HOME IS WHERE THE HEART (OF THE CITY) IS:
IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE 'LIVING FIRST' STRATEGY IN
DOWNTOWN VANCOUVER

by

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ABSTRACT

With its busy and active streetscapes and urban built form set harmoniously against mountains, water, and lush green landscape, Vancouver has set a remarkable precedent for downtown living. Its Central Area has been guided by a strategy of 'Living First', where residential developments are preferenced over other uses and housing is located near work spaces to facilitate numerous transportation options. The 'Living First' strategy has successfully accommodated the growing residential population in high density neighbourhoods that are well connected to services and employment spaces via transit, walking and biking paths.

However, beyond the aesthetics of gleaming condominium towers, vibrant residential communities, and streams of pedestrians on its landscaped streets, it is argued that the 'Living First' strategy has been too successful. The strategy has resulted in a number of implications regarding conflicts between residential neighbourhoods and the entertainment district, the potential displacement of commercial uses, insufficient job space for future growth, and social dislocation and exclusion. 'Living First' also raises questions regarding housing affordability. The strategy thus needs to be re-evaluated to accommodate these concerns. Despite these challenges, 'Living First' provides a suitable urban model that is both environmentally sustainable and efficient from a cost and land-use perspective.

Research methods employed are key informant meetings, a literature review, and data analysis of publicly available documents such as planning reports and policies, and census data.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

Preamble

The city's spectacular setting, the intimate and apparently happy cohabitation of wild nature and built fabric, the tightly packed gleaming new condo towers downtown, the public waterfront, the vibrant neighbourhood high streets, the neat parks and lush, tree-lined suburban streets... Vancouver has always been whatever newcomers want it to be, the perennial immigrants' city of the imagination: Dream City.

(Berelowitz, 2005, p.1-2)

With bustling streets, glassy condominium towers along False Creek and demand from local and international buyers, it is evident that Vancouver's downtown core is thriving (Boddy, 2005). This success is often attributed to the City's 'Living First' strategy, which aims to create a lively city centre and a balance between housing, jobs, and transportation. The strategy has been celebrated by practicing planners because it has achieved what many North American cities have failed to do, which is to have a livable residential community within a vibrant downtown. Thus, planners around the world seek to replicate Vancouver's urban model in their own downtown areas.

However, a paradox emerges: while these cities seek to recreate the Vancouver experience, Vancouver struggles with being truly a 'Living First' place. As residential towers dominate the landscape and pressure to convert commercial zones into residential areas continues to increase, critics of the model have questioned the "dream city" nature of downtown Vancouver, and the degree to which the 'Living First' strategy has been a success (Boddy, 2005). They argue that the core is becoming increasingly residentialized and fear that the Central Area will become a "bedroom community" (Loy, 2005). It thus raises the question: to what extent is the 'Living First' strategy an adequate urban model?
Problem Statement

Although the ‘Living First’ model has been successful in achieving residential and transportation goals, the movement towards a residentially-oriented downtown has a number of implications in terms of social sustainability, land-use issues, and housing affordability. Thus, current and future downtown plans need to be re-adjusted and re-evaluated in light of these concerns.

Research Purpose

Residential uses have become a more prominent land-use in many downtowns today. The purpose of this thesis is to explore Vancouver’s ‘Living First’ strategy as a case study for the planning issues associated with a housing-oriented city centre. This research will contribute to existing literature on urban revitalization efforts and downtown residential planning. In addition, this thesis will add to the research being conducted for the City of Vancouver’s Metropolitan Core Jobs and Economy Land Use Plan.

Research Questions

The objective of this research is to identify and evaluate the broader immediate and long-term impacts and implications of the ‘Living First’ strategy. This thesis examines the following key questions to understand the trends and processes that have emerged from this strategy:

- What are the strengths and limitations of the ‘Living First’ strategy as an urban model?
- What are the impacts and implications of Vancouver’s urban model?
- What are the range of issues associated with the ‘Living First’ strategy?
- How can future plans and policies mitigate the challenges presented by this strategy?
Based on this analysis, this thesis provides recommendations that are intended to inform future downtown plans and policies.

**Framework**

My thesis investigates and assesses the 'Living First' strategy as a planning model for downtown development. Chapter 2, the literature review, examines the theoretical context associated with downtown residential land-uses in order to gain an understanding of the processes, trends, and issues that shape and affect the 21st century city centre. This chapter discusses the role of Post-Industrialism and government-led initiatives in facilitating the rise of downtown housing. The chapter then assesses the benefits and shortcomings of a residentially-oriented core.

