tourism, capital and place,’ p. 475.

⁸⁸ Indeed, Rothman argues that the forte of corporations in general was to “bring enormous amounts of capital to develop the programs their predecessors had begun.” *Devil’s Bargains*, p. 278.

machine - the very mechanisms permitting it to report growing profits at a time when competitors struggle to make ends meet.

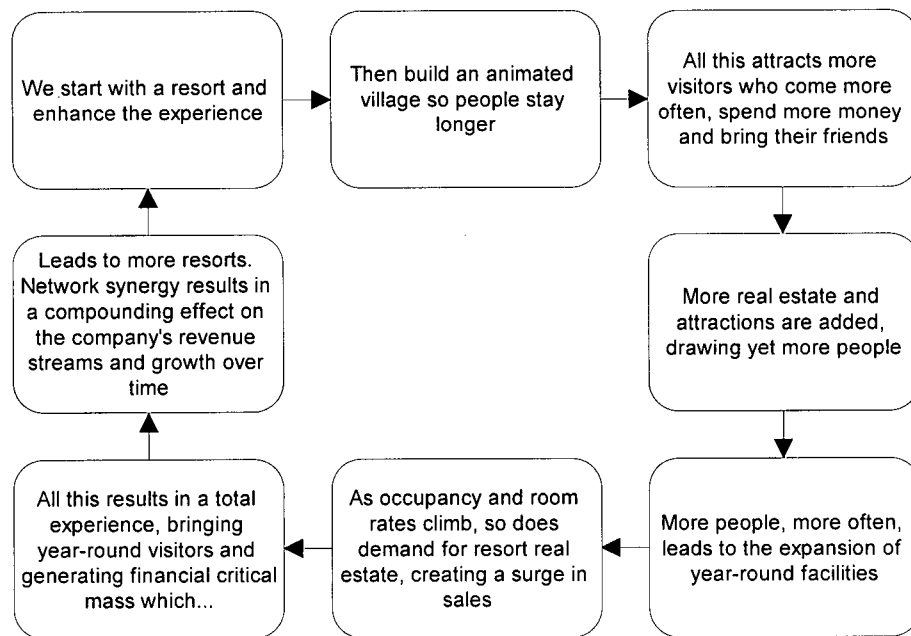


Figure 8: Intrawest's "Recreation and Revenue" methodology
(Source: Intrawest *Annual Report*, 1998, p. 23)

At the same time, therefore, as the diggers took to the slopes of Whistler Mountain to put in new lifts and cut more runs, Intrawest's resort development team embarked upon a much more conceptual mission: the 'envisioning' of a new village at the base of Whistler Mountain, on a site known as "Whistler Creek." In this chapter, I want to use the story of how Intrawest went about imagining this village as the basis for a critical engagement with the corporation's place-making strategy. My principle concern is to show how the profitability of Intrawest's villages can be attributed to a combination of calculated design, shrewd marketing and near-total control of visitor experience - traits which, not

surprisingly, have led to their being compared to Disney's theme parks. I go on to demonstrate, however, that in their attempt to 'animate' their villages, Intrawest do encourage local participation and are fully aware of the value of a co-operative resort community. I begin my story, however, with an explanation of how it was that Intrawest came to perfect the 'destination village' idea.

"It takes a village": cutting it in the North American ski business

"Ski resorts, you see, aren't just for skiers anymore."⁸⁹

Consolidation, as I outlined in my introduction, is one response being taken by the ski industry to a stagnant market for skiing. The benefits of such horizontal integration, however, are largely supply-related, working to minimise risks, cut costs and trigger economies of scale. These efficiencies still leave the ski conglomerates with the fundamental challenge of how to raise revenues at their individual resort properties. The principal strategy employed by the three largest corporations - ASC, VRI and Intrawest - has been to concentrate on capturing a greater share of the more lucrative 'destination' ski market: skiers who come to the resort on vacation. Unlike day-trippers, these visitors require a whole host of services (equipment rentals, accommodation, food, entertainment) which, when provided in-house by the corporation, add crucial value to the lift pass.⁹⁰ The 'big three' have also been attempting to diversify the range of products they offer at their resorts. Their hope is that, through offering numerous off-mountain activities to

⁸⁹ Hal Clifford 'It takes a village,' *Ski*, March/April 1995, p. 105.

⁹⁰ A 'destination' tourist is one that for whom a stay (longer than one night) at the resort is the primary reason for their trip. 'Destination' tourists will usually fly, not drive, to the resort.

distract the leisure visitor, their resorts will appeal as much to non-skiers as they do their snow-loving brethren. Intrawest's particular foresight has been to realise long before its competitors that a well-designed base village can help to achieve both. Its hotels, shops, bars, restaurants can occupy skiers' time and money when they are not on the slopes; and, if properly programmed to generate the right level of animation, entertainment and quirkiness, its streets can provide sufficient intrigue and distraction such that the village becomes a tourist *attraction* in its own right.

There is more, however, to Intrawest's villages than simply adding value to lift ticket sales. By providing lively and attractive venues for condominium development, they have succeeded in tapping into a market for vacation property that, unlike skiing, is rocketing. This surge in demand can be traced to a generation of baby boomers that, in 1995, began turning 50, the magic age which signals their peak earnings years and the onset of the period in which they are most likely to purchase a second-home.⁹¹ Houssian astutely anticipated this demographic trend when he began developing the base lands of his first resort acquisition, Blackcomb, in the late 1980s. Sales of his company's first ski-in, ski-out properties proved to be so lucrative that Houssian decided to make resort

⁹¹ See *Canadian Business*, 'Boomers in paradise,' 26th March 1999, pp. 68-74. Intrawest are not the only ones tapping into the affluence of the boomer generation. Cruise lines such as Carnival are increasing their capacity in anticipation of the demand generated by boomers entering their peak cruise-vacation years. Aixa Pascual, 'Carnival isn't ship shape these days,' *Businessweek*, 24th April 2000, pp. 94-96. Auliana Poon in *Tourism, Technology and Competitive Strategies* (Oxford: CAB International, 1993) talks of the importance of the baby boomer generation in adapting tourism products. She argues that the 'early baby boomers' - those who have raised their children - "will be experienced tourists for whom well-established destinations have few mysteries. This generation will not be easy to please, nor will they be satisfied with the old tourism products. A tremendous deal of imagination will have to be used in order to please this group of wealthy, discretionary spenders" (p. 138).

development Inrawest's sole focus; and by 1994, he had divested it of all non-resort assets.

Houssian's experience at Blackcomb taught him the synergy between vacation home ownership and resort operations. He realised that building a village full of condominium units which then sit empty for fifty weeks of the year would fail to generate the critical level of human 'animation' which is vital to sustaining the village's businesses and, in turn, makes the place an attractive destination for tourists. His solution has been to make all the beds in Inrawest's resort villages 'warm'.⁹² A warm bed means having the owners of village-centre condominiums put their units in a rental pool when they are not in residence themselves. Letting these units out ensures that the village's accommodations will have a constant supply of holiday-makers cycling through them - people who will also be spending money in the village's shops and restaurants and skiing, hiking and biking on the mountain. The 'warm bed' system appeals as much to the condo owners as it does Inrawest: they receive a 50% cut in the profits generated from renting out their property, with the remainder accruing to the property management company.⁹³ Indeed, according to one Whistler real estate agent, people are now purchasing property in Inrawest's villages "simply for its *investment* and not its use value."⁹⁴

⁹² The concept of 'warm' beds, although employed extensively by Inrawest, is not actually its idea. In fact, Houssian borrowed it from Whistler, where a municipal bylaw has always forced condominium owners to rent out their units when not occupied.

⁹³ Although Inrawest have, in the past, not involved themselves with the management of the condominiums they construct, they have just formed a lodging division to do just that. At their resort at Tremblant in Quebec they manage the majority of the rental suites in the base village.

⁹⁴ Interview with Drew Meredith, Whistler Real Estate Company, 26th January, 2000. The particular product that appeals to investors is the 'condo-hotel', whereby the property manager is a brand name hotel corporation such as Westin, Pan Pacific or Four Seasons. The arrangement is the same: individual owners purchase the suites in the hotel and can use them when they desire; at all other times, the suite is rented out

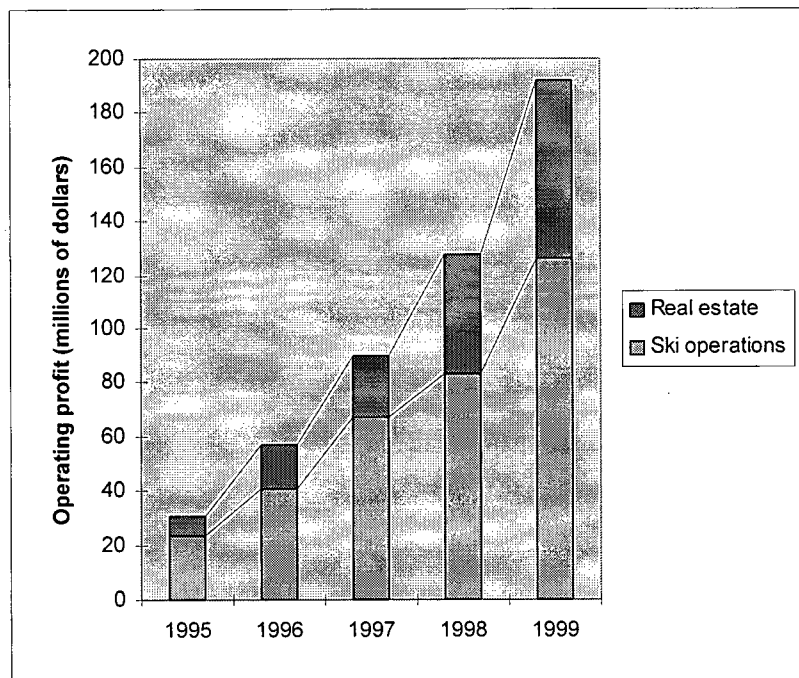


Figure 9: Intrawest's profits keep growing
(Source: Intrawest *Annual Report*, 1999; financial supplement)

The success of Intrawest's "village formula" is reflected in its balance sheet. In 1998, Intrawest netted \$137m on revenue of \$920m - a 53% increase on the previous year.⁹⁵ Profits from real estate sales - which now account for over 40% of its total revenue - helped fuel this growth (see figure 9).⁹⁶ By comparison, ASC lost \$32m on revenue of \$317m from its nine resorts across the US; and whilst Vail Resorts made \$86.1m on revenue of \$431.8m, this actually represented a decrease of 18% on 1997 takings. Not surprisingly, Intrawest's competitors have realised the potential of the village

as a hotel room. The product is attractive because brand hotels can command the highest room rates in the resort and provide the largest revenue opportunities to the unit owners. The hotel companies prefer this sort of arrangement to building their own properties in mountain resorts because of the highly seasonal nature of demand: annuated occupancy figures would probably not off-set the considerable fixed costs of constructing the hotel themselves.

⁹⁵ Leigh Gallagher, 'The Disney of Skiing,' *Forbes*, December 13th 1999, p.45.

⁹⁶ Intrawest, *Annual Report - 2nd quarter financial supplement*, 1999.

phenomenon. ASC, for example, has just commenced its own village building programme, having hired away an executive from Intrawest to oversee the task; Vail Resorts, meanwhile, is actually working in partnership with Intrawest to build a base village at their Keystone resort.⁹⁷ “Marrying mountain to village,” as one industry analyst put it, “has become an imperative for resort success.”⁹⁸

Although the name ‘Intrawest’ has now become synonymous with the ‘destination village’ concept, the corporation cannot take credit for coming up with the idea - what it has done is realise its economic potential in an evolving tourism and property investment climate. Intrawest actually owe their success to the vision and creativity of one individual, landscape designer Eldon Beck. It is only through an acquaintance with Beck’s *design* philosophy that we can begin to understand why Intrawest villages work as well as they do.

“The Eldon Effect”: designing destinations⁹⁹

Beck’s signature approach to ski resort development emerged out of a reaction to a mountain landscape in North America that was “suffering the loss of indigenous character, the spread of poorly conceived and scattered development and the proliferation

⁹⁷ This was more by coincidence than design. It was Keystone’s old owners, dog-food manufacturers Ralston Purina, who contracted Intrawest to construct a new base village for them at the resort. When Vail Resorts acquired Keystone from Ralston Purina in 1997, they inherited the project.

⁹⁸ Clifford, ‘It takes a village,’ p. 104,

⁹⁹ Much of the source material for this discussion of Eldon Beck’s design philosophy comes from a presentation Beck made in Whistler on 17th April 1997. The video recording of this presentation is available from planning department library at Municipal Hall in Whistler. Beck’s design principles are also

of eyesores and scars upon the landscape.”¹⁰⁰ The very idea of ‘planning’ and ‘good design’ in the continent’s mountain regions has, according to Beck, been an anathema. Buildings have tended to be functional not aesthetic, dispersed not clustered, and accessed by the motor car - not the pedestrian. As a result, North American mountain settlements lacked the *sense of place* that he believed was typical of their Alpine equivalents. Seeking inspiration, Beck turned to the great mountain villages of Zermatt, Kitzbühl, Garmisch and Interlaken. He admired their organicism, sense of identity, visual coherence and ‘rustic sophistication’, and resolved to replicate their ‘European-ness’ in the mountain landscapes of North America.¹⁰¹ The irony, of course, is that the ski experience for many Europeans actually takes place not in the historic valley towns of the Tyrol or Switzerland, but a new generation of high-altitude resorts constructed in the French Alps after the Second World War. These places, comprising monolithic modernist towers built with purely function, and not aesthetics, in mind, are anything but Beck’s village idyll. Beck’s notion of what is European - like that of the ski industry promoters that came before him - is thus highly, and deliberately, selective.¹⁰²

The first place in Canada to be the recipient of Beck’s ‘European-style’, mountain design philosophy was Whistler, BC. In the mid-1970s, the British Columbian provincial government chose Beck to come up with a design for a new village which they hoped

articulated in a book written one of his graduate students, Sherry Dorward, *Design for Mountain Communities*.

¹⁰⁰ Here I quote Dorward, p. 7. ‘Loss if indigenous character’ is a curious phrase to use; Dorward offers us no explanation of what that original ‘character’ was.

¹⁰¹ Here we are thus reminded of Coleman’s argument that ski resorts were purposefully deigned to appear European for a white, upper middle-class market. Coleman, ‘The unbearable whiteness of skiing.’

would become the bustling heart of a new, four-season resort. Master-planned from scratch, Whistler Village was necessarily an instant creation. First and foremost, Beck wanted it to appear as if it had *evolved* over time, as if it had a *history* and therefore 'indigenous character'. Its pedestrianised streets were not organised along a typical North American grid but were designed so that they twisted and turned in an illogical pattern - Beck intended for visitors to the village to feel a sense of discovery upon rounding the first corner and a sense of anticipation on rounding the next. Attendant to its organic feel, Beck wanted the village to blend into, not stand apart from its *natural* setting. He brought the mountains *into* the village's heart by ensuring that the height and density of its buildings never obstructed 'view corridors' of surrounding peaks (figure 10). Beck also accentuated or - where they did not exist - *simulated* 'natural' features such as mountain streams and boulders to alert visitor's senses to the village's geographical setting (figure 11). In addition, he ensured that the village had a strategically placed social space - the town square - where people could congregate and share moments together. Surrounding the square are raised terraces where people can sit, drink and simply gaze at passers-by (figure 12).

The most important aspect of design in any Beck village, Whistler included, is that it works to animate the space *year-round*. In winter, he maintains, a ski resort can "take care of itself"; the sign of a truly successful mountain village is one that is just as popular in the middle of August as it is in January. Accordingly, Beck takes such precise details

¹⁰² See Barker, 'Traditional landscape,' on the distinction between Eastern ('integrated') and Western ('organic') Alpine resorts. Also Douglas Pearce, *Tourist Development* pp. 67-77, for a discussion of the integrated development of the high altitude resort of La Grande Plagne in French Alps.

The Organic Village



Figure 10: Beck brings the mountains into to the heart of his villages by ensuring that 'views' of surrounding peaks are unobstructed by tall buildings. Here we see Blackcomb Mountain 'framed' by the buildings along the Whistler Village Stroll.



Figure 11: Where nature itself fails to provide the desired effect, Beck simply simulates it. In the most recent phase of Whistler Village, Beck 'manufactured' this mountain stream, replete with boulder-strewn banks, to give visitors a sense of being within the mountain landscape without ever having to leave the security and convenience of the village.

The Sociable Village



Figure 12: Beck makes sure to create social spaces, such as marketplaces and squares, at places 'where crossings happen'. The Village Square in Whistler is at the intersection of two streets on the Village Stroll. Note how the square is surrounded by raised terraces where people can congregate, eat, drink and watch the spectacle of passers-by.

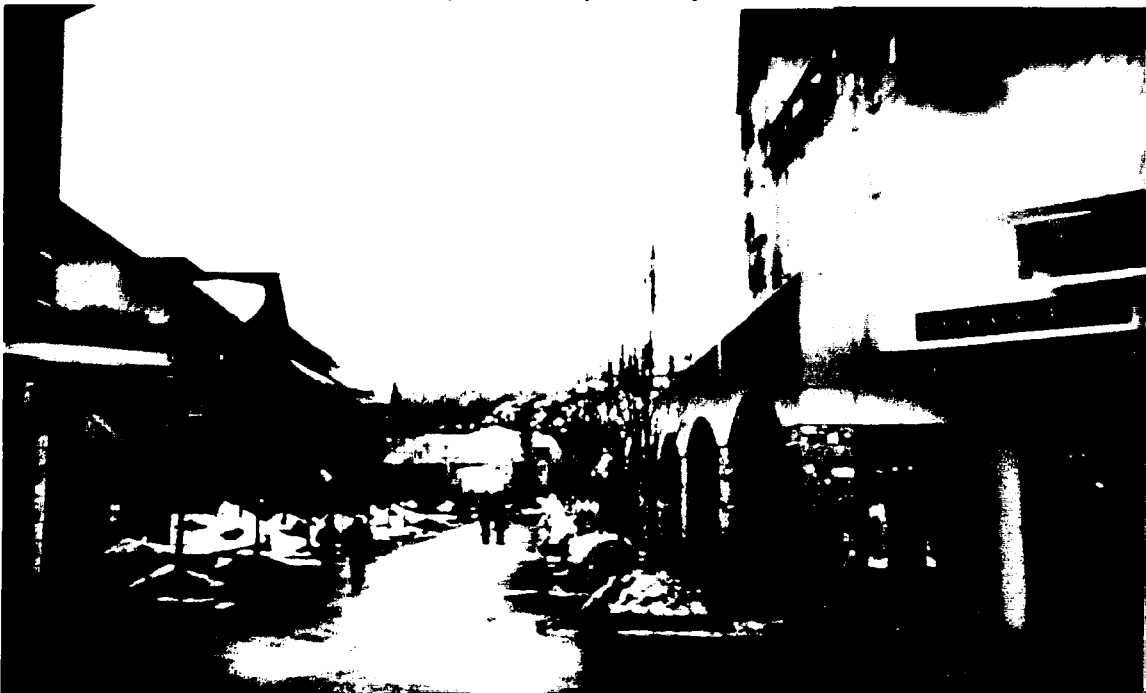


Figure 13: The Upper Village on Blackcomb. Despite being the location of Whistler's premier resort hotel, the Chateau Whistler, the village has failed to generate the critical massing in its streets as Beck's Whistler Village. The pedestrian walkway is "too wide and too linear" and there is no outside seating. The difference in the degree of human 'animation' is clearly visible by comparing the two photographs - which were taken within thirty minutes of each other.

as solar aspect into consideration, ensuring that his 'social spaces' do not sit permanently in shade. In Whistler, he also made provision for a grocery store and pharmacy to be placed in the heart of the village to encourage resort employees and local residents to make of use the village and contribute to its year-round 'animation'. Beck's Village at Whistler has received criticism from some sources for its soullessness and artificiality. The *Rough Guide to Canada*, for example, describes the Village as "a rather characterless and pastel-shaded conglomeration of hotels, restaurants [and] mountain-gear shops... very much a resort complex than an organic village."¹⁰³ This perhaps reflects its experimental nature: Beck, himself, admits that the architects of Whistler Village failed to create the 'mountain feel' he had intended. Nevertheless, his design certainly achieved what it set out to do: attract people to its streets throughout the year. Indeed, Whistler Village has been so successful that it is now a more popular attraction than the twin ski mountains themselves. In 1998, over a third of visitors to the resort came *just* to wander around its shops, eat in its restaurants and enjoy the free street entertainment.¹⁰⁴

Intrawest meets Eldon

It is through their involvement in Blackcomb Mountain that Intrawest became familiar with the work of Beck - and reaped the consequences of attempting to copy his village idea without his magic touch. The Upper Village on Blackcomb, which Intrawest began constructing shortly after their acquisition of Blackcomb in 1987, was the corporation's

¹⁰³ Tim Jepsen, Phil Lee and Tania Smith, *Rough Guide to Canada* (London: Rough Guides Ltd., 1998) p. 783.

¹⁰⁴ Intrawest *Annual Report* 1998, p. 10.

first foray into mountain village development. Despite attracting the prestigious Canadian Pacific Chateau Whistler Hotel to the site and making it the base area for two new, high-speed ski lifts, the Upper Village has consistently failed to generate the critical massing of visitors - and the much-desired level of 'animation' in its streets, shops and restaurants - that its Beck-designed neighbour so successfully achieves. Reasons for this lack of animation include a pedestrian thoroughfare that is too wide and too linear, shops that are set back from the street under shaded, covered walkways, buildings that are too tall and a lack of an entertainment venue such as a square or marketplace (figure 13). Doug Ogilvy, Vice-President for Resort Development at Intrawest, readily acknowledges their design for the Upper Village "doesn't work very well. I think we'd all admit it could have been done better."¹⁰⁵

The "Eldon Effect" can be no more aptly illustrated than by comparing Blackcomb's Upper Village with Intrawest's second village development at Tremblant, Quebec. Following their acquisition of the nearly bankrupt resort in 1991, which was attracting just 370,000 visitors a year, the company made sure to hire Beck as the resort's master-planner. With a wave of Beck's wand - and an infusion of a not insubstantial amount of capital - Tremblant's ageing collection of ski lodges and chalets was transformed overnight into a vibrant and bustling Quebecois-style village. The village's obvious appeal has been reflected in the accolades it has received and the number of people now flocking to visit it: since 1997, Tremblant has been voted number 1 ski resort in the East by *Ski* magazine, the premier industry commentator; and by 1998 the number of visitors

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Doug Ogilvy, Vice-President Intrawest Resort Development, Whistler, 9th February 2000.

had rocketed to 2 million. Their experience at Tremblant confirmed to Intrawest management that Beck was their number one asset. He now works exclusively for the corporation and has been involved with the designs of all their village developments - including Stratton in Vermont, Mountain Creek in New Jersey, Copper in Colorado and Mammoth in California.

Having found a design formula that works so well to their bottom line, Intrawest are naturally loathe to deviate too much from it. The problem, however, in adhering to a design blueprint, is that the distinctiveness and eccentricity of the European mountain villages that Beck sought to reproduce in North America is being lost (if, indeed, it was ever gained). Although their configuration may be different, Intrawest villages all have essentially the same set of features: "an outdoor public square and a meandering, cobblestone path that winds past the dozens of shops, hotel and restaurant store fronts - all of which adhere to uniform architectural inspiration."¹⁰⁶ Not surprisingly, Intrawest has come in for some harsh criticism about its "cookie-cutter" approach to resort development¹⁰⁷; and it is precisely this impression that Intrawest, as a multi-resort operator, is desperately seeking to avoid. Being, as they are, in the business of creating memorable *experiences*, the last thing they desire is for their guests not to notice, nor even remember, what makes one mountain village different from another.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Gallagher, 'The Disney of skiing,' p. 45.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Ken Castle, 'The new mountain moguls,' pp. 86-95; also Clifford, 'It takes a village,' p. 105.