Chapter 3 offers a brief overview of downtown Vancouver’s planning and policy context from the 1950s to 1990s, with particular attention to the 1974 South False Creek Plan, the 1975 Downtown Plan, the CorePlan, and the 1990 CityPlan. Chapter 4 provides a summary of the 1991 Central Area Plan and the ‘Living First’ strategy which have been identified as the two major planning initiatives that have primarily influenced Vancouver’s current Central Area. Chapter 5 identifies and analyzes the strengths of the ‘Living First’ model and addresses the impacts and implications of the strategy that have been raised through public dialogue and media. Chapter 6 summarizes the research findings of this thesis and offers recommendations for future planning initiatives. The chapter concludes with suggestions for further study.

**Methods and Methodology**

The primary data for my thesis is acquired from key informant meetings and existing literature on downtown residential development and urban regeneration. A
total of five meetings were conducted with professionals in the public and private sectors, including one consultant, three Vancouver city planners, and one planner working in academia, who were selected because of their involvement in some aspect of Central Area planning. Each key informant was given an interview protocol which covered all possible topics that may be asked during the course of the meeting (see Appendix 1).

The key informant meetings were audio-taped and transcribed, with each meeting coded and categorized. During the second coding process, data was further coded and then compared with the other meetings. Common themes that emerged from the five meetings were identified and compared with the topics that were noted during the literature review. The transcriptions were further coded and categorized to expand upon the concepts from the first and second coding. This process of data collection allows "issues of importance to...emerge from the stories that [participants] tell" (Mills, Bonner, and Francis, 2006, p.1). In acknowledgment of the difficulties in identifying every impact of the 'Living First' strategy, this thesis draws attention to the general impacts that have emerged from discussions with planning professionals and the literature.

Publicly available documents, such as planning policies and studies including the Central Area Plan and the Metropolitan Core Jobs Plan, were used to provide background knowledge and history on the Central Area. Census data and planning reports and documents provided additional information on specific topics, such as various statistical data, the type of dwellings, and population growth.

Limitations

This thesis attempts to offer a general analysis of the impacts and issues associated with the ‘Living First’ model; therefore, a smaller number of key informant
meetings were conducted. A more detailed study may include a larger sample with a broader mix of professionals for additional perspectives.

It is also important to note that the boundaries for downtown Vancouver have changed over time. Vancouver's Central Area and Metropolitan Core refer to geographic areas. The Metropolitan or Metro Core includes the downtown peninsula and extends to 16th Avenue on the south and Clark Drive on the east, while the Central Area, as defined by the 1991 Central Area Plan, refers to a smaller subset within the metro core. It encompasses the downtown peninsula between Main Street and Burrard Street, the West End, and as far south as Broadway (see Figure 4.2). While this thesis intends to look primarily at the area defined as the 'Central Area', due to availability, some of the data is based on the area referred to as the Metropolitan Core.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter provides a literature review on the emergence and key trends of the downtown housing strategy. The section begins by briefly examining how urban restructuring through Post-Industrialism has facilitated the shift towards residential development in the city centre and then explores how housing has been implemented through government initiatives. The chapter concludes by assessing the opportunities and challenges of employing a downtown residential strategy.

Restructuring Urban Spaces

The late 20th century has been a period of rapid change for the contemporary city centre, and economic and social forces have largely been the driving forces behind downtown and urban restructuring (Hutton, 2004). In his 1973 book, The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society, American sociologist Daniel Bell first presented the concept of Post-Industrialism as a shift from an economy based on the production of goods to one based on services, where knowledge, information, and education would play a key role.

The notion of Post-Industrial cities has been widely accepted (Ley, 1980; Castells, 1989), and although the extent to which these changes have occurred is often contested, there is general agreement that the shift to a Post-Industrial economy has created significant transformation in a city's built form, geography, occupational structure, housing market, and social composition (Hamnett, 2003; Hutton, 2004). Industrial production in the inner city diminished while the office sector and business industry expanded; consequently, in the 1970's, high-rise modernist office towers containing business, financial services, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) corporations became
dominant features in the CBD (Hutton, 2005a; Sassen, 1994).

The shift to a Post-Industrial economy has also led to significant occupational and social change. It has been widely noted that blue collar manufacturing jobs declined while a ‘new middle class’ of highly educated professionals employed in FIRE-related occupations emerged (Ley, 2005).

**Residential Land-Use as a Revitalization Strategy**

In addition to the loss of industrial and warehouse functions, over the past quarter of a century, many downtowns have experienced reduced employment in the managerial sector due to a maturing office sector in the 1990’s, and decreased demand for clerical employment from new technology through the up-skilling of paraprofessionals or down-skilling to contingent labour (Hutton, 2004). The continued movement of the population and businesses to the suburbs has created further challenges for downtown planning, as a number of academics anticipate the decentralization and decline of downtown (Mumphrey and Akundi, 1998; Satdie, 1997).

To offset the decline of industrial and commercial sectors and interurban competition and reinvigorate empty areas in the city centre, planners and policy makers across North America have focused planning efforts on residential developments. As Birch (2005) argues, housing has become “a critical piece of evolving strategies for downtown revitalization” (p.1), and governments have often taken an increasingly proactive role in economic development initiatives (El Nasser, 2001; Moulton, 1999).

**Approaches to Downtown Housing and Government Initiatives**

Local governments have played a key role in promoting and advancing residential uses in the core. As Kiernan (1990) points out, the global recession in the early 1980s led to a shift in contemporary planning attitude and thought as:
public and professional attitudes towards urban growth transformed from being more critical of new developments to post recession being not only more receptive to new developments than was the case in the previous decade but increasingly in the business of actually trying to catalyze it (p. 65).

Harvey (1989) argues that urban governance has shifted from managerialism in the 1960s to entrepreneurialism in the 1970s and 1980s. Urban entrepreneurialism rests on three main notions: the collaboration between urban governments and private corporations called public-private partnerships (PPP’s); the integration of local boosterism and subsidies where the public sector assumes the majority of the risk; and geographic scale. Harvey (1989) contests that the process of “city making is both a product and condition of ongoing social processes of transformation in the most recent phase of capitalist development” (p.3). Downtown housing is financially attractive to the city as the subsequent revitalization may often lead to a renewed image of the city, which in turn may lead to additional revenue through investments, tourism and taxes from new residential, commercial and retail uses.

However, assessing urban entrepreneurialism as a solely economic venture is problematic as such initiatives may achieve a social imperative as well. While economic development is the main objective for some cities, the city may negotiate for amenities on the basis that they provide a social benefit. The city can acquire community facilities that it would not normally be able to afford or build (Unger, 1988).

**Government Approaches to Downtown Plans and Policies**

Local governments have supported residential uses through a myriad of policies and land-use regulations. Hamnett (2003) identifies the gradual change in policy by planners and politicians who now permit the conversion of business and/or industrial uses to residential uses, while Birch (2002) articulates six approaches that local governments have used to implement downtown housing: (1) adaptive re-use of former commercial
and industrial buildings; (2) brownfield sites and reclaimed waterfronts; (3) mixed use projects with new construction; (4) niche markets; (5) historic preservation; and (6) redeveloped housing.

Different cities have employed a selection of these approaches. Chicago implemented a new river walk containing mixed-use development as a means to renew its downtown ("A Success Story", 2006), while Boston and Philadelphia targeted their housing efforts at the student niche market. The city government in Denver focused on both urban design and heritage conservation. Downtown Denver declared Lower Downtown ('LoDo') an historic district in 1988, and urban design guidelines regulate elements such as street lights, benches, and signage to emphasize the unique character of the area (Moulton, 1999). Redeveloped housing is exemplified in Houston, Texas where the 'Rice Hotel', a 100 year old landmark which had been vacant for 30 years, was redeveloped into apartments in 1997 (El Nasser, 2001). Vancouver has employed a combination of these approaches. Granville Island involved the conversion of a former industrial site to a mixed use development which includes a public market and retail boutiques along the Burrard Inlet waterfront.

To further promote downtown housing, urban administrators have also attempted to acquire amenities such as parks, community centres, and daycares by creating incentives and/or removing regulatory obstacles (Moulton, 1999). Portland and Denver have reduced the parking space requirements for residential units, which is beneficial for developers who are able to build more housing on less land and save money (El Nasser, 2001). Other cities employ density as a tool to negotiate for amenities and finance growth. The City of Burnaby’s Density Bonusing Policy and Vancouver’s Community
Amenity Contribution Policy allow developers to build at a higher density granted they provide an amenity in the proposed area or cash-in-lieu. In Denver, the municipal government eliminated density bonusing for commercial uses, and permitted maximum density downtown as long as residential development was proposed (Moulton, 1999).

**Benefits of Downtown Housing**

Housing in the city centre is argued as being more environmentally viable than suburban development. Downtown housing provides an alternative to sprawl, as it typically includes higher-density building forms, such as low-to-high rise apartment buildings, townhouses, and row-houses which accommodate a larger number of residents on a smaller space. The compact nature of downtown facilitates walkability and thus provides potential health benefits through increased exercise and movement. High-density downtown housing is also more efficient from a land-use and cost perspective, as it makes use of existing infrastructure and requires less servicing. As well, advocates of downtown housing justify such developments by arguing that residential land revitalizes an area that would otherwise go into disuse (Hii, 2005).