¹⁰⁸ Harvard Business School marketing gurus, B. Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore, argue that we now inhabit an 'experience economy', in which, to succeed, companies must "make memories, not goods and create the stage for generating economic value, not deliver service." B. Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Cambridge: HBS Press, 1999), p. 86. Intrawest have swallowed this philosophy

Accordingly, Beck and his Intrawest colleagues attempt to incorporate as much "local flavour" and cultural meaning into their villages as possible.¹⁰⁹ The way they achieve this is to embark upon what they call 'envisioning' prior to engaging upon any new construction project. Defined as "part art and part science," envisioning is, according to the corporation, "equivalent to the writing of a financial plan - except the currency is ideas instead of dollars."¹¹⁰ The aim is to construct a 'shared vision' - articulated in a document called a *Vision Statement* - which describes in words and pictures how the resort will look, feel and function. The vision is 'shared' because representatives from the community and municipal government are invited to participate in brainstorming workshops with the Intrawest 'visioneers'. The presence of local people helps to provide the narratives along which the subsequent development can be 'scripted' - both through its built form (the theming of architecture and design features) and in the marketing texts that are used to sell it. It is in the 'scripting' that the *business* expertise of the 'visioneers' begins to shine through; for their task - and skill - is to imagine a place which, whilst *appearing* individual and embodying a 'sense of place', remains firmly within the methodology of the corporate money-making machine.¹¹¹

whole, regarding their villages as precisely that: the 'stages' upon which experiences, and hence revenue, are generated.

¹⁰⁹ Beck argues that Tremblant, for example, was a dramatic improvement upon Whistler because of its attention to local building styles.

¹¹⁰ *Whistler Creek Vision Statement*, p. 1.

¹¹¹ I owe the concept of 'manufactured individualism' to Hal Rothman, as outlined in *Devil's Bargains*, p. 334. Referring to ski resorts in the American West, Rothman argues that "resort communities possessed innumerable restaurants and shops designed to look fashionable and locally owned - in a word unique. Close inspection revealed that many were part of chains that followed a formula but fashioned their enterprise as discrete."

Did someone say "Disney"?

"Visioneers"¹¹²? Animation? Themed architecture? Faked nature? Manufactured identity? If, by now, you have been struck by resonances between the Intrawest village and the Disney theme park, you would not be alone: a recent *Forbes* article coined Intrawest "The Disney of Skiing."¹¹³ Indeed, Beck's creation of European-style villages on the corporation's behalf would serve only to strengthen the claims of European cultural critics that the entire North American continent is one big theme park. Pontificating about Disney World, for example, Jean Baudrillard proclaims that the place is "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe the rest is real."¹¹⁴ Umberto Eco would agree that the Intrawest village is in all senses a 'hyper-real' construction: in its attempt to reproduce the stereotypical European mountain village so accurately, it becomes the total fake.¹¹⁵ Adopting a similar line, sociologist Dean MacCannell calls contemporary tourist spaces in general 'empty meeting grounds' which offer only artificial experiences to the visitor - and would no doubt see Beck's villages as perfect examples of 'staged authenticity'.¹¹⁶

¹¹² This term sounds uncannily similar to Disney's 'imagineers', the name Disney gives to the creative team behind its theme parks and movies. For a discussion of imagineering see Stephen Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

¹¹³ Gallagher, 'The Disney of Skiing,' p. 45. Because of their expanding network of resorts and cookie-cutter approach to village design, Intrawest have also been called 'The McDonalds of North American skiing' by the *Vancouver Sun*: 'Intrawest adds Quebec ski hill to chain,' March 26th 1997, p. D5. Sharon Zukin, in *Landscapes of Power* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991) argues that ski resorts in North America more generally "combine the perennial alpine resort architecture with entertainment facilities borrowed from Disneyland" (p. 231).

¹¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, 'Hyperreal America,' *Economy and Society* 22 (1993) pp. 245-252.

¹¹⁵ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper-reality* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

¹¹⁶ Dean MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Whether or not we accept the culturally elitist and somewhat essentialising arguments of these critics, Intrawest themselves make no bones about the fact that they are inspired by and continue to learn from the Disney Corporation - which is not surprising given that they view "Club Med, Disneyland, cruise lines and Las Vegas", not other ski resorts, as their primary competitors.¹¹⁷ As Nathan Greene, Director of Finance and Acquisitions for Intrawest told me:

"Disney does a great job of creating an atmosphere and a magic and an escape... The level of service they provide when you are at Disneyland is unbelievable. They provide everything once you are there - food, retail... That's the kind of thing we like to learn from them."

Indeed, it is perhaps in their desire to "providing everything" for their "guests" - and not necessarily in their theme-park aesthetic or inauthenticity - that Intrawest villages *most* resemble Disney's theme parks. Geographer Alexander Wilson has argued that "the organising principle of the Disney universe is control"¹¹⁸; and it is within this domain of control that Intrawest's villages differ in one crucial respect from the Beck original at Whistler. Although master-planned, Whistler Village was *not* subsequently developed and managed by a *single* corporation. Land parcels in the village were deliberately kept small to enable local people - predominantly from Whistler and Vancouver - to participate in development¹¹⁹; retail space was occupied by independent businesses, run

¹¹⁷ Hugh Smythe, Vice-President of Resort Operations for Intrawest, cited in Michael McCullough, 'Instant karma,' *BC Business*, October 1997; pp 22-30. The quote is on p. 30.

¹¹⁸ Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*, p. 182. Wilson argues that the map of Disney World, for example, promises a choice of tours and routes but the design of the park actually decreases the many possibilities to "a single prescribed experience."

¹¹⁹ Hall, *Whistler - Development of a Resort*, p. 54. Hall states that "virtually all development at Whistler has been undertaken by local (defined as Whistler and Vancouver) residents. This continuing support of Whistler by local developers was a critical ingredient to its success. Although potential developers in other

by local entrepreneurs not 'faux' chains; and the village was maintained and 'animated' by the joint efforts of the municipality and resort association. By contrast, in the Intrawest village, the corporation controls as much of the experience as possible - the lodging, the retail, the food and beverage and events - to ensure that people 'perform' according to expectations and do not deviate from the corporate script.¹²⁰ Everything is 'stage managed' in order that people keep consuming round-the-clock, and hence are continually making deposits into the corporate account. Like Disney World, the Intrawest village is the ultimate commodified - some might say 'postmodern' - landscape, a landscape built in the image of the markets that *consume* it.¹²¹

Methodologies, markets and meanings: envisioning a new Whistler Creek

Intrawest's new village at the base of Whistler Mountain was seen as an opportunity for the corporation to rectify mistakes made at the Upper Village, and put in place a

parts of the country were invited to bid, it was individuals with a knowledge of Whistler and a particular interest in the area that were prepared to build."

¹²⁰ For an interesting if methodologically dubious discussion of how human agents can actually subvert the control of Disney in their theme parks see Stacey Warren, 'Popular cultural practices in the "postmodern city,"' *Urban Geography* 17 (1996) pp. 545-567.

¹²¹ The term 'postmodern' is used in so many different ways by different people that it has no tangible meaning to speak of. Most of the literature about postmodern landscapes has concerned the changing aesthetics and uses of the city, particularly downtown urban areas. For a broad overview of how the postmodern city has been understood see John Hannigan 'Trend Report [ii] The postmodern city: a new urbanisation?' *Current Sociology* 43 (1995), pp. 152-215. See also Hannigan, *Fantasy City* (London, Routledge, 1998) regarding the rise of a fantasy urban landscape based around eclectic consumption. Stacey Warren offer a discussion of the theme park metaphor, which is often used to make sense of the postmodern city, in *The City as Theme Park and the Theme Park as City: Amusement Space, Urban Form and Cultural Change*, Unpublished PhD Thesis (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1993). David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 66-99, offers a strictly materialist view of postmodernism, regarding it as the "cultural clothing of flexible accumulation". With regard to urban space, he interprets 'postmodern' culture as evidencing itself in the city's playful architecture and 'festival' landscapes, which through their sense of spectacle serve to mask the persistence of social problems caused by structural economic change.

development that would sustain their flagship resort for years to come. Furthermore, construction of a third 'village' for Whistler would see Intrawest create a uniquely *European* skiing experience at Whistler/Blackcomb - defined as the ability to ski between different mountain villages on a single lift network.¹²² It is precisely the fact, however, that there are already two existing 'villages' within the resort area - the original Whistler Village and Blackcomb's Upper Village - that makes the development context somewhat different from the other resorts to which Intrawest has applied their formula. The challenge for the Intrawest team was thus to position the new village so that its product mix and appeal would not compete with, but would rather *complement* those of Whistler's other villages. Understanding how, through their envisioning process, this market positioning was achieved requires familiarity with the site of the new village, Whistler Creek.

Flares, free-spirits and that forgotten feeling: a history of the Creek¹²³

"Creekside is still the place to find the oldest, staunchest, most faithful and maniacal lovers of Whistler - as well as its most knowledgeable and expert followers. It is also, as fortune would have it, the last remaining area in Whistler that is available for development. Whistler's first frontier is also her last. The neighbourhood is the past and future heart of Whistler. A place where snow-covered mountains awaken the primitive life in us, and where those who share our outrageous passions welcome us home."¹²⁴

¹²² North American ski resorts have typically taken the form of a single mountain with a single base area - with all runs leading to that base; in Alpine resorts, it is more common for different villages to have their ski lift networks inter-linked - such that it is possible to start the day at one place and end at another. This is the effect Vail Resorts is attempting to achieve by purchasing the adjacent ski areas of Breckenridge and Beaver Creek and combining their lift systems on a joint ticket.

¹²³ This history is reconstructed from personal interviews with long-term Whistler residents, in conjunction with information printed in McCullough, 'Instant Karma,' p. 24; Anne McMahon, *The Whistler Story* (Hazeldine Press Limited, 1980); and Hall, *Whistler - Development of a Resort*.

¹²⁴ *Whistler Creek Vision Statement*, p. 4.

Most tourists bound for Whistler from the international airport in Vancouver whisk past the gravel parking lot and ramshackle collection of ski cabins and condos that collectively form Whistler Creek. Few will realise - or even care - that this rather sorry site was the place where skiing on Whistler Mountain actually began. It was in the late 1950s that Franz Wilhelmsen, a Norwegian-born Vancouver skier, recognised the irony of having to travel thousands of miles to the Alps in order to ski each winter when he had acres of glacier-covered peaks on his doorstep - the Coast Mountain range of British Columbia. Resolved that the perfect ski mountain existed *somewhere* within it, Wilhelmsen donned his back-country skis and began scouting it out. He finally found what he was looking for near the small fishing and logging community of Alta Lake, 120 km north of Vancouver. London Mountain, as it was then known, offered over a mile of vertical drop - unprecedented for a North American ski hill - and 360 degrees of exposure; it was just like the ski areas he knew and loved in the Alps. Above all, the mountain was *accessible*, just a few hundred yards west of the railway line and (what at the time was) a dirt track to Vancouver. His dream finally in sight, Wilhelmsen established the Garibaldi Lift Company and set about raising enough capital to string a gondola up the mountain's west-side. By 1964 he had sufficient funds behind him to commence construction and, with the addition of a chairlift, two t-bars and a mountain-top restaurant, the ski area was opened for business on February 15th, 1966.

The development of the ski mountain, which was been renamed 'Whistler' after the noisy marmots that inhabited it, was supported from the outset by the provincial government, which paid to upgrade the dirt track from Vancouver into a paved, two-lane highway.

The effect was reduce journey times from the city to just two hours, making Whistler accessible to crowds of weekenders from the city. Whistler also became home to a small but growing contingent of 'ski hippies' - enthusiasts who came like pilgrims to experience the exceptional skiing but never developed the will to leave. The mountain, together with Dusty's, the infamous pub at its base, became a microcosm of the free-wheeling, anything-goes culture that defined the era (see figures 14 and 15). What the place lacked in appearance and sophistication, it made up for in atmosphere. "Believe me," one long-term resident I spoke to told me "in 1971 Whistler Creek was it. That was where everybody congregated. It was pretty rough and tumble."¹²⁵ "Creekside," enthused another, had "one hell of an attitude."¹²⁶

The spiritual and physical evolution of Whistler Creek, however, was rudely curtailed in 1974 when the provincial government - alarmed at the sprawling and unregulated development that was occurring around the gondola's base - slammed a land freeze on the valley and, upon the advice of Al Raine, began investigating the possibility of developing a planned base village for both Whistler Mountain and the yet-to-be developed Blackcomb. A suitable site was found in the form of a garbage dump 3 km to the north of the existing gondola base, and construction of the first two phases of Eldon Beck's village design commenced in 1980. All provincial and municipal resources and energy were directed towards the Village, which by the end of the year was receiving its

¹²⁵ Interview with Drew Meredith, 26th January 2000.

¹²⁶ Interview with Gord McKeever, 7th March 2000.

Creekside's-a-Changing

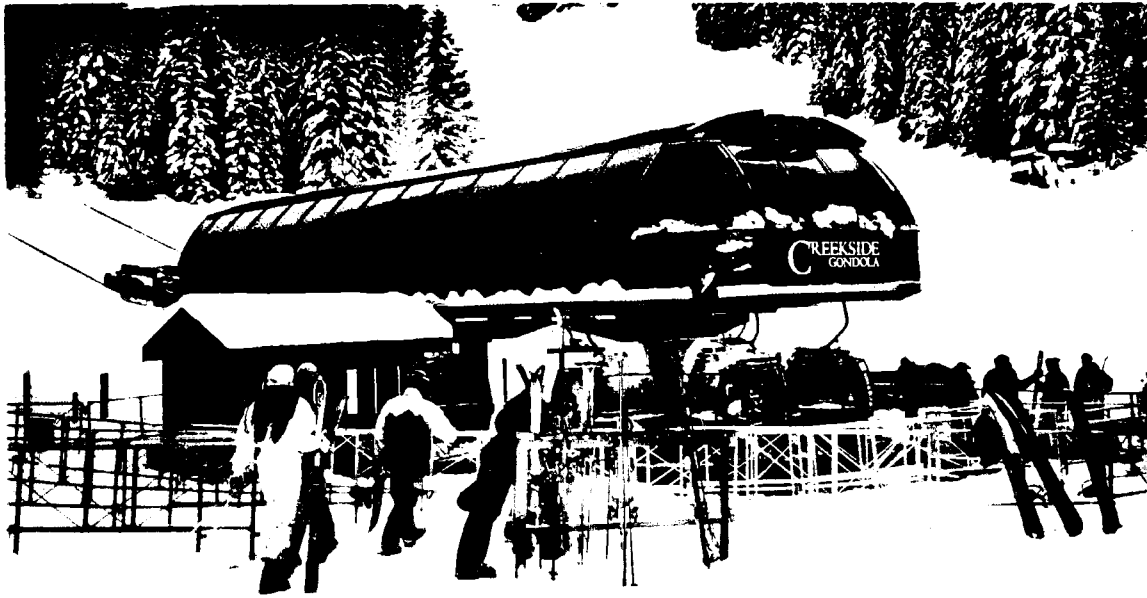


Figure 14: The Creekside gondola, where skiing on Whistler began. "I think from day 1, everyone has wanted the Creek to be upgraded," said one long-time resident. "It's a fabulous mountain, a great access point... So it makes sense to invest in it. They've already gone for a high-speed, detachable 6-person gondola and no-one's riding it."



Figure 15: Dusty's pub, the definition of Creekside apres-ski, with the Creekside parking lot in front. "Dusty's is nice," another resident told me, "but even after they fixed the roof three times it still leaks." Dusty's was demolished in April 2000 to make way for Intrawest's new village development.

first visitors. When the new gondola connecting the Village to Whistler Mountain's north-side opened one year later, the glory days of Whistler Creek were over.

Starved of investment and robbed of a unique purpose, Whistler Creek failed to evolve from local ski base to tourism destination.¹²⁷ The tumble-down, prefabricated huts that constituted the day lodge and Dusty's pub, together with the Husky gas station that marked the entrance to the gondola's parking lot off Highway 99, provided little in the way of an 'experience' for tourists. Furthermore, the Creekside area could boast few of the amenities - hotels, restaurants and shops - which precede incorporation into the tourist production system. For 25 years, the area was - quite literally - off the tourist map. Despite this invisibility, Creekside, did not become totally obsolete. Precisely because it lacked the crowds and commercialism of the Village, it appealed to locals and day-tripping Vancouverites as a base from which they could ski the mountains. Furthermore, by parking at Creekside, Vancouverites could be on the slopes up to half an hour sooner than if they travelled the extra 3 km to the village. Paul Burrows, a long-term Whistler resident and skier, captured the Creek's attraction: "people like to be able to conveniently park and get on the lift and not fuss around with having to pay for this and that. Creekside is the last bastion of that at Whistler."¹²⁸

¹²⁷ To employ Eric Cohen's semiotic typology of tourist attractions, whereas the new Village was *contrived* for tourists with *markers* in place to signify it as a sight, the Creek has remained *natural* - not in the sense of it being a pristine environment! - but in Cohen's sense of there having been no "intervention physical or symbolic, to make [it] more appealing, accessible or even more easily noticed by tourists." Cohen, 'Contemporary tourism - trends and challenges' pp. 12-29 in Richard Butler and David Pearce (eds.) *Change in tourism: people, places and processes* (London: Routledge, 1995). The quote is from p. 15.

¹²⁸ Interview with Paul Burrows, *Whistler Question* columnist, 11th January 2000.

Just as Creekside, as a ski base, serves mainly a local and Vancouver market, as a real estate inventory the area remained

“the exclusive preserve of the Vancouver people. I mean, all that old crappy real estate on the other side of the road is owned by an amazing cross-section of wealthy Vancouverites that are real old-time families. You know, the guy coming across the highway in his 20 year old faded Bogner ski suit... it's just that kind of crowd.”¹²⁹

Although not permanent Whistler residents - not ‘locals’ in the true sense of the word - these Vancouverites, who have been weekendng at their Whistler cabins since Day 1, would consider themselves as such; they pay taxes in Whistler and vote in municipal elections. For them, together with the ‘pioneers’ who came to Whistler in the 60s and 70s and never left, Creekside has an emotional attachment over and above its use value or indeed appearance. The site represents a collection of memories, a time when pleasure were more simple and the scale of the resort more intimate. Whereas Beck’s Village has become global in orientation - ‘theirs’ - Creekside has always been more local - ‘ours’. “Creekside” said another long time Whistler resident, “is close to a lot of people’s hearts. In my first year here, that’s all there was.”

From hippies to hotels: capitalising on the Creek

Although harbouring a strong affection for the Creek, few in Whistler romanticise it. They recognise that the area is desperately in need of regeneration. “I have not heard one

¹²⁹ Interview with Drew Meredith, 26th January 2000.

person say 'I want to keep Creekside the same'," one resident told me.¹³⁰ Gord McKeever, a Creekside businessman who has been campaigning for years for investment in the area, similarly joked that "Creekside has potholes older than the average age of the Whistler resident... What we have is twenty years of taxes and a Third World neighbourhood." He added that, as the gateway to the resort, Creekside is nothing short of an eyesore - an embarrassment for a destination with pretensions to be 'world-class'. As long ago as 1980, ski journalists were complaining of the "exposed sewage lines, moguled parking lots, rainbow-coloured roofs and buildings hanging off ungainly perches [which] hit the eye" on arrival in Whistler from Vancouver.¹³¹

Whistler Mountain Corporation, the previous owners of the site, had made several applications to redevelop the base area with a new day lodge, condominiums and hotels.¹³² Their strength, however - unlike Intrawest's - was in mountain operations and not real estate; consequently - and to the constant frustration of both the municipality and Creekside businesses - they lacked both the expertise and capital to follow their proposals through. The announcement by Intrawest immediately after the merger that they were to build one of their signature villages at the Creek was thus met with a sigh of relief by almost everyone in Whistler: at last *something* was going to be done with the place. Nevertheless, people harboured doubts as to what the corporate giant would make of the Creek. As one resident put it:

¹³⁰ Interview with Dave Williamson, 11th January 2000.

¹³¹ Nelson, 'Blackcomb: giant on a fast track,' p. 205.

¹³² They had been awarded the development rights to do so under the provincial 'land for lifts' policy, which sought to encourage ski lift operators to invest in BC resorts by offering them rights to develop on the mountain's base lands.

“The Creekside Area has long been in need of development - the area is currently an eyesore and does not purvey the image that Whistler is trying to achieve as a world class resort. Notwithstanding this, the Creekside has developed a real sense of community and culture and it's important that the development does not sterilise this (as the village has).”¹³³

Would a redeveloped Creekside “take on new meanings by being associated or assimilated into a tourist product?”¹³⁴ Would it come to “mirror the values not of the place but those of the travelling public?”¹³⁵ Tentative answers to these questions can be gleaned from an analysis of the way the Creek has been envisioned by Beck and his team of ‘visioneers’.

Scripting space: the Intrawest envisioning process

“The process of scripting space, both physically and psychically, defines tourist towns and resorts... like commercial space, tourist space is specially scripted to keep visitors at the centre of the picture while simultaneously cloaking, manipulating and deceiving them into believing the experience is the local's life, reality and view of the world.”¹³⁶

While construction of the new Creekside village is barely underway, the future feel and function of the place has been more or less decided with the completion of Intrawest's ‘envisioning’. The process began in summer of 1997 and took place entirely in Whistler. It is Intrawest company policy that all decisions pertaining to a resort's development be taken by representatives that live and work in the resort, not by ‘faceless bureaucrats’

¹³³ Comment made by resident of Whistler Cay subdivision at a RMOW Open House about Intrawest's proposed development. It is interesting how the Village is regarded here as ‘sterile’ - hardly an adjective Beck would have liked to have heard used.

¹³⁴ Britton ‘Tourism, capital and place,’ p. 464.

¹³⁵ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, p. 16.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

working out of company headquarters.¹³⁷ Alongside Eldon Beck and the Intrawest 'visioneers', local figures of authority such as the mayor, councillors, the municipal administrator, the head of planning and local business leaders were invited to participate in some of the sessions. This was not an entirely innocent move by Intrawest: envisioning is a key mechanism through which key individuals with power and influence in the locality are welcomed 'on-board' with the project and are granted a *sense* of ownership at an early stage. "Having the opportunity to participate at the beginning of the envisioning process was great," enthused Jim Godfrey, the municipal administrator. Intrawest also made sure that "Whistler Mountain people" - people who had worked for or skied on the mountain and could consequently articulate the site's culture and heritage - were present at the sessions. The corporation believes that fostering of "good community relations" - which is another goal of the envisioning process - is vital to its overall success as a business: "if you don't," Nathan Green, Director of Finance and Acquisitions for Intrawest told me, "you'll never get approval for anything and you'll create an atmosphere that is just horrible."

The end result of envisioning - which, for Whistler Creek, lasted over two years - is a *Vision Statement*, the document which serves, quite literally, to 'script' the new village.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Although, as has been noted, the situation in Whistler is somewhat different to Intrawest's other properties given the residence of its Board members in the resort and the length of its involvement with Blackcomb. Intrawest is actually a highly devolved corporation. There are only about 80 staff members working at its HQ in Vancouver in areas such as group financing, technology, strategy and network marketing. All other staff work in the company's resorts themselves.

¹³⁸ Rothman argues that tourist space itself comprises a script which requires 'performers', in the shape of tourists, to make it real: in the absence of their consumption activity, the space is without purpose, without meaning. Speaking of Vail, Rothman argues it is "not really a community" - not a *lived* place, with a real history, "but a script, a collection of buildings designed for the comfort of transient visitors." Rothman's use of 'scripting' here is quite clearly metaphorical, not literal.

Although primarily intended to act as a 'benchmark' for the reference of all the agencies and individuals (the architects, engineers, municipal planners and constructors) involved in the village's development, the *Statement* also serves a more pecuniary purpose; as company practice is not to build real estate until it has been sold, it functions as an important piece of marketing, a kind of sales brochure, for the corporation. Potential owners of an Intrawest mountain home are not buying into a place per se, but the idea of one - somewhere that exists only as words and images on a page.