It is also argued that residential uses provide the necessary population to reinvigorate empty streets (Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). Jacobs (1961) suggests that vibrant, safe, and interesting downtowns emerge from a range of uses and industries. She asserts that “only the combined total of people coming into the core for many, many purposes - for work, for fun, for culture, for errands – can support downtown’s indispensable variety” (as cited in Allen, 1997, p.15). A mix of compatible land-uses, such as shopping, amenities, and entertainment uses are typically permitted to locate with or near housing, as they contribute to the goal of re-establishing downtown
vitality and extending activity in the area (Jacobs, 1961; Roseland, 1991; Schwanke et al, 2005; Whyte, 1988). This mix also enhances convenience and accessibility as locating housing near work may reduce commute times. As well, the mix offers access to nearby amenities, services, and goods (Glaeser, Kolko, and Salz, 2001).

City centre housing (when successful) thus enhances livability, quality of life, and the urban environment. These aspects are fundamental to New Urbanism, an interdisciplinary movement which seeks to address issues regarding auto-dependent landscapes, sprawl, and homogeneity in urban built form. It has become the new direction for urban planning and the principles have frequently been applied to many Canadian municipalities, such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Edmonton.

As Glaeser et al (2001) argue, quality of life and livability are “increasingly critical in determining the attractiveness of particular areas” (p.27). Thus, many cities pursuing the livable city ideology have seen a remarkable growth of amenities in the core (Ley, 1996). Vancouver, for instance, has numerous marinas and extensive waterfront access (Ley, 1996). Recreational spaces and cultural industries create a more desirable place for residents by contributing to livability and quality of life and they also impact the city in less tangible ways, such as drawing non-residents to the city core (Ley, 1996).

**Living in the City: Resident Demographics and Characteristics**

A number of scholars assert that downtown residential growth is driven by and for the new middle class as personal and lifestyle preferences have played an important role in the movement towards downtown housing (Gratz and Mintz, 1998; Florida, 2005; Hamnett, 2003; Ley, 1996;). When considering relocation, workers employed in highly skilled positions will assess the job itself as well as the amenities and lifestyles that large
urban centers can offer (Glaeser et al, 2001).

The conversion of former industrial and commercial sites to high-density condominiums, luxury residential apartments and related entertainment districts was first popularized by loft-living in Soho, New York in the 1980’s (Birch, 2002; Hamnett, 2003; Zukin, 1988). Zukin (1988) asserts that Soho pioneered the notion that it was not only feasible but fashionable to live downtown where one could live in close proximity to work, services, and entertainment areas. The downtown lifestyle has proven to be attractive and appealing to the affluent and childless cohort, such as young urban professionals (exemplifying the association with the term ‘yuppies’) and ‘empty nesters’ (baby boomers over the age of 50), who represent the majority of the downtown population (Birch, 2005; Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007).

Downtown housing, such as townhouses, apartments, and condominiums, requires less housing maintenance and provides both a place to live and a lifestyle (Boyce, 2006; Schwanke et al, 2005; Sohmer and Lang, 2001). Downtowns are perceived as an alternative to the suburbs because the core offers a diversity of activities. ‘Empty nesters’, who now have more leisure time, are able to participate in cultural activities that are conveniently located nearby, while young urban professionals are consumers in amenities such as cafes and nightlife activities.

**Challenges of Downtown Residential Uses**

Housing in the central city has also resulted in a number of tensions and challenges. A major concern for downtown planners has been the need for greater diversity, both in terms of income and class. The operation of the central city property market has been influenced by returns on investment, leading to competition between
high-end housing and employment generating land-uses, which has been observed in London, San Francisco and Vancouver (Hutton, 2004).

Hence, many critics of downtown living have questioned social sustainability issues as the core becomes more residentially-oriented. The downtown housing market has been criticized for consisting largely of the affluent class as not all income groups are represented in the new housing precincts (Al-Hindi, 2001; Blomley, 2004). Housing in the core is dominated by high-density luxury apartments with a niche market of affluent professionals (Hamnett, 2003). Moreover, housing is often developed in conjunction with consumption-related activities and uses, such as expensive restaurants, retail, festival markets, cafes, and cultural facilities which cater to the needs of the middle and upper class (Blomley, 2004; Ley, 1996). Al-Hindi (2001) argues that such uses ultimately displace the underclass. The trend of increased affluence in the core also raises concerns regarding affordability as housing and rental prices increase and those at the lower end of the class spectrum are subsequently pushed out and displaced to the suburbs (Ley, 1996; Moulton, 1999).

Rypkema (2003) argues that while downtown planners have attempted to uphold the objectives of livability, quality of life, and affordability, these notions are in contradiction with one another. For instance, in order to create an appealing place, cities often need to construct new buildings, which cannot be rented cheaply. On the other hand, in order to attain equity, higher densities and cheaper construction are required, but the “aesthetic is lost in a frenzy of over building” (Ley, 1996, p.221).