The Vision

So what sort of place *have* the visioneers imagined for Whistler Creek? Figure 16 shows an artist's impression of how the village will look. If we are to believe the Intrawest marketing machine, the inspiration came from an unsolicited letter from Anthony Zebrowski Rubin, the 14-year old grandson of one of Whistler's "founding fathers".

Anthony wrote:

"You are not just building a village but Whistler's last village. So make it great. Make it historic. Make the people of Whistler proud."¹³⁹

Beck and his team clearly took Rubin's words to heart to imagine a place which oozes history and character from every turf-roofed bus stop and hand-picked cobblestone:

"Over the next 5 years the spirit of 'Early Whistler' will re-emerge around both sides of Highway 99 as a smaller, distinct counterpoint to the 'Big Village' further on down the road."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ *Whistler Creek Vision Statement*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 6.

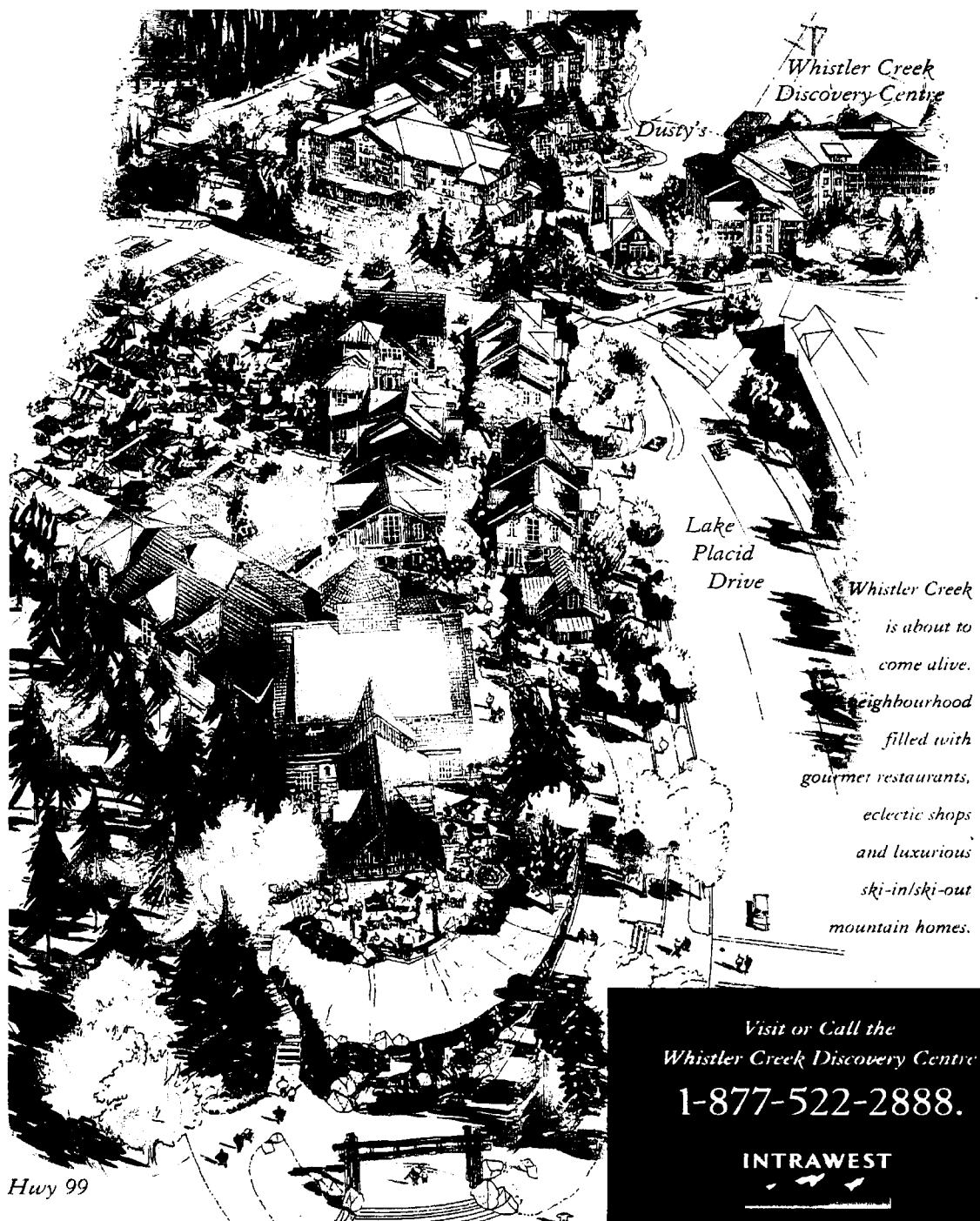


Figure 16: Artist's impression of how the Whistler Creek Village will look when completed. The pedestrian stroll parallel to Lake Placid Drive is 'Franz's Trail', where most of the shops will be located. To the right of Franz's Trail is the parking-lot-come-festival-marketplace.

The renaissance of the Creek, they hope, will serve to rekindle

“an old flame for those who fell in love with Whistler in the 60s and 70s, and for those who today display the same energy, independence and spirit of that all out, freewheeling, embarrassingly self-assertive era.”¹⁴¹

Much of this rekindling will take place in a reconstructed Dusty's pub, a 'Whistler original' which is to be the beneficiary of an Intrawest make-over, replete with 'quirky resort memorabilia' covering its barn-like walls and a bright yellow Flower Power VW van as the centrepiece of one of its five bars.¹⁴² Less a resort than a complete neighbourhood, with Dusty's as its surrogate community hall, Whistler Creek will become *the* place where locals and resort staff 'hang out and play'. Moreover, it will be where the serious skiers and snowboarders congregate, the haunt of the *real* sportsmen and women who “eschew the conspicuous consumption of the Town Centre” and want an unpretentious, down-to-earth, hard-core experience.

With regards Whistler Creek's design, all the Eldon 'trademarks' are present and correct.

The architecture will

“provide an alternative to the urbanised Big Village down the road... The buildings of *Whistler Creek* are part chalet, part cottage, part early Whistler fishing lodge and part prospector's cabin - but all with a twist.”¹⁴³

Similarly there will be an

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 6.

¹⁴² Just in case people had forgotten what makes Dusty's a 'Whistler original', Beck and his team have been happy to 'visioneer' a few traditions on their behalf: “the deep-dish blueberry cobbler” claims the Vision “is legendary”; *ibid.* p. 17. The new Dusty's is a prime example of the 'entertainment retail' which Intrawest encourages in its villages, turning necessities such as dining into higher-valued - and hence higher-priced - experiences. See Hannigan, 'Fantasy City,' pp. 81-101, for a discussion of so-called 'shoppertainment'.

“emphasis is on bringing Nature back to *Whistler Creek*. Big trees, big rocks and big possibilities... At *Whistler Creek* there will be a visible proximity to nature that is not present in the Town Centre.”¹⁴⁴

The requisite social space, however, will this time be neither a village square nor a marketplace but nothing else but than the gondola parking lot. “Anyone who thinks that a parking lot is just for parking cars,” chastises the Vision

“should wake up and smell the cotton candy... the parking lot takes its place as a true attraction, icon and ‘big idea’ at the heart of *Whistler Creek*...”

Suggested uses for this new venue range from a fairground, to playground, farmer’s market, trade show and even a racecourse. The possibilities for this newly configured space of spectacle, it seems, are endless.¹⁴⁵

What is striking throughout the Vision are the attempts made to define the Creek in opposition to Beck’s original Whistler Village “down the road”: indeed, the coding of Whistler Village (the ‘Town Centre’) is clearly *negative*. It is portrayed as urban, brash and characterless compared to a new Creek which is natural, neighbourly and quirky.¹⁴⁶ Moreover - and critically - whereas the Village is portrayed as somewhere which, by becoming geared to tourists and out-growing its design has lost its intimacy and soul, the

¹⁴³ Ibid. p. 7.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ It is, I think, a fitting tribute to the creativity and marketing skill of the Intrawest envisioning team that even a parking lot can be imagined as a must-see attraction!

¹⁴⁶ This seems somewhat ironic given that Whistler Village was a Beck design as well - only without the Intrawest marketing rhetoric. Beck himself, however, is ready to admit that Whistler Village has not evolved necessarily as he planned and has been mediated by factors outside of his control.

Creek has been imagined as a place which is to be used - and consumed - by locals - people who *know* and *love* Whistler Mountain.

Although clearly seeking to demonstrate a sensitivity to the history, nature and culture of the Creek and to the needs and wants of its current constituents, it would, of course, be naïve to assume that the imagining of the Creekside was undertaken without due consideration of the corporation's bottom line. On the contrary, almost everything within the document is informed by a strict, market logic. IntraWest, lest we should forget, is a public company. Although sensitised to the need for good community relations, the corporation's *primary* intention is to manufacture a place which will work to line the pockets of its shareholders, not make locals happy.

Any IntraWest village essentially has three core products: real estate, retail and mountain operations. The markets for these products may be distinct but are not mutually exclusive: condo-owners will buy lift tickets, skiers will shop. By identifying and explaining the targeted markets for each product we can begin to 'decode' the Vision and relate its rhetoric and conceptuality to the concrete economic logic propelling it.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ There is a growing body of literature in geography that examines representations of places in marketing media - see, for example, John Goss, 'Placing the market and marketing place: tourist advertising of the Hawaiian Islands, 1972-92,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11 (1993) pp. 663-688; also Paul Cloke and Harvey Perkins (1998) "'Cracking the canyon with the awesome foursome": representations of adventure tourism in New Zealand,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16 (1998) pp. 185-218. Much of this work, however, treats representation as a *fait accompli* and not as a active *process*. It neither identifies *who* orchestrated the marketing campaigns, nor the economic and indeed political

Real estate

Real estate product can come in a variety of forms - condo, condo-hotel, townhouse, estate home, duplex - and with a variety of ownership agreements - owner-occupied, rental and timeshare. The preferred product for Intrawest's villages is, as I have mentioned, the 'warm-bed' condo or condo-hotel. The new Whistler Creek village will contain three such condo buildings. Intrawest recognised, however, that purely as an *investment* opportunity, the location would not be so attractive as Whistler Village where land values are higher and rentals to tourists more lucrative. Furthermore, they realised that there was a huge *latent* market for vacation property in Whistler in the form of a 'ripening' generation of boomers in nearby Vancouver and Seattle - latent because the only thing deterring them from purchasing a place in Whistler is the escalating price of real estate in the resort. As Drew Meredith of the Whistler Real Estate Company explained:

"The Vancouver people probably feel they are being squeezed out... because the evolution of the resort is going more international. You know, the Vancouver crowd were here Day 1, they kept the restaurants alive, the bars alive, the mountains alive and now they're being squeezed out in favour of the big bucks."

Intrawest knew that, if they could develop a product at the right price for this market, they could save themselves the trouble and cost of engaging in a global property marketing campaign. Their solution was to sell the condos as "Quartershare". Quartershare works similarly to time-share, except that instead of buying a week or two weeks 'time' per

imperatives that lie behind particular place imaginings. Quite simply, much of this work fails to consider for what markets the *marketing* was intended.

year, the owner 'buys' the right to occupy the unit for one week in four. Although Quartershare units are still placed in a rental pool when not occupied by their owners, the idea is that they will appeal mainly to the drive-in market - those seeking property for its use, not investment value: "in terms of owner use, utility to the purchaser," explained Doug Ogilvy, Vice-President of Resort Development for Intrawest, "we felt Whistler Creek provides a very high quality product, a quality experience to the purchaser from Vancouver and Seattle." The trick is that owners not only share their property with three other people but also its *price* - making mountain home ownership an affordable and convenient option for boomers with some spare money in the bank, and a desire to retreat to the mountains once a month for some much needed rest and recreation.

The market defined and the price level established, all that remains for Intrawest is to tell their 'targets' the good news and convince them to buy. And how best to do that? By appealing to nostalgia and promising them a place which was just like it was in its heyday, when *they* used to ski there. Nostalgia sells: "everyone wants to hark back to the past," Meredith told me. Indeed, the theme is clearly carried through into Intrawest's advertising material for the first Quartershare development to be constructed at Whistler Creek, "The Legends". The headline of one advertisement, placed in a local newspaper, reads: "Remember the good old days when \$70k bought you a mountain home in Whistler? Welcome back" (see figure 17).

**Remember the good old days when \$70K
bought you a mountain home at Whistler?**



Welcome back.

Illustration is an artistic representation only.

Whistler Creek is where Whistler began back in the '60s.

The renaissance of Whistler Creek brings shops, restaurants and great après-ski to the neighbourhood.

Best of all, Whistler Creek offers slopeside ski-in/ski-out real estate at prices the average family can afford.

**ONE BEDROOMS FROM
\$68,900**

Q
This opportunity is possible through iQ -
"Intrawest Quarter Ownership."
Simply put, you own a quarter of a mountain home. It's like splitting your home with a few friends, only without all the hassles.

The first mountain homes available here are part cabin, part lodge.

All character.

This iQ opportunity will be in great demand. A top-end, true ski-in/ski-out location, steps from the Creekside Gondola with pricing that flashes back to the early days of Whistler.



WHISTLER CREEK

Figure 17: Advertisement placed by Intrawest in a local real estate magazine for their first quartershare units in the Whistler Creek Village. Quartershare - "splitting your home with a few friends" - is targeted specifically at the Vancouver/Seattle boomer market. The nostalgia theme is carried right through to the Whistler Creek graphic at the bottom of the advert, which is designed to be reminiscent of the original Garibaldi Lift Company logo.

Retail

From the outset of the envisioning process, the shops along “Franz’s Trail”, the village’s main shopping street, had been conceived as ‘funky’ and ‘eclectic’, in keeping with the overall “gritty sophistication” theme of the Creek; but, according to Ogilvy, it took a while for the team to figure out *who* it was that would be shopping in Whistler Creek’s stores. As he explained:

“if we tried to repeat Whistler Village, putting in tenants to cater for the destination tourist, it wasn’t really going to work. Because in the winter, the destination tourist would rather shop in the village where there are 200 stores than come to Whistler Creek where there’s 20. And if you put in stores so that they would still shop there, the destination tourist is only in Whistler Creek for 4 months of the year, then we’ve got the other 8 months of the year.”

Just as the Creek could not compete with the Village for the attentions of international property investors, as a retail opportunity the Creek village would not compare with the diversity and ‘classiness’ of the existing Whistler Village for the attention of the serious shoppers. Even if it did manage to attract high-spending destination tourists to its shops, they would not by themselves provide the critical massing needed throughout the year to make retail ventures economically viable. The team realised that the best way to ensure a constant supply of people cycling through the village’s stores was to design it as a neighbourhood area, replete with post office, grocery and liquor stores. The south end of Whistler had lacked any neighbourhood functions and local residents would surely appreciate these additions, as Ogilvy continued:

“So we started looking at how you make those areas animated for 12 months of the year. Well the way you do that is there’s 10,000 people live in the valley who

all need to buy groceries, all need to buy beer, all need to go to the Post Office, who are actually less inclined to come into the Village core right now because of the challenges of parking, getting in and out. So we said 'let's make Whistler Creek an area which works for the *locals*'. So we designed it, programmed it more as a neighbourhood commercial area, putting in all of the services to support the local community".¹⁴⁸

Hence, the references made in the Vision to Whistler Creek's cosy, neighbourly, local character begin to make sense - all qualities which, of course, should serve to make the village even more appealing to its new, quarter-time residents.

Mountain operations

Although destination tourists are more economically appealing as 'guests' to Intrawest because they stay for longer periods and are inclined to spend more, the regional market for the Whistler/Blackcomb ski product is too important to ignore. Well over 50% of lift ticket sales are still made to day-tripping Lower Mainlanders and Whistler locals; furthermore, this market starts skiing earlier and continues skiing later than the destination skiers, who typically come between Christmas and Easter.¹⁴⁹ The regional market has already demonstrated a preference for the Creekside base because of its ease of parking, lack of commercialism and, of course, Dusty's pub. The people who ski Creekside tend to be those who are at Whistler *for the skiing alone*; people who have been skiing Whistler Mountain *for years*. With no nursery slopes around its base, Creekside is no place for beginners.

¹⁴⁸ As I have already mentioned, Beck originally intended Whistler Village to be a place for the local community to shop; however the difficulty of access, the crowds and the inflated prices in the village centre grocery store mean that few now use it for this purpose.

Rather than turn its back on this market, Intrawest realised it would actually pay to embrace it. Hence the attention given in the Vision to the parking lot as a central feature - nay, *attraction*. In addition, a new gondola is proposed and new trails will be cut on the mountain's west-side to "beguile new generations of skiers and snowboarders - leading them through bowls and glades, steeps and deeps, and then down the runouts to *Whistler [Creek]*."¹⁵⁰ Perhaps most importantly, the Dusty's name, if not the building itself, will remain, providing a reference point for a crowd which is likely to be disoriented by the physical changes at the Creek. Although this drive-in ski market is portrayed in the Vision as a group of "hard-core athletes", seeking no frills except those to be found on the mountain, it is nevertheless Intrawest's hope that these individuals will not be beyond temptation: they will buy their "no-frills gear and garments" in the stores in the Day Lodge, enjoy "BC's Best burgers" on Dusty's patio and they will not be able to resist being "clocked on the World Cup run and, for their efforts ... be immortalised in a T-shirt imprinted with their world cup time."¹⁵¹

Enter the tourists

"Tourism is essentially about the creation and reconstruction of geographical landscapes as distinctive tourism destination through manipulation of history and culture."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Skiing at Whistler/Blackcomb begins in late November and carries on through to August, with summer skiing on the Horstman Glacier, Blackcomb Mountain.

¹⁵⁰ *Whistler Creek Vision Statement*, p. 10

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁵² Greg Ringer, 'Introduction' in Greg Ringer (ed.) *Destinations: Cultural Landscape of Tourism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). pp. 1-15; the quote is from page 7.

Contrary to what we might expect, the key markets for Whistler Creek's three core products are not international in scope - as they have become for Whistler Village - but local and regional; destination tourists are *not* "put at centre of picture."¹⁵³ This, as I have shown, is not due to any 'benevolence' on Intrawest's part; "there's probably not... what shall we say?... community spirit, or a love of the place, that causes them to take less profit," as Drew Meredith put it. Rather, a miniature version of Whistler Village, aiming for similar tourist markets, would simply not have 'worked' so effectively in raising the company's bottom line, given the unique context of the Creek within a multiple-centre resort.

All this is not to say tourists are entirely absent from the grand plan of Whistler Creek. On the contrary, the idea is that locals' *use* of the Creekside neighbourhood will - through the 'animation' they create and the sense of 'authenticity' they impart in the place - serve to provide a more genuine and lively *experience* for the destination tourist. As Doug Ogilvy put it:

"We'll get the local community coming there, that'll provide a certain level of animation and make it interesting for the destination tourist. So whereas Whistler Village is there for the destination tourist, and some of the locals happen to come there, we've sort of flipped the roles."

Furthermore, to guide tourists to the site and enable them to recognise the Creek Village as a *sight*, Intrawest will be putting various 'markers' in place.¹⁵⁴ The history of

¹⁵³ Here I deliberately repeat the quote by Rothman with which I began the section.

¹⁵⁴ Here I am adopting a *semiotic* notion of the tourist attraction, as advanced by Dean MacCannell in *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books 1976). Britton, referring to MacCannell's semiotics, argues that "many [tourism] attractions are unrecognisable as such except for one crucial element - the markers: these are any information or representation that labels the site as a sight".

Creepside lies in the memories of the people that skied there during its heyday and there is currently little in the way of a tangible heritage for visitors to interpret. The old gondola barn has been torn down and even Dusty's, as a structure, had no defining or remarkable qualities.¹⁵⁵ Visible signifiers will thus operate in the place of this absent heritage. Firstly a gateway, comprising a twin set of cairns, will *frame* the site/sight, "becoming a landmark for a resort that, ironically, doesn't have a lot of photo opportunities"¹⁵⁶; secondly, individual buildings and streets within the village will be *named* after local heroes (e.g. 'Franz's Trail') and will serve to conjure up the 'glory days' theme (e.g. "The Legends" building); and thirdly the architecture of the buildings themselves will *symbolise* the place's history through its faux, log cabin 'vernacular'. With these signifiers installed, it is hoped that tourists will come to *share* the meanings which otherwise would have remained the preserve of a select group of old-time locals.

From community to corporate control? Reaction to the Vision

There is no dispute that Whistler Creek, as envisioned, will be a totally *commodified* landscape, a landscape built in the image of its perceived markets. In so becoming, however, the question is whether the vision has made "the people of Whistler proud", as young Anthony hoped it would: has this representation of the Creek slipped by without an

Britton, 'Tourism, capital and place,' p. 463. He identifies three ways in which markers can be used to impart meaning: naming and codifying; framing and elevation; and enshrinement as symbols. As I demonstrate, all three strategies are at work in the vision for Whistler Creek.

¹⁵⁵ Intrawest did investigate options to preserve Dusty's but as Nathan Green, Director of Finance and Acquisitions for the corporation explained to me in an interview they "looked around and there was nothing much to save. Because it's absolutely nothing. It's a pretty crappy bar."

¹⁵⁶ *Whistler Creek Vision Statement*, p. 14

inkling of local contestation?¹⁵⁷ Are the meanings and labels attached to the place shared by the Creek's long-time constituents?¹⁵⁸ The answer appears to be, on the whole, "yes". Gord McKeever, Chairman of the Creekside Merchant's Association - who was party to one of the envisioning sessions - told me "it was fascinating! They were spending millions of dollars to look *just like us!*" Another resident spoke of his trust that "Intrawest can pull it off. Because they're efficient and can nail down a design and do a good job. They're good that way... they don't seem to mind doing that little bit extra to make it nice."¹⁵⁹ The mayor of Whistler echoed this sentiment: "I think it'll work really well. I've seen other examples of the projects they've done and they look good, have a nice feel. That's what people are looking for." The municipal administrator, meanwhile, believed that Intrawest's Vision "dove-tailed nicely with their [the municipality's] own" for the area.¹⁶⁰

These responses are perhaps to be expected given the fact the narratives upon which the Intrawest 'script' was based can be sourced, in part, to local people; and not any local people but people with a "Whistler Mountain" as opposed to a "Blackcomb" attitude.¹⁶¹ The whole language of a mountain *merger*, as opposed to take-over, demonstrates

¹⁵⁷ Jarkko Saarinen argues that that the manipulation and commodification of local histories and cultures that the marketing process necessarily involves means that processes of scripting places are rarely uncontested; see Saarinen, 'The social construction of tourist destinations.'

¹⁵⁸ Rob Shields poses a similar question in his study *Places on the Margin*, (London and New York: Routledge: 1991). He is concerned with the processes through which spaces become instilled with meaning: is it, he asks, through socialisation to group norms or rather through labelling?

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Dave Williamson, 11th January 2000.

¹⁶⁰ It is to a discussion of the municipality's own Vision for Whistler that I turn in the next chapter.

¹⁶¹ Whistler Mountain, as I suggested in my introduction, has always been regarded as the more home-grown, community-minded of the two mountains and Blackcomb the more bottom line driven 'outsider'. Arthur Dejong, Mountain Access Manager for Intrawest explained to me the distinction: "Whistler... was a more grass-roots, family oriented mountain; it had history, it had roots. And it was driven by local money..

Intrawest's resolve to appear as a unifying - assimilating - as opposed to a conquering force in the town. They were well aware that Whistler Mountain had a marketable asset that Blackcomb had always lacked - a history and a memory - and have sought to capture these intangibles in their new development. Ironically, as a consequence, Intrawest's proposal is much more sensitive and creative than any of the previous plans put forward by the supposedly more 'community-minded' Whistler Mountain Corporation - plans which would have seen the construction of bland multi-storeyed condominium buildings not at all in keeping with the area's scale and 'historic' identity.

Whilst issues surrounding the representation of the Creek's culture and history have yet to cause widespread debate amongst the resort's community, this is not say the Vision has been received with open arms.¹⁶² On the contrary, they have been more concerned about what is *absent* from the document than what is included within it. For what the Vision does not speak to is the degree of *control* Intrawest will be exercising over the entire development. Whereas Creekside is portrayed as a centre of local and regional consumption, it will remain largely a place of corporate production: Intrawest will operate the ski lifts, run the day lodge, build the real estate and manage the shopping area. Local people have, not surprisingly, raised questions about the economic opportunities the venture will be offering *them*:

not real corporate money like Intrawest... Blackcomb lacked some of those higher values, where you integrate a longer-term relationship with the community."

¹⁶² There have, however, been rumblings at council meetings as to Intrawest's 'commitment' to a local Creekside vernacular architecture. Bob Barnett, 'Funky Creek, sort of,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, May 5th 2000, p.1.

“Since this is to be IW funded, does it mean a veto on new businesses? Only Intrawest stores and restaurants. Healthy for Intrawest, unhealthy for free enterprise and the RMOW, locals and community!”¹⁶³

What has been the subject of most concern is the fact that Intrawest are to be the landlords of the entire retail component of the village. One councillor, Nancy Wilhelm-Morden, was disappointed that the municipal council

“didn’t do enough to ensure that the monopolistic aspects of IW were broken up in Creekside. So, for example... we didn’t insist that they sell off parcels. So they’re developing the entire Creekside, will be the landlords for the entire Creekside, may well be the operators of all the stores and all the retail spaces and that’s a real shame; *then* we’ve changed Creekside into Disneyland.”

Intrawest’s justification - which mirrors the Disney model - is that it is only through their control of the retail spaces that the overall effect of the design (in terms of what people are supposed to consume where) will be achieved:

“We’re going to own all the spaces but by owning them we can ensure that we have the right mix of tenants to provide the vibrancy and animation to make sure that space works.... What we want to make sure is that we don’t have 4 T-shirt shops side by side, as they do in the Village.”¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, Intrawest say that they do not want to be in the business of operating all the shops: they want to encourage independent, specialist stores which, they hope, will contribute to the place’s overall ‘quirkiness’. Despite these assurances, the *idea* of one large, bottom-line driven entity at the helm - a force which could at any moment flex its muscles and abuse its monopoly position within the resort - will nevertheless remain a source of some discomfort for a Whistler community. Indeed, for all the talk of ‘free-

¹⁶³ Comment made by Whistler resident on feedback form at municipal Open House.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Doug Ogilvy, 9th February 2000.

wheeling independence' and 'visionary individuals' in the *Whistler Creek Vision*, the one thing the Creekside will not replicate is the entrepreneurship and pioneering spirit that *really* defined the original Whistler experience.¹⁶⁵ Gord McKeever captured the sentiment:

"I don't want to live in a company town. The Whistler I bought into was a community of small entrepreneurs, small businesses that made Whistler work."

Conclusion

I would like to conclude the story of Whistler Creek by returning to the apparent similarity between the Intrawest village and the Disney theme park. Disney, as I have already indicated, has attracted a large degree of critical commentary in the social sciences and in cultural studies and while it is not my point to recount this literature here, I do want to utilise the insights of one so-called 'Disney-basher', urban sociologist Sharon Zukin.¹⁶⁶ In theorising Disney World as an "archetypal landscape of power," Zukin argues that the Disney theme park landscape is predicated upon "a manipulated collective memory and consumption."¹⁶⁷ Throughout my narrative, I have demonstrated how such manipulation of memory and consumption-led design is clearly apparent in the corporate *Vision* for Whistler Creek: Intrawest make no hesitation is using intangibles such as culture and identity - in this case, a nostalgia for a bygone, 'halcyon' days and a 'neighbourhood' rhetoric - as a selling point for their products. Zukin goes on to concede,

¹⁶⁵ This is reminiscent of Wilson's contention that the Disney theme park is a "kind of spatial corollary of a monopoly capitalism that incessantly produces rhetoric about free enterprise... what we see in Disney World is the recent history of capital relations inscribed on the land." Wilson, *The Culture of Nature*, pp. 182-183.

however, that “ironically, Disney’s market-oriented landscape evokes a strong sense of place”¹⁶⁸; and it is this concession, I believe, that is crucial to any critical evaluation of the Intrawest village. Without doubt, these villages represent wholly commodified landscapes which can easily be cast as ‘inauthentic’ or ‘fake’. My question, though, is what is the alternative? The “poorly conceived and scattered development” that characterised ski resort development in the past?¹⁶⁹ It is exactly the *sense of place* that Eldon Beck and his team of ‘visioneers’ seek to recreate that makes Intrawest’s resorts so financially successful and positions them favourably in a cut-throat marketplace.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, in attempting to programme a sense of place into their developments, Intrawest - *unlike* Disney - gives a voice to the people whose cultures and identities they seeks to represent, through inviting them to participate in ‘envisioning’ sessions. They do this, in part, because they recognise the value of a co-operative relationship with the communities in which they invest.

It is precisely this imperative for Intrawest to forge “good community relations” that leads me to query the wider applicability of the Disney World metaphor to their mountain village creations; for, in developing and operating their Orlando theme park, Disney Corporation have enjoyed a degree of regulatory autonomy that is quite unprecedented. As a condition for locating in the Florida swamp, they made sure that their lands were designated an “Improvement District” - a move which transferred the company’s board

¹⁶⁶ I borrow the term ‘Disney-basher’ from Warren, *The City as Theme Park*.

¹⁶⁷ Zukin, *Landscapes of Power*, p. 230.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

¹⁶⁹ Here I re-quote Dorward, *Design for Mountain Communities*, p. 7.

members powers, such as tax-raising abilities and even the authority to build a nuclear power plant, which normally accrue to a municipal or state government. Moreover, as there are no permanent residents of Disney World, the company is free from the troublesome interference of participatory democracy.¹⁷¹ Inrawest, meanwhile, are not quite so fortunate. They *do* have to conduct their business within democratic spaces and must deal with municipal and provincial (or state) governments - bodies which have at their disposal certain powers to regulate their activities. Indeed, in constructing this chapter and telling the story of Whistler Creek, I have deliberately played *down* the complex negotiations and political posturing that lies behind Inrawest's development projects; for it is precisely this interplay, between the corporation and the representative body of the community, the municipality, that is to be the focus of my next chapter.

¹⁷⁰ As architect Robert Venturi once said, "Disney is nearer to what people really want than anything the architects have given them." Cited in Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, p. 200.

¹⁷¹ See R Rymer, 'Back to the future: Disney reinvents the company town,' *Harper's*, October 1996, pp. 65-78; also R Fogelson, *Magic Town: Orlando and Disney World* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990).

- 3 -

Another corporation, another vision *Dealing with the municipality*

"In 1996 a new crew and captain looked at their ship. It was a good ship - a now famous vessel that had embarked in the early '70s on a voyage that saw a group of visionaries map out and plunk the tiny town of Whistler boldly on the North American map as a dynamic world class ski resort. The vessel had got far on this leg of its journey but, it was listing, and in need of some refurbishing. A fresh and creative crew was also needed to plan for the next leg of the trip that would see a sustainable resort community safely sailed into the 21st century."¹⁷²

In November 1996, just one month before Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains announced they were to merge, a new mayor and council took over the reigns at municipal hall. They inherited a local government which, according to one local reporter, was "in disarray".¹⁷³ The municipality had been without an administrator - the crucial individual who "orchestrates the dance between council and staff" - since December 1995;¹⁷⁴ and the resignation of the bylaw superintendent had sparked a comprehensive review of municipal procedures by a group of external consultants in January 1996. One of the key recommendations made by the consultants was for the municipality to embark on a strategic planning process, the purpose of which was to map out where Whistler wanted to be in the next five years and determine exactly how the municipality was going to help it get there. The mayor, Hugh O'Reilly, and his newly appointed administrator,

¹⁷² Loreth Beswetherwick. 'Charting a course for Whistler's future,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, 21st October, 1999, p. 15.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁷⁴ Here I am quoting an interview with local newspaper columnist Paul Burrows. The previous administrator had been on medical leave before resigning.

Jim Godfrey readily accepted the consultants' suggestions. Both had become convinced of the need for the municipality to reinvent itself as a *corporate* organisation, replete with mission statement, strategy and discernible targets against which performance could be measured. In order to articulate what those targets should be, O'Reilly and Godfrey instigated their own 'visioning' process - not dissimilar to Intrawest's - in 1997. The principle means through which public input was gathered was by running workshops with various stakeholder groups, including business leaders, community groups and resort employees. Information from these workshops was put alongside results from resident surveys undertaken in previous years and used as the basis for a working document, entitled "Vision 2002 - Charting a course for the future." It is this document, the municipality's own Vision Statement, that will provide the context for my investigation into community relations with Intrawest.

Since the merger, municipal staff and council have been engaged in two significant land deals with Intrawest's Resort Development Group (RDG) which have decided upon almost all of the remaining commercial development zoned for the resort. In both instances, the municipality worked in partnership with RDG staff to achieve particular targets set out in its Vision; in so doing, however, it also had to make concessions to the corporation which contravened other targets and compromised core community values. The effect was to embroil both council and community in debates as to which targets and whose values should be fore-grounded. The stories *behind* the deals are valuable because they tell us not only about relations of power with and public perceptions of Intrawest; but they also serve to illustrate how 'the municipality' itself - despite the coherence of its

Vision - is far from a homogenous entity or a neutral convener of power.¹⁷⁵ I begin the chapter, however, with a closer look at the targets the municipal Vision sets for itself and the means through which the municipality proposes to realise them.

What do we want to become?

i) A world-class resort

In the Vision, Whistler is envisaged not as a regional, nor even a national, but a *world-class*, four-season resort. Consequently, the document speaks to strengthening what it terms the 'Whistler Experience' - defined as "a mosaic of timeless impressions: serene mountain views, contemplative moments, recreational pursuits and shared enjoyment with family and friends."¹⁷⁶ As a principal provider of the Whistler tourist product, in the form of Whistler Village itself and the Valley's parks and trails, the municipality believes *it* has an important role to play in setting the standard for the entire resort. As the mayor explained to me:

"When you have a target like that, everything starts to fall in line... because it changes the whole relationship and standards you set for yourself as a community. When you take on a project you don't just build a community park, you build a world-class community park."

¹⁷⁵ This is certainly the view put forward by Maureen Reed in 'Power relations and community-based tourism planning', *Annals of Tourism Research* 24 (1997) pp. 566-597. Reed argues that municipal governments are "more likely to be purposeful, goal-oriented actors that use their power to their own purposes" (p. 589).

¹⁷⁶ RMOW, *Vision 2002 - Charting a Course for the Future*, p. 6. The municipality seem to have taken a leaf out the Intrawest book of marketing here.

The key idea contained in the Vision, however, is that only through acknowledging the interdependence of the resort and its residential community will world-class status *really* be achieved. "In Whistler," proclaims the Vision, "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. One cannot exist without the other."¹⁷⁷ The Vision recognises that a vibrant local community is integral to the attractiveness and hence competitiveness of the place. As the mayor put it to me:

"When you *sell* Whistler, you sell a lifestyle, a perceived image and that's probably embodied in all of Whistler rather than a single component of it... It's the community that's the attractive part of it."

The challenge for the municipality over the coming years, therefore, is to ensure that the 'Whistler Experience' is as good for residents as it is for visitors.

ii) A healthy community

"In terms of looking at how other resorts have evolved in the States, most of them have lost their sense of community, and that's really crucial in terms of all the things the municipality is looking at."¹⁷⁸

For a case-study of what can transpire when the 'resort' is prioritised over the people who produce it, Whistler needs only look to the experience of Vail, Colorado - which is precisely what the new council did when they embarked upon a tour of their Stateside competitors in 1997.¹⁷⁹ Master-planned from scratch in the 1960s, Vail, like Whistler,

¹⁷⁷ RMOW, *Vision 2002*, p. 6.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Jim Godfrey, municipal administrator, 7th March, 2000.

¹⁷⁹ Hal Rothman offers an excellent description of the evolution of Vail resort in *Devil's Bargains*, pp. 229-237. Rothman argues that whilst Vail embodied a "quality of life [that] was exceptional for second-home residents and visitors" but that "life as an employee became progressively less desirable". June Simonton

was incorporated shortly afterwards. During subsequent decades, however, Vail became more and more attractive as a second-home opportunity causing property values to soar and increasingly, local wages could not meet the cost of renting, let alone buying, accommodation in the resort. No provision was made by the local municipality, nor indeed Vail Ski Corporation, to house the resort's workforce. As a result, employees were gradually squeezed out of the resort to sites, typically sprawling trailer parks, located tens of miles down-valley, to be succeeded by a group of wealthy and largely absent second-home owners - people who regard the resort not as a working community but a transient place to play.

Returning from their trip, Whistler's council were resolved that this *American* approach of resort development is not one a *Canadian* Whistler should be allowed to take. They did not want to create a landscape which so visibly exposed the class system that under-girds resort economies; nor did they want Whistler to become a playground for the 'filthy rich'. Yet this was precisely the route Whistler was in danger of following. For, in a similar way to Vail, Whistler has been becoming a victim of its own success. Low-income service workers, essential to Whistler's smooth functioning, have recently been experiencing chronic difficulties finding affordable rental accommodation in the resort. Consequently, they are being forced to live in Squamish and Pemberton, commuting up to two hours each day just to get to and from work (see figure 3). It is not just the 'lifties', chambermaids and cleaners, either, who have been feeling the accommodation

paints a similar, if glossier picture in *Vail: Story of a Colorado Mountain Valley* (Denver: Taylor Publishing, 1987).

squeeze.¹⁸⁰ Between 1992 and 1998, the average price of a single family detached house increased three-fold from \$294,309 to \$800,000, putting a home out of the range of most middle-managers, small business owners and professionals.¹⁸¹ The situation has been compounded by a self-imposed cap on development (see below) which is limiting the supply of housing in Whistler. As Pat Kelly of Whistler real estate company put it: "there is a reason property doesn't go up in Palm Springs. Every time there is an upswing in demand someone opens up 500 more acres. We have a fixed supply. Short of major economic collapse or it raining for 12 months, people are going to look at this area as a choice and as long as it presents good value, people are going to come here and that is just going to drive prices up."¹⁸²

The plight of the Whistler middle class and urgent need for affordable housing was, not surprisingly, a platform upon which Hugh O'Reilly and several of his councillors campaigned during the 1996 elections.¹⁸³ As a consequence, the municipality's Vision has at its core a pledge to house two-thirds of the Whistler workforce. The vehicle that was incorporated to achieve this goal is the Whistler Valley Housing Authority (WHA). Established as a wholly-owned subsidiary of the municipality in November 1997, the WHA has the power to make any new developers or businesses in Whistler provide

¹⁸⁰ A recent bylaw has actually prevented all properties that are not zoned as 'tourist accommodation' (public beds) from being rented to tourists in an attempt to overcome the problem of landlords not renting to employees. Interestingly, in the early years of the resort, the designation of 'tourist accommodation' (the 'warm bed' bylaw) on a property was not necessarily desired by home-owners, for it would mean the home would have to be placed in a rental pool for so many weeks of the year. Recently, with the surge in tourism, second-home owners are realising the revenue potential to be gained from renting their property to tourists and have actually been lobbying councillors to have their properties rezoned 'tourist accommodation'.

¹⁸¹ RMOW, *Whistler Community and Resort Monitoring Report 1999*, p. 6.

¹⁸² Kelly cited in Loreth Beswetherwick, 'Taluswood sales sign of global interest in Whistler,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, 3rd March 2000, p. 7.

accommodation for their employees. If they are unwilling to do this themselves, they must contribute to a fund which is used by the WHA to create employee rental units on their behalf. The WHA can, furthermore, permit construction on lands not currently zoned for development if they construct resident housing (resident housing is not included in the resorts 'bed cap'). This means placing a covenant on properties which tags their value to the North Vancouver, and not the Whistler, real estate market.

Alongside making provision of affordable housing a priority, the Vision articulates a continuing responsibility of the municipality to provide the amenities - the schools, health services and public transport - Whistler residents require to lead balanced lives. "Residents of all ages", it claims, "will enjoy a high quality of life, defined by the accessibility of comfortable living spaces, of convenient public transit, of life-long education, of state-of-the-art health care, of a variety of leisure opportunities and of public safety programmes, in a viable local economy."¹⁸⁴

iii) A sustainable, natural environment

Another aspect of the Colorado resorts which Whistler does not want to replicate is the urban sprawl and environmental degradation caused by unrestrained real estate development.¹⁸⁵ In the Vision, the municipality thus makes a commitment to respecting

¹⁸³ Diane Rinehart, 'Whistler to the max,' *The Vancouver Sun*, 7th December 1996, p. C1.

¹⁸⁴ RMOW, *Vision 2002*, p. 8.

¹⁸⁵ There are many in Whistler who would argue that the damage has already been done.

the cap on development set at 52,500 'bed units'.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, through pursuing a new strategy of environmental stewardship and embracing a policy of 'no net loss of habitat', the municipality seeks to preserve as many of the remaining undeveloped wetlands in the valley as conservation areas. Its Vision recognises that Whistler's environment represents not only a 'positional good' for the people who have made the resort their home but is the very thing that make the place attractive as a recreation destination - especially as it attempts to broaden its appeal away from the ski mountains and become a four-season resort.¹⁸⁷ As Drew Meredith, a former mayor of Whistler put it:

"If this becomes a city, will people continue to come here as tourists? They're coming here for nature and recreation. They're not coming here for streetlights and smog. I think that's a fundamental issue in this community and one that continues to drive it."

How are we going to get there?

The targets the municipality sets for itself in its Vision are ambitious; and the Vision's principal architects are well aware that they cannot achieve them in isolation. As Whistler approaches build-out (expected to occur by 2002), critical sources of income - in the form of work and service charges, property and commercial taxes - will evaporate. The

¹⁸⁶ A bed unit is defined as "a measure of a quantity of development intended to reflect servicing and facility requirements for one person;" for example, a detached dwelling represents six bed units; a hotel bedroom two units; and a dormitory bed half a unit. RMOW, *Official Community Plan* 1993; p. 7. Every development that is proposed in Whistler is thus assessed - and, crucially, *understood* by community members - in terms the number of bed units it is 'using up'. A development cap has actually been in place since the second Official Community Plan in 1982; Alison Gill argues, however, that it is only since the mid-1990s that the municipality has given anything but a nod to the need for growth management. See Gill, 'From growth machine to growth management.'

¹⁸⁷ Poon, in *Tourism, technology and competitive strategies*, pp. 63-70, argues that a recognition of the limits to growth and the creation of eco-friendly destinations is an integral component of the so-called 'new tourism' and is what will secure a place's competitive position as public sensibilities move towards environmental appreciation.

municipal funding situation is exacerbated by federal and provincial government cutbacks. As the mayor explained:

“Everyone’s being asked to do more with less, the downloading in this country is astronomical. We’re at the bottom of the rung - the last people you can download to is the municipality. And we shouldered more than our fair share.”

To achieve its goals, the Vision contends that the municipality will have to become “more innovative, more entrepreneurial.” Such a philosophy has been driving the effort to create a ‘corporate culture’ in municipal hall, empowering staff to think more creatively and work in a more business-like manner. The buzz word is *partnership*. Partnerships, claims the Vision, “will be the basis for improved, co-operative decision-making at a time of transition from a rapidly growing to a more sustainable resort community.”¹⁸⁸ Through allying with other levels of government, non-governmental actors and the private sector, the aim is that the municipality will be able to *leverage* its resources; as an ‘entrepreneurial partner’, the municipality sees itself as less a regulator - less traditional “government” - and more of a leader, a collaborator and a *deal-maker* within a system of *governance*.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ RMOW, *Vision 2002*, p. 24.

¹⁸⁹ There is a distinction between *government* and *governance*. David Harvey, criticising literature that concentrates on ‘government’, argues that the “power to reorganise urban life so often lies elsewhere or at least within a broader coalition of forces within which urban government and administration have only a facilitative and co-ordinating role to play.” He argues that the urban entrepreneurialism has “at its centrepiece the notion of ‘public-private partnership’”: hence ‘the government’ is only one actor in a system of *governance*. Harvey, ‘From managerialism to entrepreneurialism,’ p. 6. See also C. Michael Hall in ‘Rethinking collaboration and partnership: a public policy perspective’, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 7 (1999) pp. 274-289. Hall argues that the role of government specifically-regarding tourism has shifted from a “public administration model” which was concerned with implementing government policy for a perceived public good to a “corporatist model” emphasising “efficiency, investment returns, the role of the market, and relations with stakeholders, usually defined as industry.” Hall refers to the development of networks between actors, defined as organisations and individuals, where linkages become formalised towards sustaining mutual interests. Networks exist on a continuum ranging from ‘loose’ relationships to coalitions and longer-lasting structural formations. For an in-depth discussion of the role of collaboration in

While municipal staff are being encouraged to think like business-people and develop partnerships with other players in the resort, the new spirit of co-operation does not necessarily extend to all power brokers in the community. Staff may be responsible for pursuing deals, but they respond to the directives of council. And it is the politicians on council who have the final say on matters requiring any change to the regulatory status quo. As I explained in the introduction, the 1996 elections brought to government in Whistler a council that, for the first time, demonstrated an ideological split between those who stood on what might be described as 'pro-community' platforms, and those who were more neutral, or pro-development in their outlook. Another aim of the administrator and mayor in orchestrating a 'shared vision,' therefore, was to paper over these ideological differences by establishing a common set of values and priorities. Underlying the veneer of consensus, however, are more disparate ideas about *how* goals should be achieved.¹⁹⁰ For some on council and indeed in the community, entrepreneurialism and the partnerships that accompany it are difficult to swallow. They are seen as an attempt to transfer power away from the politicians to other, non-governmental (and hence non-democratic) actors. This sentiment is felt all the more acutely when that 'partner' happens to be the most powerful private sector player in the resort and its economic lifeblood - Intrust. By turning to look at the two major land deals made between the municipality and the corporation since the merger, my hope is to illustrate this political dynamic.

community-based tourism policy see Tazim B. Jamal and Donald Getz, 'Collaboration theory and community tourism planning,' *Annals of Tourism Research* 22 (1995) pp. 186-204.

¹⁹⁰ S Clegg and R Hardy argue that "we cannot ignore the power hidden behind the facade of 'trust' and the rhetoric of 'collaboration'" (p. 678). Clegg and Hardy, 'Conclusion: Representations,' pp. 676-708, in Clegg, Hardy and Nord, *Handbook of Organisation Studies* (London: Sage, 1996).

The community bargain: the Comprehensive Development Strategy

Intrawest's Comprehensive Development Strategy (CDS) is one of the largest single development proposals ever to have been entertained by the municipality. The proposal emerged out of a strong desire by the municipal council to make the new village at Whistler Creek a much less dense development than that for which the 44 acre site was zoned.¹⁹¹ Indeed, the municipal Vision for the area calls for a place where "history goes back a little further" and "the buildings are a little lower" than in Whistler Village.¹⁹² As we have seen, Intrawest's own vision tallied: a village of tightly packed, multi-storied condominiums would hardly be in the design philosophy of their master planner, Eldon Beck. Pursuing a lower density design, however, meant that the Creek village was not going to consume *all* the development rights - in the form of 2,500 bed units - that had ceded to Intrawest as a result of its acquisition of Whistler mountain. Simply surrendering these rights, however, was not something Intrawest would contemplate. In a place where the supply of real estate is fixed and demand is sky-rocketing, bed units represent a license to print money.

Thus, in October 1997, shortly after Eldon Beck and his envisioning team had commenced their brainstorming for Whistler Creek, Intrawest development staff embarked upon an altogether more technical set of negotiations at municipal hall. Their

¹⁹¹ When Whistler Mountain Corporation was originally awarded development rights for its base lands, the bed units were simply 'parked' in Whistler Creek by municipal planners. Planners knew, however, that they would probably have to be transferred to alternative sites in the when their owners came to realise them.

mission: to come up with a plan which would find a home for *all* their remaining development rights in Whistler. This was not as easy as simply marking out on a map where the development would go - if location was all that was at stake, the process could have been over in weeks, not years. Rather negotiations centred on how the proposal could be configured so that the agendas of both parties could be realised through the process.