Conflicts also exist between differing activities and uses. Although many cities attempt to promote the 24-hour city concept to expand activity in the centre (Heath and
Stickland, 1997), this objective creates tension with downtown residents who associate nightlife activities with the younger population and noise externalities (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). Thus, the challenge is to create a downtown that appeals to a diverse group of residents while at the same time accommodates their varied activities, lifestyles, and needs.

Downtown is hence a place of contestation and social dislocation (Zukin, 1988). Blomley (2004) contends that gentrification represents the spatial struggle for inner city areas, which have become a site of conflict. He argues that, from a development perspective, gentrification is an optimistic term since these areas become ‘cleaned up’ whereas from a social equality perspective, it can also be seen as displacing the lower-income class. Blomley (2004) contests that social mixing is often one-sided as the rich are allowed into poor areas, but the reversal rarely occurs.

Housing is often in greater demand in the core because it can be developed more intensely and generates greater financial return (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007; Hii, 2005). However, as Hamnett (2003) asserts, “with expensive centrally located land and a market economy, the emphasis is constantly on maximizing development potential” (p.246); consequently, substantial industrial and office space are eliminated and converted to residential use (Boddy, 2006; Sorkin, 2002), and it has been difficult to maintain a balance between the amount of housing and employment.

Commercial development in the core has been further limited by the sharp fluctuations of an ever-evolving and uncertain global economic market. Sassen (1994; 2001) asserts that globalization results in a hierarchy of cities, and cities that play a
prominent economic role in the global marketplace are ranked higher. The top-tier cities, such as Tokyo, London, and New York, contain a disproportionate number of global, national, and financial functions, thereby stripping head office and command and control functions from other cities. The reduction and erosion of the commercial market through acquisitions, mergers and downsizing have become common occurrences; thus, cities often compete with one another to attract and maintain jobs, resources, and capital (Morin and Hanley, 2004).

Hence, concerns have been raised that with fewer office towers, the downtown will become predominantly residential as businesses relocate to the suburbs where tax rates are more competitive and there is more available office space (Boddy, 2005; Loy, 2005). Critics speculate that the downtown will become a bedroom community as residents commute from downtown to outlying areas for work which would essentially reverse traditional patterns of suburban-urban commuting. Boddy (2006) further argues that policies concentrating on downtown housing are unbalanced and do not necessarily anticipate future needs.

Sorkin (2002) suggests that plans need to consider downtown as a whole, as well as consider a broad spectrum of land-uses and policy fields in order to ensure that residential construction matches the number of new work places for sustainability purposes. However, Teitz (1989) refutes this notion, arguing that it is difficult to gauge whether people who live downtown will necessarily work downtown. Live-work buildings, which have become popularized within the last two decades, have been implemented to create new work spaces. However, rather than becoming a multi-purpose space, this use has typically reverted to a primarily residential space (Hii, 2005; Planner, personal...
It also argued that downtowns need to consider a more comprehensive social plan. Moulton (1999) contends that for downtowns to reach their potential as "vibrant, enticing places, families must be present to contribute to its life" (p.20). Thus, planners need to examine the single and young couple population and anticipate whether they will move to the suburbs or stay downtown once they have children. Creating housing that is more flexible and adaptable may allow housing to accommodate various demographics. Planners also need to consider servicing, public school systems, and affordable housing.

**Conclusion**

Downtown housing has been used as a planning strategy to 'fill in the void' left from deindustrialization, changing economies, and global competition, and to facilitate the reinvigoration of downtown spaces. Residential strategies attempt to promote the city centre as a place that is hip, upscale, and lively with numerous amenities and constant activity. While an emphasis on housing presents opportunities for economic development and regeneration, it has also generated challenges such as conflicts between socio-economic groups, notions of affordability, and displacement of other land-uses. Despite these challenges, housing continues to play a key role in downtown planning.

Numerous cities have used Vancouver's strategy of 'Living First' as a prototype for city centre revitalization. This strategy has been developed from previous downtown plans and input from the public and civic administration. The following chapter explores the planning context and policies that have guided Vancouver's Central Area from the mid-20th century to the 1990s in order to understand the conditions and issues that the 'Living First' strategy sought to address.
Chapter 3. Vancouver’s Central Area in Context

Introduction

Situated along the west coast of British Columbia, the City of Vancouver, with a population of approximately 600,000, is the third largest metropolitan city in Canada (City of Vancouver, 2003a, ¶1). Vancouver, and in particular its downtown, is widely known for its livable urban areas and natural beauty (Berelowitz, 2005). Surrounded by the Coast Mountain ranges and the inlets of the Pacific Ocean, Vancouver’s Central Area encompasses a mix of uses ranging from residential, recreational, to commercial. The downtown also entails modern high-rise condominiums, clusters of boats floating in the water, and on a (rare) sunny day, vibrant street life as pedestrians, bikers, and rollerbladers take advantage of the pathways along False Creek.