The municipal agenda

Freshly armed with their Vision document, the municipality came to the negotiating table with a long list of wishes. Intrawest's proposal represented the last chance for them to extract considerable planning gain from a developer. As Nathan Green of Intrawest put it, the municipality needed to get "as much out of us as they can, while they can." At the same time, the new 'flavour' of the municipal administration was towards partnership and collaboration, not conflict and antagonism. Although this proposal would theoretically signal the end of Whistler as a 'green-field' development opportunity, *redevelopment* and revitalisation of the existing infrastructure may require Intrawest's RDG being "brought back in" at a later date. Furthermore, regardless of any land development, the relationship between the two 'corporations' will continue through Intrawest's control of Whistler/Blackcomb.

¹⁹² RMOW, *Vision 2002*, p. 11.

Municipal wants going into the negotiations ranged from affordable housing to a day care facility and a new site for a fire hall. At the top of their wish list, however, was a site for a new elementary school. The surge in families choosing to make Whistler their permanent home has put undue pressure on the existing facility, with several classes having to be taught in temporary, prefabricated classrooms. Whilst the provincial government is the agency that is supposed to provide educational facilities, cutbacks and delays mean that funding for the school has not been forthcoming. The Whistler community was getting impatient and the municipality was feeling the pressure to produce a result. Acquiring a new school meant taking matters into its own hands.

Intrawest's agenda

If the municipality entered the negotiations seeking a development that would fill the gaps in community provision created by the province, Intrawest, naturally, wanted a proposal that would work first and foremostly to raise its bottom line. The corporation's warm-bed destination 'villages' - such as the one envisioned for Whistler Creek - actually function to support a wider real estate base of 'cold bed', owner-occupied properties; and it is precisely in the construction of luxury townhouses and estate homes that the highest profits are currently to be made in Whistler. Whereas the average value of property appreciated by 10% in 1999, properties in the \$1m plus category increased in worth by as much as 30% - an indication that the market for this property is being driven not by local or even regional but by global demand.

Testimony to this trend can be found in recent sales of an elite subdivision currently being constructed by Intrawest high up on the west side of Whistler Mountain (see figures 18 and 19).¹⁹³ Taluswood comprises five different projects, the most recent of which - a development of 26 ski-in, ski-out townhouses, each valued in excess of \$1m - sold out within a few hours.¹⁹⁴ Whilst 60% of the purchasers were from Vancouver and Whistler, 40% were long-haul purchasers, mainly from the United States.¹⁹⁵ The discovery of Whistler by the US market has been a marked phenomenon that is driving demand for the resort's high end real estate. One estate agent I spoke to explained:

“A year ago the ownership by US citizens in Whistler was zip; not anymore. It's like there's a light went on. Somebody found out about this exchange rate, told a friend, told a friend, and it's just been wild.”¹⁹⁶

Given the profitability of Taluswood, it is hardly surprising that Intrawest put a similar development at the top of *its* wish list with the project. Such an elite development, however, is hardly in keeping with a Vision of an affordable, middle-class Whistler, a Whistler for its workforce. The question thus became: how could the two agendas, the two visions of Whistler, be reconciled in a single, mutually beneficial plan?

¹⁹³ Construction of the Taluswood subdivision was actually begun by Whistler Mountain Corporation; however financing difficulties resulted in Intrawest stepping in as a partner in the project. The co-operation on the Taluswood development marked the beginning of a relationship which culminated in the mountain merger.

¹⁹⁴ This had been achieved without even having to advertise the development through Intrawest's normal marketing channels, such as direct mailouts to previous Intrawest customers.

¹⁹⁵ Beswetherwick, 'Taluswood sales,' p. 7.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Drew Meredith, Whistler Real Estate Company, 26th January 2000.

Rooms with a View



Figure 18: Ski-in, ski-out properties with expansive views of the Valley, such as these high up on Whistler Mountain, currently command the highest property prices in Whistler.



Figure 19: 'The Bluffs at Taluswood', an exclusive new development of townhomes by Intrawest. Owners for all these properties will have been found before construction commenced. Note the irony of the label 'townhomes' for properties supposedly closer to 'nature'.

Reaching compromise

Not surprisingly, it took the best part of two years for Intrawest and municipal staff to agree on a proposal. During the process, municipal planning staff demonstrated their ability to drive a hard bargain. Indeed, Doug Ogilvy, Vice-President of Intrawest's RDG in Whistler, thought that "the demands from the [Whistler] municipality, and also the level of scrutiny, is probably the highest of any muni or approvals jurisdiction I have had to work with by a very significant margin." That said, Ogilvy also felt Intrawest had been the recipient of some of the new 'spirit' of partnership that was driving the new organisational culture at municipal hall. Whilst the municipality had clearly come to the table with a demanding agenda, he felt that the nature of negotiations was cordial and co-operative, as opposed to antagonistic - a marked change from the past:

"You go back four years ago, there was more of an adversarial relationship between the municipality and the development community, which was at that time very much a concept of 'how much can we get from developers?' Whereas I felt going through this process, the test was more 'is this or is this not good design?'. There was certainly discussion of community benefit. We definitely worked as a team with the muni staff to approve the design so that everyone was happy with it."

What, then, was the basic structure of the agreement? To summarise: of the bed units that had accrued to Intrawest after the merger, the municipality agreed to transfer some (approximately 500) to a site in Intrawest's Upper Village on Blackcomb, where they would be used to construct a hotel. The remaining rights would then be split between three sites, all situated in the southern half of Whistler: the Whistler Creek village; a new

neighbourhood called Spring Creek; and a new residential subdivision high up the side of Whistler Mountain called The Peaks.

	Whistler Creek	Spring Creek	The Peaks
“Community” Benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • neighbourhood shops and services • flood protection of Creek area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fully serviced and rough graded school site • fully serviced day-care site; \$300,000 towards cost of constructing facility • fully serviced and rough-graded fire site • 138 resident townhouse units • playgrounds and park land dedications • valley trail connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big Timber park land dedication • valley trail extension
“Intrawest” Benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 hotels • commercial area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 46 single family lots • 48 townhouses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60 luxury ski-in, ski-out properties

Figure 20: The Comprehensive Development Strategy - who benefits?

Figure 20 above shows the benefits accruing to each party from the individual components of the package. As I have discussed in chapter two, the envisioning process for Whistler Creek helped to ensure municipal figures were on-board with the project from the outset. Indeed, the village’s historic theme and function as a community commercial area was largely in keeping with the municipality’s own vision. The agenda - and negotiating skill - of municipal staff becomes more evident in the proposal for Spring Creek. Not only did they manage to commit Intrawest to providing and servicing a site for a new school - at an estimated cost of \$1m; but they also made them agree to construct a

whole new *neighbourhood* around it, replete with a day-care facility, playgrounds and critically, a mix of market and resident (affordable) housing.¹⁹⁷

The 'concession' to Intrawest in the proposal is The Peaks. This subdivision, in a similar vein to Taluswood, comprises 60, ski-in ski-out estate properties, each with an estimated market value of over \$1m.¹⁹⁸ According to Doug Ogilvy, it was only the height of the Whistler real estate market that supported Intrawest putting so much community benefit on the table in the first place:

"When we started this programme... the pricing in Whistler and the general perception of where pricing was going would not support what the community ultimately received. The market shifted last winter, market values went up. The higher market values allowed us to increase the level of community benefit to carry that application through."

Neither Spring Creek, 40% of which is dedicated to non-profitable activities, nor even the village at Whistler Creek - because of the \$6m worth of flood proofing necessary just to prepare the area for development - made economic sense for Intrawest as stand-alone projects. Because of this, Intrawest attached a crucial condition to their proposal: either *all* three developments would be simultaneously approved by council or the deal would be off.

Although the 'bundling' of separate development sites into a single proposal - which became known as Intrawest's "Comprehensive Development Strategy" (CDS) - was a

¹⁹⁷ This is the kind of development that the municipality favours; it does not favour constructing 'ghettos' of affordability, spatially removed from exclusive market developments.

highly irregular way of doing business, municipal planning staff agreed that it was nonetheless a legitimate demand on Intrawest's part. They understood that Intrawest wanted assurance as to where all their development could go - the company could not risk future councils changing the goal-posts, potentially axing the one component of the development that was paying for the rest. Reflecting the spirit of partnership, staff also felt Intrawest had demonstrated a level of co-operation with the municipality that had been quite exceptional, especially given that the development rights were legally *theirs* to use anyway. As one planner told me:

"Those development rights were granted aeons ago... Everything we've extracted in the last couple of years has been topping up of that. I'm not sure what would have happened had Intrawest said 'no, we're not doing that'. I think it would have been very interesting and I'm not sure we would have won - those bed units were there, they had those, all they were looking for was a place to put them and they brought millions of dollars with them in community benefits just to find it."

He and his colleagues felt they had done their work: they had negotiated for the community a layer of benefit that was "unprecedented."¹⁹⁹ The majority of the public agreed: at a municipal Open House held to present the deal, the feedback was largely positive. "Do it all!", one resident wrote; "This appears to be a great proposal with lots of public benefit" wrote another; "Excellent! Don't let municipal council veto any of these

¹⁹⁸ Homes on the Peaks, however, will permit auxiliary suites which may only be rented to Whistler employees.

¹⁹⁹ Comparing the CDS to the Intrawest's Taluswood development shows how the municipality had 'upped' the stakes for this, the last round of development for Whistler. The Taluswood subdivision, representing 1,100 bed units, was approved in 1993 and was associated with just a million dollars worth of community benefit: some highway intersection upgrades, a small piece of park land and two tennis courts. The CDS, meanwhile, representing just 50% more bed units, is associated with a package of community amenities in excess of \$28m. As Doug Ogilvy put it, "In terms of the level of community benefit we ended up putting on the table to support the rezoning application was huge. These development rights were rights we had had for 18 years; although those rights were already enshrined, in order to place the development rights on the land in a manner we liked, we ended up adding on a layer of community benefit that was just unprecedented."

plans!” was the advice of another.²⁰⁰ Yet “veto these plans” is *exactly* what several members of council were intending to do. Why should this be so?

Over to the politicians²⁰¹

What enraged several councillors about the CDS, as Intrawest had anticipated, was the inclusion of The Peaks. Councillor Melamed regarded the 4000-7000 ft homes as a “gluttonous approach to land use.”²⁰² As a committed environmentalist and past chairman of AWARE, Whistler’s community-based environmental lobbying group, Melamed believed constructing a 2 km road just to access 60 property completely contradicted the municipality’s commitment to environmental sustainability, as articulated in the Vision. Furthermore, he felt The Peaks represented precisely the kind of social landscape he and other council members had observed in Colorado and had resolved would *not* be the template for Whistler. Councillor Kirk agreed, arguing that The Peaks catered not to the rich but the “*filthy rich*”²⁰³. Councillor Wilhelm-Morden also thought that Whistler could do without more “rich people”:

“People can say ‘let’s bring in the millionaires and billionaires because they pay high taxes and make no demands on the infrastructure’. We’ve got enough of those people already. *We’ve got an endangered community, they’re called the middle class.*” [my emphasis]

²⁰⁰ These quotes are from feedback forms received from attendants of the municipal Open House on the CDS.

²⁰¹ The following discussion is based on attendance at council meetings, interviews with councillors and comments made in local newspapers.

²⁰² Colin Heaney, ‘Council approves Creekside development plans,’ *Whistler Question*, 4th November 1999 p. A1

These three councillors all felt aggrieved that The Peaks had been bundled into one bylaw. Wilhelm-Morden called this a 'shrewd move by Intrawest', attempting, as it did, to disarm council of the *power* to reject the proposal. Whistler desperately needed a new school and councillors knew that the community would not thank them for passing up the opportunity to get one; as such, Wilhelm-Morden argued that the CDS "put a gun to the community's head." She was particularly angry with municipal staff for allowing the deal to evolve to this point:

"I was really quite cross with our staff that they had agreed and recommended that the three separate parcels... would all be considered by way of one bylaw. I thought that that made a mockery of the process - how could you possibly ask the neighbours at Bayshores what they thought about The Peaks when we desperately wanted the elementary school down at Spring Creek?"²⁰⁴

Her disapproval was echoed by Melamed. His criticism, however, was directed more pointedly at Intrawest. "Intrawest is supposed to be a partner in building our community" to told a local newspaper. "I would suggest we don't blackmail each other."²⁰⁵

Not *all* on council felt this degree of injustice, however. Councillor Sloan said she was "proud" of the deal; and Councillor Wells thought her fellow politicians had all too quickly forgotten that Intrawest had no legal obligation to co-operate with the municipality on a proposal that gave so much back to the community. She repeated the view of the planners:

²⁰³ This was a reference to Beaver Creek ski resort in Colorado, which the council had visited on their tour. The resort's developers said that their real estate market was not the rich but the 'filthy rich'.

²⁰⁴ Bayshores is the subdivision through which The Peaks would be accessed. Its residents were concerned about the increase in traffic that would be caused by the new access road to The Peaks.

²⁰⁵ Heaney, 'Council approves Creekside,' p. A1.

"I think the thing that people forget is they [Intrawest] have development rights. We're not *giving* them to them they've already *got* them. They could go ahead and develop them just for the sake of developing them and we could end up with not at all what we wanted."

In a similar vein, Councillor Milner *praised* Intrawest for succeeding where the province had failed:

"The provincial government has done such a fine job they don't have any money to build a school or buy the land or service the land. So the only magic we had was that Intrawest would provide the service lot. That's how we jumped the queue to get a school."

Milner, furthermore, did not share his fellow councillors' discomfort with the presence of 'the rich' in Whistler. This feeling, he implied, was nothing more than sour grapes:

"...they [the left-wingers on council] would have axed the Peaks because it attracts rich people. They hate rich people. Who are rich people anyway? I guess someone who has more money than them."

A happy ending?

When the time finally came for council to vote on the CDS - just weeks before the 1999 election - the result was split: three councillors voted in favour, and three voted against. What the deal effectively did was to fore-ground the ideological divide on council - to which I spoke in chapter one - between those members who might be regarded as 'pro-community' and those who are more neutral in their views towards growth and development. The irony, in this instance, was that the 'pro-community' faction were willing to forgo an unprecedented package of community benefits for the sake of not compromising - and not sharing power - with the corporation.

Given the hung vote, it was left to the mayor to make the casting ballot. As a key architect behind the deal, it came as no surprise that he voted in its favour - despite his 'pro-community' election stance. His justification for doing so was that he believed both Intrawest and the community needed certainty as to where the bed units would go. The fact that a rejection at this stage would have caused untold damage to the official municipal 'partnership' (as opposed to the council's more janus-faced relationship) with Intrawest was undoubtedly at the forefront of his mind.

They think it's all over: the Emerald Forest deal

"Newer mountain communities... less often exhibit the wisdom that bought earlier generations respect for natural processes and environmental limits. Indeed, accessible mountain areas today are in the vortex of 2 frequently conflicting forces; the pressure for development and the effort to preserve the quality of the environment"²⁰⁶

"I have three beliefs in life: death, taxes and the 52,500 bed unit cap."²⁰⁷

The CDS was *supposed* to be the end game for land development in Whistler. At the same time as the CDS was being hammered out, however, another deal was being thrashed out at Municipal Hall, again involving the 'guys from Intrawest', which would ultimately result in the municipality sanctioning yet more development over and above the bed unit cap. This time, however, it was not Intrawest but the municipality who had initiated proceedings. Municipal staff had called upon their 'partners' to assist them in a

²⁰⁶ Dorward, *Design for Mountain Communities*, p. 4.

²⁰⁷ Woman in favour of the municipality buying Emerald Forest outright, quoted in Bob Barnett, 'Emerald Forest deal panned, praised,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, 27th August 1999, p. 8.

complex deal to realise another goal articulated in their Vision: the preservation a “56 hectares of dense woodland and swamp.... so green that the sudden appearance of a leprechaun would seem appropriate,” known by locals as the “Emerald Forest”.²⁰⁸ The story of *how* IntraWest became a partner in the deal and the discourses that arose among politicians and community members surrounding both parties’ participation provides us with another critical insight into the way business is being done in the new, ‘corporate’ Whistler.

The background to the deal

Although the Vision 2002 document singles out conservation of the Emerald Forest as a municipal priority, the desire to preserve the Forest actually extends as far back as 1985. Early on in Whistler’s development, the municipality recognised the value of protecting a wetlands corridor between Green and Alta Lakes (see figure 4, p. 22) and set about expropriating land in the Valley. This was possible because the majority was owned by the Crown, who deeded land parcels to the municipality on the condition that they remained in their ‘natural’ state. The Emerald Forest - the last ‘link’ in the wetlands corridor - had, however, always been under the private ownership of a property group called Decigon; and by the late 1980s, in the face of a booming property market in Whistler, Decigon were anxious to realise the land’s value by undertaking a real estate development.

²⁰⁸ Brian Morton, ‘Battle looms over Whistler land deal,’ *Vancouver Sun*, 17th September 1999, p. B1.

Under the land's existing zoning, "Rural Resource 1", Decigon had the right to subdivide the property land into six, 20 acre lots, placing a single family home on each. From Decigon's point of view this was not a particularly profitable use of the plot, due to the disproportionately high cost of servicing six, dispersed properties. Decigon consequently began applying for higher-density developments on their property, in 1989 and again in 1994, but both proposals were rejected by council.²⁰⁹ The municipality was stalling - it wanted to preserve the lands but did not know quite how. Decigon decided the only way to force council to the negotiating table would be to press ahead with the an application to subdivide its property, which they did in November 1995. Crunch time for the municipality had come.

The council of the day, as Decigon anticipated, immediately voiced their opposition to the subdivision because, as one senior planner told me,

"...if you look at the history of development everywhere else in the world, 20 acre lots either don't stay 20 acre lots, or if you have a well-heeled individual paying \$2m for a lot you can guess they're going to put what they want on it. And that's not conducive to keeping the habitat values that are there. A tennis court is not a good place for cougars!"

Municipal staff, however, were so tied up with other proposals for other developments - in particular those associated with the new Village North development (an extension of the original Whistler Village) - that they had neither the time nor the resources to devote

²⁰⁹ Decigon's first proposal to develop the lands was submitted in 1989. This was a result of the council's decision to raise the development cap from 45,000 to 52,500 bed units as an incentive for developers to provide summer amenities in the resort. Decigon made an application to utilise some of these bed units but had its proposal rejected by the municipality. The reason was that the Emerald Forest lands had already been identified in the Valley's recreation master plan as a key site to be acquired and protected.

to the Decigon issue. Their response was to hire consultants to come up with a solution on their behalf. The consultants suggested that the municipality up-zone one 20 acre corner of the property, upon which Decigon could undertake a higher-density (40 lot) development. In exchange, Decigon would deed the rest of the lands back to the municipality in perpetuity. This option was met favourably by the public but by time the proposal had been worked through, it was the fall of 1996 and municipal elections had come around. This was a critical moment in the evolution of the deal. As the newly-elected mayor, Hugh O'Reilly, explained:

"The new council that was elected was very green. They put up significant environmental concerns about that approach. They felt that even a single road / single lot would *significantly* diminish the value of what we were trying to achieve. They thought, if you want to send the right message, you start preserving lands in their entirety. You don't compromise on them."

It was Ken Melamed and Nancy Wilhelm-Morden in particular, two of the councillors that were elected in 1996 on the back of pro-community, pro-environment manifestos, who advanced the position that the value of the Forest lay in its entirety, not in its parts. Other members of council were initially sceptical of the environmental logic informing this standpoint. Councillor Wells told me:

"The problem is there's varying environmental strategists all over. One person would say 'concentrate at the bottom, have an access road from the left side and you're fine'. The other says 'you've just completely disturbed the entire value of the ecosystem there'. Someone else would say 'you've just cut the bear path from one end of the valley to another and wildlife corridors have been destroyed'. The other will say 'the impact to the run-off from the wetland is ridiculous'. There are so many different angles depending on the bent of the environmentalist so making a choice based on their recommendations is very difficult".

Nevertheless over time, all but one member of council came round to the holistic view. The sole dissenter, Councillor Milner, rejected the environmental philosophy outright. His opinion was that the rhetoric surrounding the Forest ignored the reality of what it *actually* comprised (see figure 21):

“What is the forest? The forest is second growth, logged out years ago, it’s dissected by BC Hydro slash, BC Rail’s main line, a road, two gravel pits - they wanted to build on the gravel pits. But my colleagues said even *one* house renders the entire 140 acres worthless. “So why is that?”; “Well, we just think so”. That was the logic, if you can call it that.”

With a majority of council favouring preservation of the entire property, however, municipal staff were again instructed to find alternative ways of acquiring the Forest, involving neither subdivision nor rezoning. Purchasing the lands, although favoured by Wilhelm-Morden, was considered too costly: at an estimated value of \$10m, the acquisition would have consumed over half the municipality’s annual residential tax base. Attempts to get national and regional environmental organisations, such as Nature’s Trust, to acquire the land and put it in trust also proved unfruitful.

It was at this point that the municipal staff - embracing the ‘innovative’ business culture in vogue at municipal hall - struck upon the idea of finding a third party to make a deal, in the form of a ‘density transfer’. The thrust of such a deal would be as follows: in lieu of making a cash payment to Decigon for the Forest, the cash-poor municipality would offer development rights, in the form of ‘bed units’, to a third party willing to purchase the Emerald Forest lands from Decigon on their behalf. The catch with this approach was that the municipality didn’t *really* have any bed units in the ‘bank’ to play with either: the

CDS was supposed to be allocating all the remaining bed units accounted for in the resort's Official Community Plan (OCP). However, the municipality decided to take advantage of a controversial provision made in the OCP which permitted the cap to be raised, in *exceptional* circumstances, if council considered the community benefit to be substantial. In keeping with its Vision of conserving environmentally-sensitive lands, the majority of council deemed the Emerald Forest case to be one such 'exceptional circumstance'. Municipal staff were thus instructed to pursue the option.

To make the deal, staff needed to find a developer with enough financial resource to purchase the land from Decigon and enough environmentally-*insensitive* land on which to place the additional development rights. A number of different landowners in the Valley were approached, but only one fitted the bill: Intrawest.

The good citizen? Enter Intrawest

The involvement of Intrawest in the deal added another dimension to a process which was already becoming politically contentious. Most councillors were relieved to have found a partner who was willing to negotiate with them to achieve something they wanted; Intrawest did not, reportedly, jump at the opportunity to participate when first approached. Much was at stake for the corporation. Their resort development team were in the midst of trying to put together the single most important proposal in their history at Whistler - the CDS - and the last thing they wanted was for that to become confused with another, potentially controversial deal. Given these circumstances, Intrawest's decision to

enter discussions with the municipality was interpreted by some councillors as a 'good citizen gesture' by the corporation - a genuine response to a plea for help.

Others members of council, however - in particular, Wilhelm-Morden, one of the councillors who had pushed for the Forest to be preserved in its entirety in the first place - were less convinced about Intrawest's "benevolence". She was uncomfortable with having Intrawest, whom she regarded as already "too big of a player in this town", as a partner in the deal. "We would rather have made [the deal] with another company," she told me. When I suggested to her that some of her fellow councillors actually interpreted Intrawest's participation as a sign of 'good corporate citizenship', her response was incredulous:

N: Intrawest!!??

G: Yes.

N: Huh!

G: How do you feel about that?

N: [laughing] Absolutely not! That's hilarious. I mean... some of the members of council... oh, no, I'm not even going there... I mean, I just, I think it's really quite naïve to think anything but the fact that it was the bottom line that was drawing Intrawest to the table, not doing us a *favour*.

According to Intrawest themselves, they would have been ready to walk away from the negotiations within three weeks had it not been for the encouragement and persistence of municipal staff to keep them involved. The frustration for Intrawest was that Decigon's demands - by which we have to assume the price they wanted for their land - were "very hard to meet in terms of attaining an economically-viable project."²¹⁰ Councillor Wells agreed that the negotiations were "the longest... I've ever, ever had anything to do with"

and would not have been surprised had Intrawest upped and left. "If I was Intrawest", she told me,

"I'd really have wanted to walk out... I almost felt that Intrawest was going to come to us and say 'you know what, you asked us to pull you out of a mud puddle, we put out our hand, we extended the rope, you know, and now you let go? You know, we're not interested. We're really not interested. We've got other stuff that's more important'."

Despite the threats, the lure of the bed units kept Intrawest talking. And finally, in August 1999 - five years after Decigon submitted its original subdivision application - the terms of a deal were agreed upon. Figure 22 below shows how the deal worked.

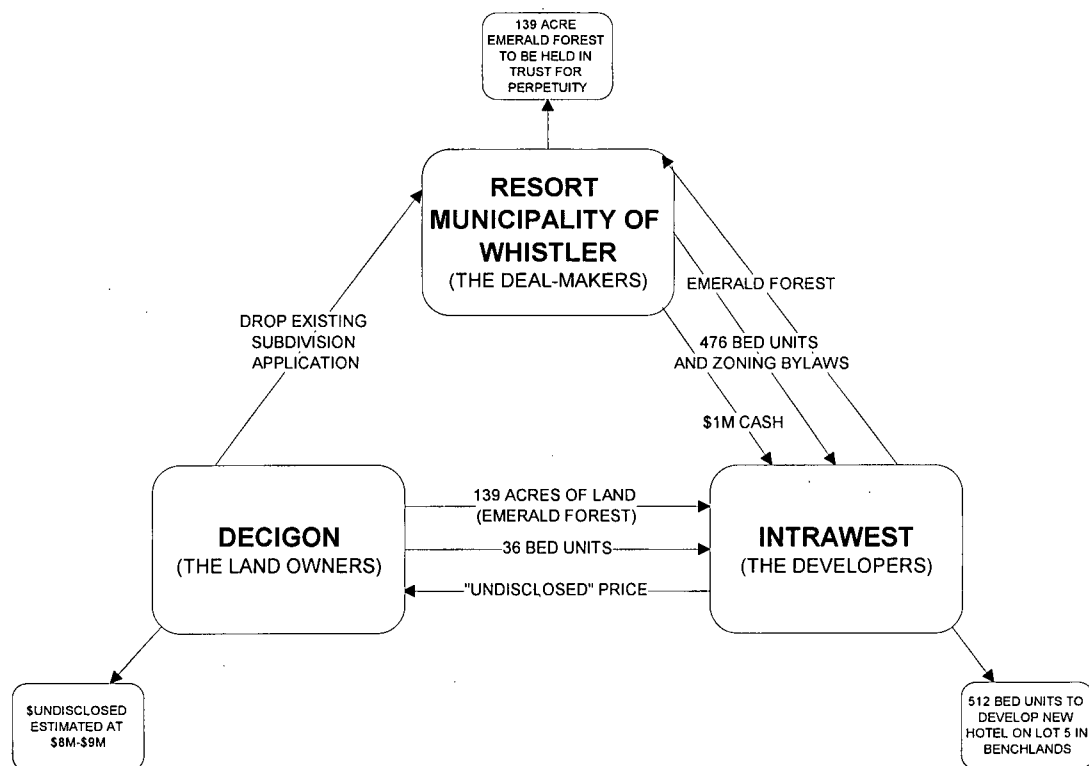


Figure 22: The Emerald Forest deal: how it worked.

²¹⁰ Interview with Doug Ogilvy, 9th February 2000.

In summary: Intrawest would purchase the Emerald Forest lands from Decigon, on the municipality's behalf, for an undisclosed sum. Intrawest would then deed the land to the municipality, who would put the land in trust for perpetuity. In exchange, the municipality would pay Intrawest \$1m cash and grant it the development rights to build a new hotel on day skier parking lot in the Upper Village - a location deemed to be of minimum environmental impact (see figure 23). A win-win-win situation: Decigon got market price for their land; Intrawest got the rights to a new hotel; and the community got the Forest. All that was left was to let the public know the good news.

The public reaction

It was at this stage in the process that municipality made a critical error of judgement. The terms of the agreement had taken so long to finalise that by the time it was ready for public hearing, another municipal election was looming in the fall. None of the parties to the deal wanted it to become an election issue. Decigon, in particular, did not want a repeat of what happened in 1996, when a change of council derailed the original plan. Consequently, this new deal had to be rushed through the usually lengthy public approvals process. The announcement was scheduled for the middle of August and took place at a council meeting which even the mayor and two councillors could not attend because they were on vacation. Not surprisingly, rather than appreciating that this was the outcome of several years of negotiations, the impression received by the public was that

A Forest (of Sorts) for a Hotel...



Figure 21: The part of Decigon's lands which is, to use the words of Councillor Milner, "dissected by BC Hydro slash, BC Rail's main line, a road and two gravel pits" and hence is "not worth saving."



Figure 23: The parking lot on Blackcomb where Intrawest's new hotel will be built. Owners of adjacent condominiums were enraged by the deal.

“this deal had been cooked up in 6 weeks and we were trying to slam it through whilst everyone was sleeping.”²¹¹

Rather than focusing on the outcome - the saving of the Forest - the community were “more concerned with what the municipality is giving up to get this deal, what Intrawest is getting out of it, and what alternatives might be left.”²¹² The problem lay in the fact that only the municipality, Decigon and Intrawest had been party to the whole deal-making process: because it was a land deal, negotiations had been undertaken in-camera. No-one in the community had been mentally prepared for what was coming. Consequently, what they saw was not ‘Emerald Forest: saved’ but ‘Intrawest: 500 units over the bed cap’.

Councillors admit that they had underestimated the strength of the public’s commitment to the development cap. For the majority in Whistler, it was not the actual *number* of bed units that were at issue. It was more an issue of *trust*. The council had been elected on the back of election pledges to adhere to the cap; to then announce, with no warning, that the cap was to be breached was tantamount to treason. One resident I spoke to complained that

“there’s no support within our planning department or Municipal Hall for this bed cap. They’re trying to rewrite it, they are constantly trying to downplay the importance of it. The bottom line is it’s the best indicator we have that we’re getting big.”²¹³

Many members of the community were clearly not happy with the way the municipality was doing business on their behalf. Was this going to be the thin end of the wedge? Were

²¹¹ Interview with Doug Ogilvy, 9th February 2000.

²¹² Bob Barnett (1999) ‘Can’t see the forest for the bed units,’ *Pique Newsmagazine*, 3rd September, p.32.

there more deals to come out of the woodwork? Why did this all happen behind-closed-doors?

The most vociferous opponents to the deal, however, were not permanent Whistler residents at all - not the 'community' as defined in the Vision - but part-time condo owners in the Upper Village. It was these people that would be the 'recipients' of the density transfer, Intrawest's new hotel. They felt aggrieved that their immediate environment should be valued less than the Emerald Forest. At a heated public meeting, they rallied council members to reject the deal and find another way. Their complaints fell mostly upon deaf ears. Only one councillor, Ted Milner, who had opposed the deal from the outset, championed their cause. The rest of council acknowledged that the deal was a 'bitter pill' for community to swallow and should not happen again but that they had gone too far down the road to turn their backs on it. Thus, on Sep 19th 1999, the deal was eventually approved, with a majority vote of 5-1.

Reflections on the deal: who wins?

So who were the *real* winners with the deal? The question still divides Whistler. Some say it was Decigon. "They made off like bandits!" exclaimed one real estate agent I spoke to. Councillor Milner shared this view. For him, it was a simple question of economics. In the original 'deal', put forward by the consultants, Decigon would have *given* 85% of the Forest lands to the municipality *for free* in return for a 'payment' of just 200 bed units. In

²¹³ Interview with Whistler resident Dave Williamson, 11th January 2000.

order to keep the Forest in its entirety, the municipality now has to 'pay' Decigon 500 bed units, plus \$1m. With the market value of a 'bed unit' estimated to be \$14,000, that represents a total cash equivalent of \$8m. Had Decigon actually pressed ahead and subdivided its land, Milner believed the most they could have expected was \$3m profit. "Decigon," he told me,

"couldn't believe it! In fact after the adoption, the Houghton brothers came to me and laughed and said 'you know and we know you're right, but I guess we have to take the extra \$5m!!' I said 'you assholes'!"

The view that the municipality 'paid too much' was echoed in letters to local newspapers and by some residents I spoke to.²¹⁴ The municipality might identify itself as a corporation but some thought its lack of business 'experience' showed through in the Emerald Forest deal: its private sector 'partners' could still drive the harder bargain. As a former planner for the municipality told me:

"The problem is that municipalities are *not* negotiators, they're not top Intrawest business, they're probably not as shrewd as the Decigon guys. That's not their fault; we're not trained in planning school to be hard core corporate negotiators."²¹⁵

Whilst some think that municipal inexperience at negotiating meant Decigon came out of the deal the winners, others believe that Intrawest profited most from the process: "there's no question that what IW got for it was a real good deal..." mused local columnist Paul Burrows. Materially, this may well be true. But in terms of public relations and image, what should have been a coup - the benevolent corporation stepping in to help the

municipality and save the community forest - ended up being a disaster. As one Intrawest employee put it:

“...the philosophy behind [the deal] should have happened before. And here you have the ‘evil empire’ carrying the baseball bat - just the *wrong* process. People needed to think about the holistic side of it before they could understand the partnership between the muni and the ‘borg’, Intrawest.”

The mayor agreed that, from the way that the deal was presented, it was a “no win situation” for Intrawest. Referring to the fact that the municipality actually asked Intrawest to be a partner in the deal, he told me that “no-one would believe that’s how it came about. They believed that Intrawest talked *us* into it, this was them scheming. There’s not a lot of upside for them and a lot of down.”

The view of Intrawest as the corporate philanthropist was certainly disputed by some residents. One felt that if Intrawest really wanted to demonstrate what a ‘good citizen’ of Whistler it is, then it would have made the Forest a ‘thank you’ gift to the community underwriting its success:

“If the community is willing and eager to sacrifice tax dollars to save the forest, why wouldn’t Intrawest be willing to make a sacrifice? This could be Intrawest’s legacy to the community of Whistler which fuels their empire. We could call it the Whoosh Forest, or the Emerald Intrawest Forest, or the Emerald forest that is located on Higher Ground.”²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Gordon Hall, ‘Are we paying too much for Emerald Forest?’ *Whistler Question*, 23rd September 1999, p. A9; Ryan Davenport, ‘Emerald Forest leaves too many questions, not enough answers,’ *Whistler Question*, 16th September 1999, p. A9.

²¹⁵ Interview with Caroline Hicks, 12th January 2000.

²¹⁶ Davenport, ‘Emerald Forest leaves too many questions,’ p. A9; ‘The Whoosh’ and ‘Higher Ground’ are references to slogans of Intrawest which I turn to consider in Chapter 4.

This said, there are also many other people in Whistler who, according to Whistler/Blackcomb Operations Manager Doug Forseth, “understood we facilitated in making it happen *for the betterment of the community*.” Indeed, Ken Melamed - the exact same councillor who accused Intrawest of blackmailing the municipality over the CDS, now praised Intrawest for its role in saving the Forest: “They [Intrawest] didn’t have to do this,” he said. “Certainly they benefit - but they are the ones that make it work.”²¹⁷

There was no doubt in Doug Ogilvy’s mind that the Whistler community, not Intrawest, were the real winners from the deal. He told me.

“In our minds 140 acres of park land in exchange for 500 bed units was a very big win for the community. So that was a misjudgement... I think it’s something that 20 years from now, the community will look back at the Emerald Forest and applaud the current council for having the perseverance to push this through. But at the present time there is still ambivalence out there in the community as to whether it was a good deal or a bad deal”.

A local columnist agreed with the sentiment that staff and council should be praised for doing what they thought was the right thing:

“The deal for the Decigon lands is done. It is a compromise that probably no-one is completely satisfied with, but council and staff deserve credit for pursuing alternatives with due diligence and then making the decision they feel is in the best interests of the whole community.”²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Councillor Melamed quoted in Bob Barnett, “RMOW ‘buys’ Emerald Forest for \$1m and 500 bed units,” *Pique Newsmagazine*, 13th August 1999, p. 5.

²¹⁸ Bob Barnett, ‘Opening Remarks: Emerald Forest deal the best of a sad situation,’ September 24th 1999, p. 2.

The bottom line, it seems, is that whilst almost everyone in Whistler was happy that the Forest was to be saved, no-one was completely satisfied with *how* the municipality got there.

Conclusion

Having told the stories of the CDS and Emerald Forest deals, it is now that we can begin to see the parallels between them. In both cases, the municipality had to contradict one component of its Vision to achieve another, embroiling politicians and community members in debates about which 'value' was more important, and calling into question the worth of a Vision which was there only to be contravened. More contentiously, in both cases, the municipality embraced highly 'irregular' and ostensibly *undemocratic* procedures (bundling projects together, in-camera negotiations) to achieve its goals.²¹⁹ Whilst for some in Whistler these dealings demonstrate a creativity on both the municipality's and Intrawest's part that should be applauded, others in the community have been disturbed by the blurring of government (the body that is supposed to represent "us") and big business ("them") through the formation of partnerships. As one resident put it:

"It appeared to me that the RMOW is very pro-Intrawest. They should hold a non-biased position."²²⁰

²¹⁹ Many residents of Whistler wanted to know why a referendum could not be held on the Emerald Forest deal. The response of council was that there was not enough time - the deal had to be approved before the elections. The issue of putting an end to the 'back-room dealing' actually became a platform upon which some mayoral candidates campaigned during recent elections. Loreth Beswetherwick, 'What goes on behind closed doors,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, November 18th 1999, p. 15.

²²⁰ Comment by resident on feedback form by resident at CDS Open House.

The response of the mayor and municipal administrator - the individuals who have been leading the transition to the 'entrepreneurial' approach - would be that to hold up a distinction between government and business - to continue to *think* in such a binary and debate whether the municipality is pro- or anti-Intrawest - is futile. In a place which is simultaneously a product, the government *is* business, the resort and the community *are* one, there are no 'winners' or 'losers'. Tourism development, they are suggesting, and corporate involvement within it, need not be the 'devil's bargain' that Hal Rothman and others claim it to be: what works for the community *can* work for the corporation, and vice versa. Putting in amenities to house and service their employees, for example, may compromise corporations' immediate profitability but is nevertheless essential to the sustainability of their business. Resort operations, not real estate sales, will be generating revenues in the long-term, and a workforce to manage and staff their lifts, hotels and retail outlets needs to be secured.²²¹ Similarly, the future competitiveness of ski resorts - and the livelihoods of the people who work in them (both directly for the corporation and in independent businesses) - will depend upon the corporation's ability to make a 'healthy return' on their investments. Skiing is not only a labour- but a capital-intensive business, requiring frequent *re*-investment in the mountain product.

Adopting such a long-term, 'strategic' perspective, however, requires a certain sort of mind-set - a mind-set not everyone in resorts is willing to assume. For some, "the corporation" will always be a force which must be viewed with suspicion at all times and

whose power must be continually kept in check. Despite the best efforts of the mayor and municipal administrator, this attitude is clearly evident in the politics of Whistler resort.

As Councillor Milner put it:

“There are people on council who hate Inrawest and will vote against them whatever they propose... Inrawest are thought of as big business in the old BC Social Democracy battle. Whatever that means. But it means something to a lot of my friends here.”

²²¹ Whistler/Blackcomb employees will actually have first refusal on some of the affordable housing at Spring Creek.

An association for all seasons
Making markets and broadening the brand

“Tourists may typically select among destinations on the basis of a total set of destination attributes, rendering firms’ individual marketing planning of limited value if it does not relate to strategies of other suppliers in the total offer.”²²²

With both the Comprehensive Development Strategy and Emerald Forest approved by November 1999, all remaining commercial land development in Whistler - pending no further ‘deals’ by the municipality - had been decided.²²³ The challenge, as the mayor and municipal administrator are well aware, is to maintain the health of the resort’s economy *without* depending upon the revenues and employment generated by physical growth. Although diversification into non-tourism industries is a goal outlined in the municipality’s Vision 2002, future economic sustainability will, in large part, be dependent upon attracting the highest-spending tourists to the resort for all four seasons of the year. The agency which has, in the past, been largely responsible for this task is the local tourism organisation, the Whistler Resort Association (WRA). I say ‘in the past’ because recent activities by Intrawest have resulted in the role of the association, and its ability to serve its members equitably, being brought into question.

In this chapter, I turn to examine the evolving marketing relationship between the WRA and Intrawest - its largest member - taking as a starting point claims that such a powerful

²²² Palmer and Bejou, ‘Tourism destination and marketing alliances,’ p. 617.

corporation 'does not need' the resort association. I show, on the contrary, that both organisations are actually working in partnership to promote the resort across increasingly segmented, and to ever more *exclusive*, geographical and temporal markets. I conclude the chapter with the story of how Intrawest, the WRA and the municipality attempted to strengthen the 'brand-image' of the resort by unifying under a shared logo - a move which raised debate as to whether the Whistler experience should really be so 'seamless'. I begin the chapter, however, with a description of the task and activities of the WRA.

Promoting the product: the Whistler Resort Association

The WRA's mandate is simple: "to grow the resort's business," with that business defined as tourism. This it achieves by organising itself into several different task-oriented divisions. The association's market development team is primarily responsible for identifying and growing markets - usually defined geographically - for the resort's products. Through their presence at travel and trade shows, they foster links with other industry players such as tour operators and airlines and raise awareness of the Whistler 'brand'.²²⁴ Once markets have become more established, the advertising team take over and devise promotional materials tailored to the *perceived* characteristics and preferences of those markets. The basis for many of their (and their members') decisions is the comprehensive market surveying and business monitoring the research department continually conducts within Whistler. Finally, as the press centre for the resort, the WRA

²²³ Remaining development over and above the bed cap will, however, be permitted for employee housing.

²²⁴ WRA staff also host so-called 'fams' - 'familiarisations' - where tour operators and other potential clients visit the resort and learn about the product.

acts as the 'face of Whistler', ensuring that its coverage in global media is widespread and as favourable as possible.

Just as the municipality offers a tourism 'product' in the form of maintaining parks and the Village infrastructure, the WRA is responsible for managing three products of its own: the Whistler Golf Club, the Whistler Conference Centre, and a series of annual Whistler events. These are vital to the success of resort businesses in two ways: firstly, any revenues they generate are ploughed back into the association's overall marketing budget;²²⁵ and secondly, and more importantly, all three products function to keep people coming to Whistler outside of the peak skiing season from Christmas to Easter. The golf business, for example, has been critical in filling resort accommodation in the summer.²²⁶ Similarly, the conference centre and events are vital mechanisms through which the WRA generates business for its members during 'shoulder seasons' - those periods in spring and fall which are traditionally the slowest times for the resort. The conference market is considered highly desirable because delegates' expenditures - based frequently, as they are, on company accounts - are amongst the highest per capita of all

²²⁵ The conference centre is typically a loss-leader for the WRA - room lettings do not cover the cost of the maintaining and managing the facility. The benefit to the resort is in the business conference delegates bring to the association's members.

²²⁶ 22% of all visitors to Whistler in the summer participate in playing golf at least once during their stay. "Summer" is defined by the WRA as the months of May through to October. *Tourism Whistler Business Performance Statistics 2000*, p.10. Unlike the conference centre, the Whistler Golf Course generates a profit for the WRA

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***Gratuities included in ticket price.*

Figure 24: Flyer for the resort association's annual 'Cornucopia' event. The food and wine extravaganza is used as a way to attract up-market visitors to the resort in an otherwise quiet time. Cornucopia is a perfect example of how a marketing association, through its ability to co-ordinate activities between different members, can work to the mutual advantage of all involved: it is unlikely that individual restaurants and hotels could stage an event of similar magnitude.

visitors to the resort.²²⁷ WRA-organised events, meanwhile, through their *temporal* 'theming' of the Whistler tourist product, function to make the resort appeal to highly segmented market groups at various times throughout the year. A 'Really Big Street Fest' is designed to boost Village attendance by families in the middle of August; a Bavarian-style 'Oktoberfest,' keeps adults coming to the resort the weekend after the mountains cease their summer activities; and Cornucopia, a food and wine festival staged each November, gives a primarily Vancouver-based market of budding gourmets a reason to visit the resort, in an otherwise dreary and uneventful time (see figure 24).²²⁸

The WRA adds value to the events it holds - and consequently its members' businesses - by 'packaging' for visitors with a hotel stay and restaurant vouchers.²²⁹ Responsibility for packaging Whistler is, in fact, another of the association's legislated tasks, through its operation and management of the resort's Central Reservation System (CRS).²³⁰ The CRS

²²⁷ In addition, the conference market is weather insensitive and commits its business to the resort a long time in advance, enhancing association members' ability to manage demand.

²²⁸ November is the quietest month in Whistler. In 1999 it had about two-thirds the visitors of the next quietest month, October, and just over a fifth of the visitors the resort experiences in its peak month, August. *ibid.*, p.11.

²²⁹ The activities of the WRA mirror other sectors of the tourism industry. Cruise lines, for example, now stage themed cruises - murder mystery, singles, nature-lovers - to capture particular market group at various points throughout the year; and even Disney World, already a themed environment, holds theme days - such as its annual 'gay day' - to tap into lucrative, specialised tourism markets. Auliana Poon would consider the practice of segmentation as illustrative of the 'new tourism', which she considers distinct from an era of mass ('old') tourism which preceded it. Poon, *Tourism Technology and Competitive Strategies*, pp. 85-98.

²³⁰ Poon, *ibid.*, also talks about the importance of CRSs and information technology in selling tourism experiences, pp. 92-94. In the 'old' tourism, she argues technologies were used to facilitate the mass production of services; now they are used to "facilitate flexible production and to manage capacity, yield and clients. The focus on technological applications in the new tourism is on global networks, telecommunications and value creation". In other words, whereas before tourist were presented with a singular 'package' by tour operators that offered little flexibility, now, through the use of CRSs, customers have the ability to choose the various components of their vacation and construct their own 'package' (for example, the airline, the type of accommodation, the lift pass). See also Simon Milne and Kara Gill, 'Distribution technologies and destination development: myths and realities' pp. 123-138 in Dimitri Ioannides and Keith Debbage, *The Economic Geography of the Tourist Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1998) for a discussion of the ownership and product distribution functions of CRSs. Milne and Gill argue

is a 'one-stop shop' where tourists can purchase not only accommodation but lift tickets, flights, airport transfers and car hire. The association's 1-800 number is listed on all the promotional materials it produces as the 'call to action' - the first point of contact for a potential consumer whose interest has been raised sufficiently by the advertisement.²³¹ In addition to the commissions which accrue to the WRA for selling its members' services, the CRS acts as another vital mechanism through which the association can distribute visitors across the resort's portfolio of products and manage tourist demand for its members' services.

Rebirth: a new vision, a new role

In a move which parallels the municipality, the WRA has itself recently emerged from a period of redefinition which culminated in a new corporate image and name for the association: "Tourism Whistler." The self-reflection was actually precipitated by a cash shortfall in 1997, compounded by the reality that revenues from membership (which have, in the past, increased significantly on an annual basis, in line with the resort's physical growth) would stagnate as build out approached. A new president, Suzanne Denbak, was hired in 1998 to help turn the organisation around and ensure it continued to

that CRSs "provide a good example of flexible service delivery systems that enable customers to make individual requests for specialised product combinations" (p. 129). They contend, however, that CRSs (and new information technologies in general) tend to be controlled by a few 'giant' industry players and small firms / tourism suppliers can face enormous difficulties gaining access to CRSs and global distribution systems; hence the need for small firms to ally together in a marketing association to operate such a system.

²³¹ The WRA's CRS is also being increasingly accessed by customers via the world wide web; it is now possible to book accommodation in Whistler from the association's web site and it has plans to make full packages available on-line in the near future.

deliver results, in the form of more business for the resort's businesses, well into the future. Just like Intrawest and the municipality before them, the first thing Denbak and her executive team did was to embark upon a 'visioning' exercise of their own, with the aim of answering the question "what are we here to do?"²³² The new role and strategy which emerged from this exercise has been most recently articulated in Tourism Whistler's *Business Plan* for 2000-2002.