While economic restructuring has been influential in reshaping the core, planning policy and local government have also contributed to changes in development, land-use patterns, the physical environment, and the social composition in the downtown. This section examines the evolving urban form in the Central Area over the past four decades in order to provide a context for contemporary downtown Vancouver. In addition, this
chapter assesses the key planning and policy approaches from the late 1950s to the early 1990s that have informed and facilitated the development of the 1991 *Central Area Plan* and the ‘Living First’ strategy.

**Early Twentieth Century Vancouver: A Core for the Region**

During the first half of the Twentieth Century until the 1960’s, downtown Vancouver served as a local and regional centre for retail, service, commercial, and banking functions (Hutton, 2004; 2005b). The strong presence of service industries created employment while retail departments stores, such as the famed Woodward’s along Hastings and Granville, drew numerous residents from all across the city (Barnes, Edgington, Denike, and McGee, 1992). Cultural facilities, theatres, and sports arenas were also constructed. Urban form typically consisted of low-rise buildings. Residential uses in the core tended to be one to two storey buildings in the mature communities of the West End, Strathcona, Fairview, Kitsilano and the Downtown East Side, and mainly contained housing types such as rooming houses, residential hotels, and wooden single-family housing (Hutton, 2004). A handful of commercial skyscrapers were also constructed including the Marine building (1930), Hotel Vancouver (1939), and the BC Hydro office tower (1957) (Hutton, 2004).

Unlike other Canadian cities, Vancouver did not develop into the classic industrial city, as it functioned primarily as a staple processing and local distribution and control centre for provincial resource industries (Barnes et al, 1992). Consequently, extensive resource processing and manufacturing plants such as sawmills, lumber yards, and rail-yards were centralized around False Creek, the central waterfront, Mount Pleasant and False Creek Flats (Hutton, 2004).
1960s: Pro-development Policies

From 1937 to 1972, the Council in power was the Non-Partisan Association (NPA), who tended to favour industry and business objectives over residential preferences (Hutton, 2004); thus, policy direction throughout the late 1950s to the early 1970s was primarily development-driven. The key planning issues in the 1960s revolved around residential development in the West End, commercial development downtown, urban renewal, and the freeway proposal (Punter, 2003). In 1956, a new zoning and development bylaw (#3574) was adopted for the West End and Kitsilano area, which conferred planners the power to relax certain zoning regulations to accrue incentives such as parking lots and larger sites for development (Punter, 2003). The bylaw introduced discretionary zoning and an element of design review into development decisions, but these aspects would not become more significant until the 1970s. Punter (2003) argues that the 1956 bylaw was driven by downtown businesses to “foster retail expansion and to provide housing for the increasing number of white collar workers in downtown offices” (p.18). Therefore, existing three-storey homes were demolished in favour of a myriad of tall towers. Consequently, the population of the West End doubled between the 1950s to the 1970s (Punter, 2003).

In response to economic and demographic change in the early 1960s, there was a push towards large-scale redevelopment in the core which led to several commercial developments such as Pacific Centre and the five-towered Bentall office complex. However, the scale, quality, and form of downtown development generated public discord as many residents referred to the Pacific Centre project and the adjacent Toronto-Dominion and IBM building as the ‘towers of darkness’ (Punter, 2003). In addition,
although air, water and noise externalities from light and heavy industries were met with public discontent, industrial uses continued to be permitted in False Creek as Council extended industrial leaseholds on the south shore of False Creek in 1967, which reaffirmed its industrial designation (Hutton, 2004).

From the 1970s onwards, Vancouver experienced rapid population and commercial growth as the CBD expanded and tertiary and high-order service industries became more prevalent. Vancouver’s link to the BC resource economy led to a number of provincial resource companies locating their head offices in the core. Related business functions such as accounting firms, hotels, restaurants and law firms also located downtown, making the city centre the largest concentration of firms and jobs in both Vancouver and the region (Barnes et al, 1992). From 1966 to 1980, net rentable office floor space doubled, growing by a compound rate of six percent per annum (Hutton, 2004). The number of business and professional service firms increased by 140 percent (Hutton, 2004) and 36 new office towers were constructed in the core during 1966 to 1982 (Punter, 2003).

This office boom was complimented by a growth in downtown neighbourhoods from middle class residents who were employed in professional-managerial and service sector jobs (Punter, 2003). As commercial and residential developments expanded, land-use patterns began to shift away from declining industrial services, which were subsequently displaced to the areas east of False Creek and Main Street on the Burrard Inlet (Punter, 2003).