The central theme of the vision is the need for Tourism Whistler to form *strategic partnerships*.²³³ Having leveraged all of its members' resources through creating a combined marketing budget for the resort, the task for the organisation now, in response to funding shortfalls, is to leverage that budget further by collaborating with other bodies in higher-level marketing initiatives. These bodies include other municipal, regional and national state-run tourism boards, for example, Tourism Vancouver, Tourism British Columbia and the Canadian Tourism Commission, in addition to package tour operators across North America, Europe and Japan.²³⁴ One of their most powerful 'partners', however, is to be found much closer to home: Intrawest.

²³² Bob Barnett, 'Feature: The next cycle,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, 14th October 1999.

²³³ 'Strategic partnerships' are defined by Palmer and Bejou as "a joining together (by means of dependency and collaboration of two or more organisations over a given time period in order to gain a competitive advantage." Palmer and Bejou, 'Tourism destination and marketing alliances,' p. 618.

²³⁴ The name change to 'Tourism Whistler' actually sought to bring the resort association into line with the names of its industry partners, such as 'Tourism Vancouver'. Without the name 'tourism' in its title, management thought the association was not conveying accurately - even to its members - what it was there to do.

Happy bed pals? Tourism Whistler and IntraWest

Whistler/Blackcomb - or 'the mountains', as they are referred to - are the single largest contributor to Tourism Whistler and with two members on the association's board, have a considerable say in the way marketing budgets are allocated. Unlike other businesses in the resort, however, who rely on Tourism Whistler to do practically all their marketing for them, Whistler/Blackcomb have, since the merger, been undertaking many of their promotional campaigns and marketing initiatives in-house.²³⁵ They manage their own web site, organise a host of on (and off-) mountain events throughout the year, and print advertisements in 'vertical publications' such as ski and snowboard magazines.²³⁶

These activities have contributed to a common perception that Whistler/Blackcomb and its parent corporation, IntraWest, see the resort association as nothing but a waste of money, feeling they could do a far better job without it. As Drew Meredith, a former board member of the Tourism Whistler, put it:

"I can tell you right now that IntraWest, in their mind, doesn't need Tourism Whistler. They would probably tell you they think it is a highly inefficient, expensive organisation. But it's mandated and legislated and that's just too bad."

²³⁵ Several of the large hotels, such as the Canadian Pacific Chateau Whistler and Delta Resort, will do some of their own destination marketing; being 'brand' hotels, however, they benefit from general advertising and brand awareness campaigns undertaken by their parent corporations.

²³⁶ 'Verticals' are mediums that guarantee the audience will be potential users of the product; Whistler/Blackcomb can be confident that readers of ski magazines will, for the most part, be skiers. The problem with advertising only in 'verticals', however, is that as specialist publications, only a small percentage of skiers - generally enthusiasts who need no convincing to ski - will read them. Reaching a wider audience will require advertising in 'horizontal' media such as newspapers. The trade-off here is that only a very small percentage of the total readership of 'horizontals' will be skiers. The task for

This perception has been fuelled by a recent venture which saw Intrawest acquire Resort Reservations Whistler (RRW), a direct competitor to the WRA's central reservations service. RRW started out in 1996 as the initiative of Whistler businessman Stan Sprenger and within three years had succeeded in accumulating \$7m worth of reservations business, compared to the WRA's \$10m.²³⁷ The company became an attractive buy for Intrawest, who were looking to replicate the forward vertical integration undertaken by competitor Vail Resorts through the creation of their own in-house travel agency. After acquiring RRW and its sister company, Mont Tremblant Reservations, Intrawest amalgamated the two into a system-wide reservations agency called "Intrawest Vacations."²³⁸ Headed up by Sprenger, the company now sells inclusive air and hotel packages to all of the corporation's resorts, including its new warm-weather resort at Sandestin in Florida (see figure 25). In addition to providing a critical channel through which tourists can be 'fed' into the corporation's resorts, Intrawest Vacations is actually the first step in a campaign to establish the Intrawest *brand* as the providers of a consistent, high-quality, resort experience, in a similar way to 'Disney' or 'Club Med'. The idea is that if a customer is happy with their resort experience at Whistler/Blackcomb, they can be assured of an equally memorable experience at Copper or Tremblant simply *because* "it's an Intrawest."

Whistler/Blackcomb is thus to calculate which media will in fact illicit the highest response to advertisements placed in them.

²³⁷ Loreth Beswetherwick, 'Intrawest buys reservation company,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, 13th August 1999, p. 8.

²³⁸ The service makes full extent of e-commerce capabilities and its web site can be accessed as a link from all Intrawest's individual resort home-pages.

Although Intrawest Vacations is currently very small, having only been in business for two seasons, the operation represents a conflict of interest between Whistler/Blackcomb and the members of Tourism Whistler. Through its aggressive marketing and wider reach, Intrawest Vacations may steal away more and more of the customers who would otherwise have used Tourism Whistler's CRS - eating into its commissions which are a source of income for its marketing budget.²³⁹ Furthermore, whereas a Whistler business listing on Tourism Whistler's system is included with the membership fee, a listing on Intrawest Vacations' is *not*. The result is that smaller businesses - such as 'ma and pa' bed and breakfasts - will be excluded from the business that is diverted from Tourism Whistler, unless they pay to be listed at Intrawest Vacations.²⁴⁰ One Whistler businessman expressed the obvious anxiety Intrawest's move caused to resort association members:

"Is Intrawest going to completely rob the WRA of their ability to effectively operate their central reservations? It is not fair to other members of the WRA that rely on this service to fill their rooms and sell their services."

Doug Forseth, Operations Manager for Whistler/Blackcomb, acknowledged that the acquisition of RRW did not improve the corporation's relations with Tourism Whistler or its members. "They reacted with concern," he told me. "They don't know what it means to them." He was keen to point out, however, that the move was a *head office* initiative - not one emanating from within the ranks of Whistler/Blackcomb. Indeed, the acquisition

²³⁹ An inquiry about accommodation on Whistler/Blackcomb's web page, for example, will take the user not to Tourism Whistler's site but Intrawest Vacations'. Indeed, Tourism Whistler has now had to title its web site 'The *Official*' web site of Whistler to assert its status as the 'neutral' CRS of the legislated resort association.

²⁴⁰ Even if they are listed on Intrawest Vacation's CRS, it is unlikely that staff tending the phones will be as neutral in their opinion regarding which property to stay in as those at Tourism Whistler.

of RRW provides us with an interesting case study of where Intrust *corporate* strategy can unwillingly pit the Intrust-owned but independently managed mountain operations against their resort 'partners'. As Forseth explained:

"There is no question that corporate initiatives at time... cause us problems with our partners in the community... The deciding factor of acquiring that company [Resort Reservations] had nothing to do with Whistler/Blackcomb. It was a company wide initiative... It just so happens that there's a conflict here in Whistler with Tourism Whistler and we started talking about how we can resolve it."

Forseth was not forthcoming about exactly *how* the situation would be 'resolved'; neither was the Vice-President of Marketing and Sales for Tourism Whistler, Barrett Fisher. They both stressed, however, that despite the perception, there was no rift between the two organisations. On the contrary, they had just committed to work in partnership to leverage their marketing resources and adjust to the changes in their relationship brought about by the merger.

Carving up the market: marketing for the winter

Prior to the merger, the marketing relationship between the resort association and the mountains was relatively clear-cut. The individual mountains would compete for the regional skiing market, directing their campaigns at skiers from Vancouver and Washington State; the WRA, meanwhile, did almost all of the destination marketing for the resort, targeting longer-haul markets in continental North America, Japan and Europe. The arrangement made sense. Day skiers were not choosing which place to ski *at* but which mountain to ski *on* - Whistler or Blackcomb; thus the independent attributes of

each mountain were critical to their decision. Destination skiers, however, simply needed to be persuaded to come to Whistler - as opposed to Vail or Lake Louise - and which mountain they would ultimately ski on was irrelevant until they arrived (indeed, a dual mountain pass was eventually introduced for their benefit). With the merger all lift passes to all customers became valid on both Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains. Whistler/Blackcomb, with the marketing resources of Intrawest corporation behind them, were able to begin directing their energies to more productive uses than squabbling over the local market. This translated into attracting more high-yielding skiers from Canada, the US and the UK, bringing the mountains, for the first time, into the territory of the resort association and creating the kind of competitive situation which marketing alliances are supposed to eliminate. Inevitably, according to Doug Forseth, the activities of the two organisations have begun to "overlap to some extent."

To minimise this duplication and market confusion, the two bodies are in the process of forming a "partnership agreement" which will map out exactly how they will co-operate to leverage their combined marketing resource. To date, co-operation has taken the form of pooling funds for joint winter advertising and direct mail programs in the target destination ski markets of California and Ontario.²⁴¹ They have also participated jointly in consumer ski shows throughout North America and in the UK. In the future, however, the terms of the agreement may well mean that Tourism Whistler withdraws altogether from *winter* promotional activity in certain geographical markets, allowing

²⁴¹ Significantly, on any advertisement that is funded jointly by Whistler/Blackcomb and the WRA, the resort association's telephone number and web-site (as opposed to the mountains' or Intrawest Vacations')

Whistler/Blackcomb to take the lead. During the ski season, the mountains are, after all, Whistler's *raison d'être* and what has given the place its reputation as the 'number 1 ski destination in North America'. Their exceptional qualities - the unparalleled vertical drop, variety of terrain, lift technology and excellent snow record - are such that avid skiers and snowboarders will travel half way across the world to experience them. Furthermore, with perhaps the exception of cross-country skiing in the valley, practically all winter outdoor activity takes place on the mountains, meaning that Whistler/Blackcomb - unlike other businesses in the resort - can be more or less certain that it will benefit from every extra individual who comes to Whistler. In the summer months, however, it is a different story altogether.

"Oh it's a long, long time / From May to December": marketing for the summer

Compared to the revenues generated in winter, the summer business for Whistler/Blackcomb is a drop in the ocean. Nevertheless, keeping the mountains open throughout the year performs two vital functions that contribute to the company's overall financial and operational sustainability. Firstly, it allows the mountains to retain a permanent staff, reducing the cost of having to recruit and train new employees at the beginning of every season and losing "good people" at its end; and secondly, it makes sense to put their lifts - which largely represent fixed capital and entail little incremental cost to keep running - to work for twelve months of the year as opposed to six. Making summer operations feasible, however, has required Whistler/Blackcomb identifying new

will appear. This is because whilst the mountains are represented by their membership of the WRA, the

markets for their product, tackling the widely-held perception that ski mountains are just for skiing on.

One of the growing summer markets for the mountain product in recent years has been mountain biking. Ski mountains lend themselves to this 'extreme' sport, offering as they do a carry-service up the hill (the ski lifts) and clear-cut trails (the ski runs) back down. To capitalise on the gaining popularity of the sport, Whistler/Blackcomb have begun running training camps and race days which allow them to add crucial value to the price of the lift ticket - just as equipment rentals and lessons do with skiing. Even so, biking does not even begin to fill the gap created by the departure of the skiers. As Arthur Dejong, Mountain Access Manager explained:

"We started doing mountain biking 10 years ago with guided tours. But we're not making much money, you know, it's not very profitable. We might make a few dollars... But we're competing with the Whistler valley which has so many different trails. It's not going to be a big breadwinner for us, even if we put a lot more money into it."²⁴²

The bulk of the revenues from summer lift operations actually come from sight-seers or hikers making the trip in the gondola up to the summit of Whistler Mountain.²⁴³

Whistler/Blackcomb also encourage people to use the lifts by making the mountains natural 'stages' for performances - for example, a series of 'summit concerts' take place atop Whistler Mountain each August.²⁴⁴

other members of the association are *not* represented by the mountains or Intrawest Corporation.

²⁴² One of the preferred spots for mountain bikers in the Valley is none other than the Emerald Forest.

²⁴³ About 30% of visitors to the resort in the summer use the Whistler Mountain gondola for sight-seeing. Of these, only about 40% will actually walk further than 1km from the gondola station.

²⁴⁴ These concerts are actually organised in partnership with Tourism Whistler. Tourism Whistler chooses to provide the programming for and promotion of the event because the staging of these "spectaculars"

In addition to trying to grow the lift-generated business, Whistler/Blackcomb have begun utilising their lands in the Upper Village of Blackcomb for a summer “Adventure Zone” - Whistler’s answer to Disneyland. Aimed primarily at children, this is recognition of the need to cater for the *family* market in the summer: almost 40% of summer visitors now comprise married couples with children, as opposed to 28% in the winter.²⁴⁵ Attractions in the zone include alpine slides, mountain wall climbing, horseback rides and trapeze-flying, all configured to conjure up the excitement and atmosphere of the theme park (see figures 26 and 27).

The theme park idea is carried through into Whistler/Blackcomb’s promotional material for its summer product, its so-called *Alpenguide* (see figure 28).²⁴⁶ This conveniently divides the mountain up into five ‘zones’ - which, incidentally, are not necessarily spatially exclusive. Each zone caters to a different market: for ‘nature’ and views, you are

serves to attract visitors who otherwise would not have come to the resort and hence would not have taken advantage of the product offerings (hotels, restaurants, shops) of other association members. Note also how the metaphor of the ‘stage’ can be applied to the mountains, just as it was to the village in Chapter 2. There is nothing, it seems, that cannot become a ‘stage’ for generating revenue in the resort context.

²⁴⁵ Tourism Whistler *Business Performance Statistics* 2000, p.8.

²⁴⁶ Susan Davis in *Spectacular Nature: Corporate Culture and the Sea World Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) offers an excellent discussion of the ‘theme park’ experience of nature through her case study of Sea World. “If nature”, she says “compensates for the urban world, offers cultural capital, provides a path to self improvement, and proposes to help people transcend every day life, the nature entertainment of the theme park may at once become the real thing and is system of distribution” (p. 237). Davis’ concern lies with the privatisation and commodification of nature through the corporate-controlled theme park the way nature is (mis) represented in the theme park setting. The latter idea is touched upon by Alexander Wilson in his discussion of the presentation of nature at Disney World and EPCOT centre. See *The Culture of Nature*, pp. 157-193. Interestingly, what Whistler/Blackcomb is doing is actually the *opposite* of Disney or Sea World: rather than creating a theme park and putting nature in it, it is taking nature, adding to it and presenting it as a theme park for the ready consumption of tourists. Paul Cloke and Harvey Perkins, in their study of the representation of adventure tourism in New Zealand, argue similarly that the entire *country* is presented as “one big adventure theme park”, with tourist brochures promising “the white-knuckle excitement of contemporary theme parks but in a ‘natural’ outdoor setting.” Cloke and Perkins, ‘Representations of adventure tourism,’ p. 204; 206.

“Whistlerland”: Blackcomb’s Adventure Zone



Figure 26: Children queue up for a go on the Adventure Zone’s ‘Westcoaster slide’. The slide is a perfect example of how Whistler/Blackcomb are devising new ways to “make money from mountains” during the summer months.



Figure 27: Can you climb the “Great Wall?” A safe alternative to the real thing, the climbing wall gives children a chance to practice their mountaineering skills whilst their parents watch - and pay.

WHERE TO FIND YOURSELF - AN ORIENTATION

Between these two towering giants, activities, facilities, events and natural highlights abound. One day could find you walking along a Whistler Peak ridge at 6,500 feet. That same evening you could be swinging on a trapeze 30 feet above the net at the Blackcomb Base Adventure Zone. For your ease of navigation, we have divided the area into several zones. And where space allows, we've included a "notes" section so you can plan your itinerary.



Orientation

6

The Whistler High Alpine Zone

If you pick one thing not to miss, this is it. This zone starts at the top of the Whistler Village Gondola and extends as far as the eye can see. Hike down to a sparkling alpine lake at tree-line, or head up the stony peaks and gaze into the ancient blue eye of a glacier. At the centre of the action is the Roundhouse Lodge — the largest high-alpine restaurant in North America. A full description of the High Alpine Zone starts on page 9.

The Whistler Mountain Bike Zone

Whistler is a fat-tire mecca. So if you plan to ride here, the Mountain Bike Zone is a must. More than 100km of single track trails await, all accessible via the Whistler Village Gondola. The zone also includes a skills learning centre, trials park and a dual slalom course offering timed runs every day. Camps and guided tours are offered by a team of top instructors. For specifics on the Mountain Bike Zone, turn to page 21.

The Blackcomb Base Adventure Zone

At the base of Blackcomb Mountain, you'll find an endless range of activities, from trapeze-flying to horseback tours. And Merlin's Bar & Grill is a great place to wind down after a hot day of mountain exploring. For the complete lowdown, turn to page 23.

Shop Zone

Our retail locations stock everything you need to make your Whistler vacation complete, from logowear to equipment rentals. Or, if you're looking for a quick refreshment or a meal to fuel up after the day's activities, our restaurants are here to serve you. For more information, turn to page 27.

Event Zone

From concerts to races and the Alpine Wine Festival, summertime in Whistler is a carnival of events, music and attractions. Check out our listings on page 29 to see what's coming up.

Figure 28: Intrawest's summer *Alpenguide*

invited to take the gondola to the 'High Alpine Zone'; for thrills and spills you enter the 'Mountain Bike Zone'; for family fun, you head to the Blackcomb Adventure Zone; for a souvenir and a bite to eat, it's the 'Shop Zone' you're after. And if, after all that exertion, you've run out of energy, you can sit and be entertained in the mountains' 'Events Zone'.

What is significant about the *Alpenguide* is that it is *only* distributed within Whistler. Indeed, Whistler/Blackcomb themselves undertake no summer promotional or marketing activity outside of the resort. Despite innovations to their on-mountain product and the growth in activity markets such as mountain biking, Whistler/Blackcomb are well aware that the (ski) mountains alone are not sufficient reason to draw tourists to Whistler in summer. Indeed, during these months, it is much more the "*total* set of destination attributes" which will sell Whistler to potential visitors.²⁴⁷ As a consequence, Whistler/Blackcomb leave the responsibility for getting people to the resort to the body which represents that total set of attributes, the resort association. The challenge for association staff, however, is not simply 'getting people to the resort' but making sure they get the *right sort* of people.

Although Whistler now receives more visitors between May and October than it does November to April, the "problem" with the current summer constituency is that it yields

²⁴⁷ Here I deliberately repeat the quote by Palmer and Bejou with which I began. Rob Davidson and Robert Maitland similarly argue that "destination management is thus in a real sense concerned with the management of a *portfolio* of products in a destination"; Davidson and Maitland, *Tourism Destinations*, p.56.

two-thirds less per capita than its skiing counterpart.²⁴⁸ This drop in yield can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, whereas in the winter almost every visitor to the resort is paying to take part in some on-mountain activity, many of the amenities which attract visitors to the resort in the summer months, such as the valley trail, the parks and lakes and the village street entertainment, are free; consequently, the opportunities for Whistler businesses to add value to the visitor experience are much reduced. Secondly, summer visitors to Whistler are almost exclusively local and regional in origin, with the result that they stay for shorter periods, if they stay at all.²⁴⁹ Moreover, their decision to go to the resort is highly dependent on uncontrollable factors such as the weather, making demand management a much more difficult task.²⁵⁰

As a response, Tourism Whistler is pursuing a number of strategies to make summer business more lucrative and reliable for its members. Firstly, by raising awareness amongst tour operators that Whistler is very much 'open for business' in July and August, it is attempting to convert its destination ski markets, particularly those in North America and Europe, into destination *summer* markets - markets which will book in advance, stay for longer and spend more. The logic is that, as active sportsmen and women,

²⁴⁸ 1,326,316 visitors came to the resort between May and October 1999 compared to 942,465 between November 1998 and April 1999. The average expenditure per party per stay in winter 1997/8 was £2,203; this compares to just \$793 per party per stay in summer. Tourism Whistler *Business Performance Statistics* 2000, p.11.

²⁴⁹ This is reflected in occupancy rates for the resort's accommodation. In the 1998/99 winter season paid occupancy was 63% and the average length of stay (based on figures from Tourism Whistler's CRS) was 3.97 days; in summer it was 43% and 2.2 days. Furthermore, the winter accommodation market is actually *growing* more rapidly than the summer one - the number of room nights sold in the 1998/99 represented an increase of 21% on 1997/98; the increase in summer nights sold, however, was just 2%. Tourism Whistler *Business Performance Statistics* 2000, p.12.

snowboarders and skiers will be just as excited by the prospect of white-water rafting, alpine hiking and water skiing as they are practising moves in the half-pipe or taking to the powder. Secondly, the association is attempting to cream off some of the Vancouver-based cruise ship market, by positioning Whistler as an ideal pre- or post-cruise destination. Cruise tourists, typically more mature in years, are highly desirable to Whistler businesses because of their relatively high expenditures on accommodations, food, gifts and health treatments. In presenting Whistler to this audience, Tourism Whistler emphasises not the thrills and spills to be had in the 'great outdoors' but the resort's top quality hotels, spas, sophisticated shopping and easy access to 'nature'.²⁵¹ Thirdly and finally, by making renovation the Whistler Golf Course a priority and packaging it in conjunction with resort's two other courses, Tourism Whistler is hoping to attract a larger share of the rapidly expanding North American golf market, presenting Whistler as the "Number One Golf Destination in North America" and making golf do for summer what skiing has achieved for winter.²⁵²

From divergence to convergence

With their preference for destination markets over local and regional ones, we begin to see how Tourism Whistler's strategy actually mirrors, not contravenes, that of Intrawest Corporation. Both organisations have an interest in keeping the resort of Whistler

²⁵⁰ Visitors from British Columbia and Washington State account for over 50% of all hotel nights sold in the 1999 summer season (compared to 35% in winter). Tourism Whistler *Business Performance Statistics* 2000, p.6.

²⁵¹ The cruise ship market tends to be older couples who are less inclined to partake of strenuous activities.

²⁵² Golfers, like conference guests, are classified as a 'high yield' market.

exclusive. Neither wants to “put volume where volume is not necessary” by catering to a mass, undifferentiated market of tourists; rather they are want to ensure that the *yield* generated by each and every visitor is maximised.²⁵³ Furthermore, Intrawest - as can be seen from their village-building philosophy - are acutely aware that making their mountain resorts four-season destinations will make or break their business. In the winter, it is true that Whistler/Blackcomb could probably sell themselves without too much assistance from a resort association. This is largely because the winter market for the resort, although *geographically* more dispersed, is fairly homogenous, comprising mainly people who have come specifically to ski and snowboard. In the summer and shoulder seasons, however, the need to promote the *entire* product portfolio of the resort and tailor the Whistler experience to the needs and wants of a greater variety of market *segments*, ranging from conference delegates to cruise passengers and thrill seekers, means that the work and resources of the collective marketing body come into their own. As Doug Forseth of Whistler/Blackcomb put it:

“Do I think we could work without Tourism Whistler? No. I think we should be partners with Tourism Whistler. Could we go it on our own? Sure. Would it be as successful? No. That would not be a good move in my mind at all.”²⁵⁴

²⁵³ The quote here is from Barrett Fisher of Tourism Whistler. Poon in ‘Tourism, technology and competitive strategies,’ pp. 96-98, argues that ‘yield management’ is another trait of the ‘new tourism’. In the old tourism, management practice focused on filling capacity (on planes, hotels and coaches) “with anybody and everybody.” Now, the emphasis is on configuring the mix of customers so that the yield (i.e. spending) per customer is maximised. The trend can be seen throughout the industry - for example British Airways most recent corporate strategy is to focus on attracting lucrative business class passengers and reducing capacity in the cut-price, economy cabin. British Airways *Annual Report* 1999.

²⁵⁴ Testimony to the fact that Intrawest corporation needs collaborative marketing organisations such as Tourism Whistler is paid by the fact that it has just helped to establish an independent resort association in Tremblant.