The urban landscape reflected changing demographic and economic patterns as buildings shifted to higher density commercial and residential buildings. Gentrification
in Fairview and Kitsilano resulted in medium density buildings, whereas in the West End, low and medium density dwellings were rezoned to high density multiple dwellings (Hutton, 2004). In 1986, more high-rise apartment towers were constructed, making the West End one of Canada’s densest residential communities with a population of approximately 40,000 in some 28,000 units (Berelowitz, 2005; Hutton, 2004). Similarly, commercial buildings were challenging previous vertical traditions and reshaping the city skyline.

Growth-oriented Council members and the development industry conceived that further development of the core depended on freeway access. However, the proposal to run a 120-foot-wide freeway system through the Chinatown-Strathcona area in 1967 was opposed and defeated by neighbourhood groups, including The Electors Action Movement (TEAM), who advocated that such development would destroy the character of the neighbourhood (Ley, Hiebert, and Pratt, 1992; Punter, 2003).

1970s: New Council Reforms and Innovations: Towards the Goal of a Livable City

The movement against the freeway demonstrated the changing political climate. In 1972, TEAM came into power, winning nine of eleven Council seats (Hutton, 2004). The ideas, initiatives, and values that were implemented during TEAM’s time in Council significantly influenced contemporary downtown policy in Vancouver. While the previous NPA Council pushed economic and pro-business objectives, TEAM’s vision and agenda promoted environmental and social issues such as public housing and diversity. The new Council was also committed to changing downtown development patterns and advocated re-populating the core by implementing the livable city goal, which emphasized innovative design guidelines, high quality of life and placing ‘people
before property’ (Hutton, 2004; Ley, 1980; North and Hardwick, 1992).

TEAM also introduced a participatory planning process where city planners and communities collaborated to determine local planning direction and priorities, which inevitably enhanced planning at the neighbourhood scale (Ley et al, 1992). This notion of neighbourhood planning was further reinforced and supported by Ray Spaxman, the Director of Planning from 1974 to 1989.

From the 1970s to the early 1980s, three plans were developed that significantly influenced subsequent downtown plans and policies. These include the 1974 South False Creek Official Development Plan (ODP), the 1975 Downtown Plan, and the CorePlan.

1974 South False Creek Official Development Plan

TEAM’s cornerstone achievement is often cited as the South False Creek ODP. The obsolete industrial site along the waterfront and False Creek area was one of the major planning issues at the time. Housing was identified as providing potential opportunities within the downtown; consequently, Council rezoned the industrial lands to permit residential neighbourhoods. The 1974 South False Creek Plan marked a shift in the Central Area’s planning approach where industrial uses were no longer accommodated, but rather, concepts of urban design, site planning, and community interaction were promoted instead (Hutton, 2004).

The South False Creek industrial lands were converted to a medium density, mixed-income residential zone which included parks, open space, public walkways (the seawall) and community facilities. The initial phase of the Plan incorporated a mix of housing type and tenure, and restricted vehicular access and parking to reduce automobile impact (City of Vancouver, 2003c). However, while the lands have successfully
generated mixed income spaces for families and reclaimed large parts of the south shore for park space, the site has poor connectivity with surrounding areas and is ill-served by transit. In addition, the moderate density housing allows for limited commercial viability (City of Vancouver, 2003c).

**1975 Downtown Plan**

In 1975, an ODP was established for the downtown. The Plan focused on five topics: land-use, density, building height, parking and amenities, and mixed spaces (Punter, 2003). It emphasized design, retail continuity, and active on-street level uses, and established residential bonuses in a number of zones to achieve residential development. Moreover, in accordance with the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) policies, the Plan discouraged car use and encouraged some decentralization of the office area. The 1975 ODP also distinguished eight character areas in the downtown which are still in use today (Punter, 2003). Industrial uses were not considered in the ODP as it anticipated that office space would play an important role in the economy; thus, a substantial portion of the downtown peninsula was designated for office districts while the west portion, including the South False Creek development, was devoted principally to residential neighbourhoods (Punter, 2003). The 1975 Plan has provided a framework for the development of subsequent downtown policies, particularly the ‘Living First’ strategy which is discussed in Chapter 4.

**The CorePlan**

The CorePlan, which was later called the Vancouver Plan, was a growth management strategy designed in the early 1980s to address the implications and externalities of long distance commuting and the displacement of services, retail and
residential uses due to rapid office expansion, deindustrialization and the gentrification/depletion of working class neighbourhoods (Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). The main concern was that the rapidly growing office sector would outstrip construction of new housing in the core. Both the 1975 Downtown Plan and the CorePlan established housing as the preferred mode of redevelopment.