All is not what it seems: a shared logo for Whistler

Although Whistler/Blackcomb and Tourism Whistler are committed to working together to sell the resort, when it comes to presenting the consumer with a coherent Whistler brand-image they still have some way to go. For, as it stands, a visitor to Whistler will be confronted with not *one* but numerous different graphics and word-marks which in some capacity of other are supposed to say 'Whistler' (see figure 29).²⁵⁵

The logo the visitor is most likely to encounter when he or she is the resort is that which denotes 'the mountains'. Immediately following the merger, Whistler/Blackcomb introduced an interim logo, designed in conjunction with the WRA, to signify that the Intrawest had achieved the impossible and made two mountains into one - for the purposes of skiing at any rate. The logo was known as 'Higher Ground', after the slogan underscoring it. Although this would become the trademark which would adorn official mountain merchandise, ticketing and advertising materials, the old logos for the individual mountains - Whistler and Blackcomb - were retained to act as 'geographic signifiers' within the resort (see figures 30 and 31). 'Higher Ground' was itself replaced in August 1999, when a new Whistler/Blackcomb, dubbed 'The Whoosh' after its 'dynamic W' appearance, was launched. The Whoosh has been identified by locals as all manner of things, from a pair of ski goggles to a moustache and its uncanny similarity to

²⁵⁵ The significance of a logo in presenting a coherent destination image is discussed by Cloke and Perkins in 'Representations of adventure tourism,' p. 190. Their example is the fern leaf that was chosen to symbolise Brand New Zealand. Whilst they offer a description of the marketing rhetoric behind the logo, they curiously withhold from the reader a depiction of it.

Nike's stripe has meant it has become the subject of local derision. One Whistler columnist jested:

"Do you like my new moustache? I think as a moustache, it's very becoming. Gives me a Dali-esque eccentricity doesn't it? Intraborg likes it. They paid someone \$300,000 to copy it... I wonder if they consulted Nike and were told to *just do it?*"²⁵⁶

The official line is that The Whoosh's "fluid movement" can be "associated with mountain sports, with snow tracks, glacial curves, the rivers, the Sea to Sky highway and mountain bike tracks"; its colours (silver, black and 'natural pigment' red) represent the weather, strength and Canadian pride.²⁵⁷ There is more to 'The Whoosh', however, than what meets the eye. For behind its inception lies a series discussions between the three major partners in the resort - the mountains, the municipality and Tourism Whistler - surrounding the possibility of all three organisations adopting a shared logo. Instead of having several logos representing the different components of the total Whistler product managed by the key players, the idea was to have one marker that simply signified 'Whistler'.

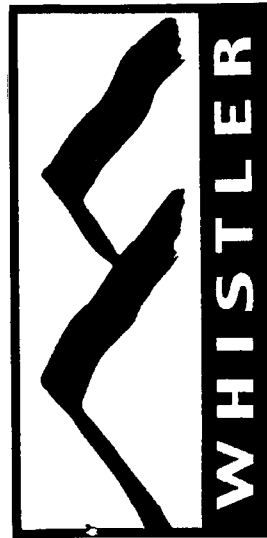
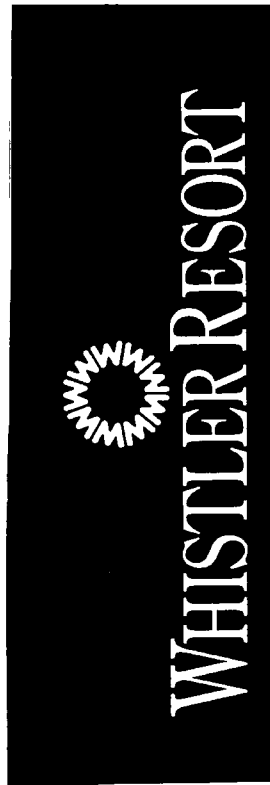
²⁵⁶ Stewart Glen, 'Logo a go-go,' *The Sea to Sky Voice*, August 13th 1999, p. 13.

²⁵⁷ Dave Perry, Vice-president of Marketing for Whistler/Blackcomb cited in Amy Fendley 'Behind the new identity,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, August 13th 1999, p. 12.



The "Higher Ground" logo was launched immediately after the merger...

...then a new identity, "The Whoosh", was launched by Whistler/Blackcomb in August 1999



The 'circle of Ws' has been the WRA's logo since 1979...

...but it was changed in October 1996 to the new 'twin peaks' logo, to accompany the association's name change to Tourism Whistler



The RMOW have had their logo even longer, since 1975...

...but a graphic designer is currently working on a new one. Will it one day be shared by the three key players?

Figure 29: Logo-a-go-go: how many ways to say "Whistler"?

Geographic Signifiers



Figure 30: Despite the launch of a new logo to signify ‘the mountains’ after the merger, each mountain’s individual logos have been retained as ‘geographic signifiers’ in the resort. This one for Blackcomb is located at the entrance to the Upper Village. In the background is Club Intrawest, a warm-bed time-share development operated by the corporation.

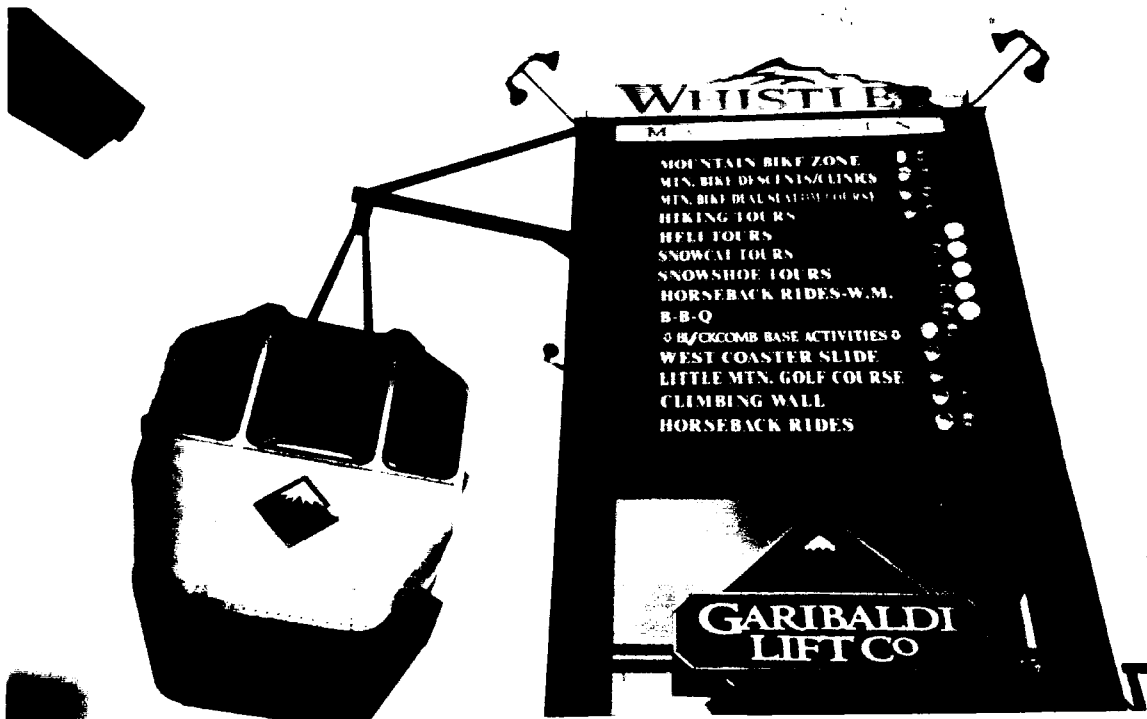


Figure 31: This logo for Whistler Mountain stands atop an activities board, letting visitors know what they can do on the mountains that day. Intrawest wanted to show respect for Whistler Mountain’s “history” (and reinforce that it was a *merger with*, not *take-over of* the mountain) by keeping its old logo in circulation.

Both the mayor and municipal administrator - in new entrepreneurial fashion - have been particularly keen on the idea of adopting a shared logo. Jim Godfrey thought such a move would enable the three partners to leverage even further their marketing resources: "if we combined the look," he argued, "we would have more of a vertical penetration and people who get more value for money". The mayor's goal in the initiative was to help make the various partners' responsibilities within Whistler "seamless" for the visitor - in other words, removing the markers which denote the beginning of each organisation's "territory": "When visitors leave, they should walk away thinking Whistler was unbelievable, fantastic. And I don't know who did it all but it was all working." Doug Forseth of Whistler/Blackcomb agreed, arguing that it would be "very positive" for the three organisations to use the same identity. "You're just going to see it more, from a branding standpoint. It's certainly getting the message out in a stronger way than having three different word-marks." Barrett Fisher of Tourism Whistler similarly thought that a shared logo would "create consistency in the marketplace."²⁵⁸

Despite such consensus among the key players as to the benefits of a single image, something went wrong during the negotiation phase. For just two months after The Whoosh was launched, the resort association unveiled a new logo to accompany its relaunch as Tourism Whistler. The logo - two brushstrokes depicting the twin mountains - replaced the 'circle of Ws' that had been the association's identity since the 1970s.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Indeed, the issue of a coherent brand-image will become more significant as Tourism Whistler and Whistler/Blackcomb begin to share out the responsibility for promoting the resort between different markets.

²⁵⁹ The irony is that the design of the new Tourism Whistler logo actually says 'the mountains' more than Whistler/Blackcomb's.

Several weeks later, the municipality announced it too had independently hired a designer to come up with a replacement for its 25 year-old graphic. Local columnist Paul Burrows - never one to mince words - called the turn of events "a childish pissing match":

"We should have one logo that says "Whistler". Then underneath it, it can do whatever it wants - RMOW, Tourism Whistler, the mountains. Because when the visitor turns up they don't care - why do they worry about what the logo looks like for each branch of Whistler? I think it's really unfortunate and doesn't give anyone an identity that they can hang on to when they go back to Germany, UK or wherever the hell they've come from."

What caused the change of heart, it seems, was not the philosophy behind a shared logo, nor difficulties agreeing upon a suitable design, but timing and the technical issues that implementation would have raised. As Doug Forseth explained:

"I think we went in with the best of intentions, we hoped we'd find away to make it happen. It's a very complicated issue; it's not just the logo and the word-mark but there's all kinds of other issues that come out of that with sponsorship, marketing dollars, identification, logo-wear sales."

The most significant problem raised by sharing a logo related to the issue of corporate sponsorship. Whistler/Blackcomb, for example, has its own set of corporate sponsors, including General Motors, Pontiac and Kokanee beer, which all pay for the privilege of having their name associated with the mountains. These sponsors are joined by Intrawest-wide corporate 'partners' such as Coca-Cola, Nestle, Fuji Film and Evian. Similarly, Tourism Whistler is in the final stages of settling several sponsorship agreements, in particular for its conference centre; and now even the municipality is keen to start discussions with potential sponsors for *its* products. According to Barrett Fisher, the question that arose from this situation was:

“How do you divvy up different sponsors? If you’ve got different properties with the same logo, how can separate out the representation? So, for example, the municipality had a sponsor that represents the Meadow Park arena and we had a sponsor that represents the conference centre and the mountains had a sponsor that represents the mountains, how do we ultimately decide who benefits from that?”²⁶⁰

None of the organisations could wait until current sponsorship agreements expired or wanted to deal with the complexities of calculating who should benefit from sponsorship before they launched their new logos. Consequently, each decided to press on with their own re-imaging. Jim Godfrey is nevertheless still hopeful that a joint logo will eventually come off. “We haven’t given up on the process,” he told me. Indeed, he has involved representatives from Tourism Whistler and the mountains in the design of the municipality’s new logo - which will be launched by the end of this year - and would find it “most acceptable” if, in the end, “they could migrate from their wordmarks to ours.”

Not everyone in Whistler, however, is as sure as Godfrey and his business colleagues that the idea of the ‘seamless’ resort is necessarily a good one. Some are uncomfortable with the loss of identity, representation and autonomy that a shared image would entail. Mark Gasgoigne, Marketing Manager of Whistler/Blackcomb - contrary to his colleague Forseth - believed there is

“always a need to have some separate identity. Because we’re owned by Intrust and our responsibility is to our customers, staff and shareholders and all the other parts of the village have people they are responsible to... they’re not always going to be identical. It’s like saying, ‘we’re the city of Vancouver, why should the aquarium have a different logo?’ It all becomes totally homogenous.”

²⁶⁰ This is the sport and recreation centre run by the municipality.

Councillor Wilhelm-Morden agreed. For her, adopting a 'seamless' look would be taking the trend towards partnership one step too far: it represents just one more way in which Whistler is coming to resemble a Disney theme park, a place which eliminates from sight and mind the *work* that goes on to produce it.²⁶¹ Moreover, such cohesion in the name of 'brand consistency' serves to blur further the boundaries of democratic representation, rendering it increasingly difficult for stakeholders in the resort to ascertain *who* is actually speaking and acting on *their* behalf. As Paul Burrows - who, after 40 years in the resort, is finally packing his bags and moving on - put it:

"I don't know who speaks for Whistler. They've tried all sorts of people... We've got the WRA, Intrawest, the mountains, we've got the muni. You talk to the man in the street and say 'who represents you here?' They'll probably shrug their shoulders."

Conclusion

I started this chapter with the premise that, as Whistler approaches build-out, the marketing side of the resort business will become increasingly important to its economic sustainability. Currently, the resort is in the midst of a tourism boom; its skier visits have topped two million for the two consecutive years (1998/9 and 1999/2000), and the hype that comes with being labelled "best ski resort in North America" means that Whistler is one of the 'it' places to ski on the continent. But, as local journalist Bob Barnett argues, "eventually, Whistler won't seem so new": another ski destination will be 'discovered'

²⁶¹ See Project on Disney *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World* (London: Duke University Press, 1995) for a discussion of how Disney separates work from play in its theme parks. It seems more than a little ironic that, in a study which has sought to identify the resort's key players and expose the nature of the relationships between them, I should conclude with the story of how they hoped to conceal their territories and responsibilities behind the 'facade' of single logo.

and will tempt fickle destination skiers away.²⁶² Of particular concern for the ski industry more generally is a recent model that predicts that over the next 15 years, the number of skier visits across North America will decrease from 50 to 36 million per year, due to baby boomers leaving the sport.²⁶³ The continent's ski resorts will all be squabbling for a larger piece of a shrinking pie and, in response, will all be seeding more golf courses, opening more conference centres, building more 'villages' and holding more festivals to make them appeal to broader, four-season audiences. The key to maintaining competitiveness for any mountain resort will be to mould its image and to innovate new products so that they appeal to as many market *niches* as possible. As tourism researcher Auliana Poon argues in her 'new tourism' thesis, people "no longer want a standardised and marginally packaged product; they never did."²⁶⁴ In Whistler, capitalising upon market segmentation will require Intrawest and Tourism Whistler, together with the municipality, working ever closer together to leverage their resources, maximise their market reach and strengthen the resort's brand image. The attempt to unify under a single logo shows how seriously the three agencies are taking this proposition. What is more, as I shall argue in my conclusion, I believe it perfectly symbolises the degree to which Whistler must now be understood as a wholly *corporate* production.

²⁶² Bob Barnett, 'Opening Remarks: remembering the past; looking forward,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, 26th May 2000, p.2.

²⁶³ Loreth Beswetherwick, 'Going to school on skiing,' *Pique Newsmagazine*, 26th May 2000, p.7.

²⁶⁴ Poon, *Tourism, technology and competitive strategies*, p. 247.

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Conclusion

The corporate production of resorts

“[T]he economic machine that is Whistler didn’t just happen; it took a lot of hard work and a co-ordinated effort to reach this point. And others have been watching and learning...”²⁶⁵

My primary aim in conducting such a wide-ranging and multi-layered investigation into the contemporary production of Whistler has been to illustrate that we cannot, and should not, reduce resorts to a single, prescribed trajectory, as studies based upon Butler’s life-cycle model continue to do. Instead, I have argued that it is necessary to foreground the *work* involved in producing resorts, and to demonstrate how that work is undertaken by key players with different stakes in - and ideas about - their development as destinations. Whose visions succeed in becoming impressed on the resort landscape - and articulated in its marketing image - will be the outcome of complex relationships of power, bargaining and co-operation between the representatives of various stakeholder groups.

I have suggested that one way resorts can be approached differently is by taking key moments in a resort’s history - such as the arrival of a new actor or a change in competitive context - as the starting point for empirical inquiry. It is then possible to trace the realignment, reconfiguration and re-visioning that such a moment provokes both

²⁶⁵ Bob Barnett, ‘Opening Remarks: remembering the past; looking forward,’ *Pique Newsmagazine*, 26th May 2000.

between and within the resort's key players. For this study, I took the merger of Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains under the ownership of IntraWest Corporation as the entry point for my exploration into the production of Whistler resort. Given that so many ski resorts in North America are coming under the control of several, large corporations, I wanted my case-study to show the corporatisation process at work in one resort, with the anticipation that the various processes I uncovered would speak to the experiences of resorts elsewhere. In particular, I sought to discover whether the 'colonial' relationship between tourism communities and corporate investors, identified by Hal Rothman in the ski resorts of the American West, holds true for Whistler. My research certainly provided support for some of Rothman's claims - for example, his contention that corporations regard identity as a selling point and stifle the entrepreneurialism and enthusiasm that characterise less organised ski areas. Nevertheless, I believe that, for the most part, Whistler does not conform to Rothman's general thesis. Indeed, the 'Whistler difference' (and, potentially, the 'difference' of other ski resorts) becomes clear when we consider 1) the degree to which, as a place, it was ever 'locally' controlled; 2) the extent to which IntraWest, 'the corporation', has been permitted to impose *its* vision on the resort; and 3) the level of co-operation between the three main players. In the remainder of this conclusion, I look at each of these considerations in turn.

How local is local?

As I have explained, Rothman's basic storyline is that the majority of ski resorts in the American West started out as highly 'local' places which, following the growth of ski

tourism, became *colonised* by “outside capital and its local representatives.”²⁶⁶ In Whistler, this was not the case. Master-planned as a destination resort in an otherwise sparsely populated area, its tourism business largely predated its community. Moreover, the huge cost of building it from scratch ensured that outside capital was required from the very beginning - it was an American company, for example, that undertook the initial development of Blackcomb Mountain. The most significant source of extra-local capital, however, came not from a transnational corporation but the state. The British Columbian provincial government supported a ski resort at Whistler from the outset and without its financial and regulatory assistance, the resort would never have succeeded. The flip-side of this state involvement, however, was that its representatives, working out of Victoria, had a considerable powers in the resort - right up until WLC Developments completed the final phase of Whistler Village in the late 1990s.

Ironically, the departure of the province more or less coincided with Intrawest's acquisition of Whistler Mountain; and by this stage, Whistler's leaders were used to sharing power with a large-scale, 'external' interest. Intrawest, we could thus argue, was simply stepping into the province's shoes.²⁶⁷ That said, the degree to which we should even be labelling Intrawest an 'external' player in the resort is questionable. As a publicly-held company, Intrawest clearly represents the interests of non-local capital and is primarily responsible to distant shareholders. However, as one local journalist recently pointed out, they have “been in Whistler longer than most Whistlerites, and stand to be

²⁶⁶ Rothman, *Devil's Bargain's*, p. 11.

²⁶⁷ Indeed, this argument assumes more prescience when we consider that it is Intrawest, not the province, that is providing Whistler with a school site.

there longer again".²⁶⁸ indeed, most 'locals' have never known Whistler *without* Intrawest. Furthermore, unlike the board of LTV, who ran Steamboat out of their head office in Texas, or Twentieth Century Fox, who controlled Aspen from Los Angeles, several members of Intrawest's board actually live in Whistler and did so since before it even became a player in the ski industry. As such, the company does not fall so easily into the "them/us", "corporation/community" binary upon which Rothman's thesis depends.

Who has the power?

Whether or not Intrawest is viewed as an 'internal' or 'external' player in the context of Whistler, the reason the 1996 merger generated so much concern was that it effectively turned the resort into a one-company town - affording Intrawest more power than ever before to enact a 'grand plan' for Whistler. Rothman certainly depicts corporations in the American West as all-powerful entities who impose their visions upon resorts and eclipse those of locals.²⁶⁹ In Whistler, however, I do not believe Intrawest enjoys total power. This is partly down to the fact the corporation does not wish to be *perceived* as a colonial force: management are keen to foster the impression of being a 'local' operation and one that is on the community's side - hence the discourse of a mountain 'merger' as opposed to 'take-over' and the commitment to constructing a 'shared' vision for Whistler Creek. Mostly, however, it is due to the local regulatory and political context. Simply to gain

²⁶⁸ Mike McCullough, 'Whistler Unzipped,' *Vancouver*, January/February 1999, p. 56.

²⁶⁹ Patricia Stokowski paints a similar picture in her study of the introduction of limited-stakes gambling to two Colorado towns. The gambling corporations co-opted local politicians and imposed their vision, reinterpreting "community as a place to conduct business, replacing a view of the community as a place for

approval for any real estate development, Intrawest *has* to make its proposal comply with the municipality's own Vision for Whistler - a Vision which, in the current political climate, puts the needs of Whistler's residential community on an equal footing with those of the resort. Moreover, to conduct any business on resort lands, Intrawest *must* subscribe the Whistler Resort Association - with the result that its substantial marketing dollars work to benefit *all* of Whistler's businesses and not just 'the mountains'.

This is not to say Intrawest wields no power in the resort: clearly it does. In putting together the Comprehensive Development Strategy, for example, it broke normal planning rules and compromised the ability of municipal politicians to reject the deal; and in using its corporate reach to establish Intrawest Vacations, it challenged Tourism Whistler's ability to service its other members through its Central Reservation System. Nevertheless, I would argue that there appears to much more give and take between the corporation and community in Whistler than Rothman suggests for the ski resorts of the American West. This conclusion highlights the significance of Whistler's *Canadian* development context. For it was the provincial government that put Whistler's administrative structures in place and granted them the powers to regulate the activities of developers such as Intrawest. In the more laissez-faire political culture of the United States, regulatory powers are much more likely to be withheld, allowing free market forces to make their imprint on the landscape.

quality living." Stokowski, *Riches and Regrets: Betting on Gambling in two Colorado Mountain Towns*

More than one corporation?

My final consideration regards the very definitions of 'corporation' and 'corporatisation'; for when Rothman speak of corporations, it is solely in relation to large-scale business interests. The experience of Whistler, however, suggests that we cannot assume *all* corporate players in resorts to be private sector actors, for both Whistler's local government and its state-legislated marketing association insist that they now speak as corporations. Accordingly, both have completed strategic planning exercises, establishing for themselves targets and goals against which their performance can be measured. Moreover, they consider themselves to be 'entrepreneurial partners,' as opposed to administrative agencies, in the production of the resort. This new outlook has meant viewing Intrawest as an opportunity and a partner, not a problem. I showed how, in the Emerald Forest deal, the municipality called upon its 'colleague' to assist it in a project of community importance; and in formulating a partnership agreement, Tourism Whistler has begun sharing its promotional responsibilities with Whistler/Blackcomb. The entrepreneurialism of the municipality and resort association can be no better illustrated, however, than by their attempt to unite with Intrawest under a single identity, a shared logo for the resort. This commitment to brand-image and the 'seamlessness' of the resort experience, I believe, is evidence enough that the corporate mode of thinking extends to all three corners of the Whistler production triangle. Adopting such a corporate approach might have the effect of improving the financial and organisational efficiency of both the municipality and resort association, it is also brings into question the issue of

(Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado), p. 185.

representation: who is speaking for whom in Whistler? Partnership may be professional but it is also political and the 'partnering' process will continue to be fraught with tension.

Parting words

In this study, we have seen how Whistler's Disney-esque village is being reproduced by Intrust and its competitors at resorts across North America. The emergent 'Whistler model', however, is not limited to its physical form: the resort's administrative 'formula' is also being duplicated in tourism destinations elsewhere. A compulsory resort association based upon the WRA has, for example, been established at Tremblant in Quebec; and staff at Whistler Municipal Hall receive enquiries and visits on a daily basis from local officials from around the world, keen to discover how they manage to balance the various demands of resort stakeholders. Given the degree of imitation, I am confident that the *kinds of* structures, pressures and processes outlined in this study will be in evidence in other resort destinations. What, however, I have been at pains to stress throughout my account is that the existence of organisational and physical similarities between different resorts does *not* mean they will all evolve in a predictable and prescribable ways. On the contrary, the individual trajectories of resorts will depend upon how people and institutions operating within them interact in particular political, economic and cultural contexts at particular moments - interactions which, I believe, will only be elucidated through comparative, empirical study.

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