However, unlike the South False Creek ODP and the Downtown ODP, the CorePlan expressed concern regarding future plans for industrial functions, which were also reflected in Planning documents from the Overall Planning Division (Hutton, 2004; Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). One report noted it would be unlikely that this area would be converted back to industrials lands. It also questioned the future of such industries, as the city's tax base would consequently rely on a more narrow range of activities (Hutton, 2004). The proposed redevelopment for the 1986 World Exposition (Expo '86) was also anticipated to precipitate a substantial loss in manufacturing and production-related jobs and disrupt industrial activity.

However, the recession in the early 1980s arrested the expansion of commercial development. Overbuilding, the impact of technology on office employment, acquisitions and mergers depleted the number of head offices in the core, as unemployment levels reached approximately thirteen percent (Hutton, 2004; Punter, 2003). Consequently, the CorePlan was abandoned in 1985 and future industrial land-use considerations were muted as a result of diminishing political and public support for assertive growth management (Hutton, 2004). Although the CorePlan was never adopted by Council and functioned primarily to “educate planners and the public about the issues of balance, monitoring, and paying attention to the balance between transportation, jobs
and housing" (Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007), it identified issues such as office expansion and the need to balance land uses and transportation, which would later be addressed by the 1991 Plan and the ‘Living First’ strategy.

1980s: Building an International Core

By the mid-1980s, the Central Area experienced renewed growth. The provincial government sponsored Expo '86 in hopes of stimulating the provincial economy (North and Hardwick, 1992). They purchased and redeveloped False Creek North for the World Fair, which resulted in several developments including the Canada Place Convention Centre, BC Place, new international class hotels and the implementation of a fixed rail rapid transit system (Hutton, 2007). These developments were not without consequences. Single Room Occupancies (SROs) were converted into budget hotels to house visitors for Expo, which exacerbated polarization and subsequently displaced low-income residents (Ley et al, 1992). In addition, an agreement between the provincial government and the City in 1985 confirmed that industrial redevelopment would not be an option for the north shore of False Creek following Expo '86 (Hutton, 2004).

The hallmark event propelled Vancouver’s Central Area into the international spotlight, leading to growth in the tourism industry, property market investment, and international trade, which came primarily from the Asia-Pacific region, such as China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Japan. In particular, an influx of immigrants and investment came from Hong Kong. In 1988, Li Ka-shing, a prominent Hong Kong businessman and developer, purchased 240 acres of former Expo lands along False Creek from the provincial government. The lands were rezoned to permit a mixed-use, high-density development, which accelerated the integration of Vancouver into global property
markets (Hutton, 2007). The purchase projected a significant amount of confidence in the Vancouver market and overseas Hong Kong residents began to purchase condominiums in the city centre, which were often marketed and pre-sold in Hong Kong. The Regatta Condominium near the Cambie Bridge along False Creek, for example, was entirely pre-sold within three hours (Punter, 2003).

Redevelopment began to shift to the margins of the downtown, and planning focused on the issue of livability in new high density residential areas. Development Cost Levies (DCLs) were used to cover the costs of basic infrastructure, while Community Amenity Contributions (CACs) were implemented in 1989 to pay for amenities in areas of intensification (Punter, 2003). Affordability became a major concern as rental apartments were increasingly replaced by condominiums. Consequently, Council and the Planning Department recognized the need to create opportunities for affordable and sustainable housing to “deliver a more diverse housing stock to meet demographic and lifestyle needs” (Punter, 2003, p.148).

1990s: Community-Oriented Planning

While the 1980s involved mega-project plans that consisted of phased developments, in the 1990s, plans were progressively becoming smaller in focus through neighbourhood and site-specific planning. In 1990, a citywide planning strategy called CityPlan was launched (Punter, 2003). In CityPlan, “each neighbourhood would develop its own detailed land-use plan, zoning regulations, design guidelines, and enhancement projects [which] would respond to the overall CityPlan directions” (Punter, 2003, p.166). It emphasized increasing housing variety; locating jobs near where people live; encouraging walking, biking and cycling; and supporting community-based planning
through a neighbourhood-based model (Punter, 2003). These aspects would become the basis from which the Central Area Plan and ‘Living First’ would be developed.

**Conclusion**

Vancouver’s Central Area has experienced profound change particularly within the past 40 years. During the first half of the century, the NPA Council promoted development-driven objectives, whereas the succeeding Council, TEAM, advocated a socially-driven agenda where community and livability became primary objectives in the core. Several downtown strategies, most notably, the 1974 South False Creek Plan, the 1975 Downtown Plan, the CorePlan, and the 1990 CityPlan, raised key issues such as the role of the office market and the notion of creating a livable downtown, which would emerge in the subsequent 1991 Central Area Plan and ‘Living First’ strategy. The following chapter describes the origin and goals of these two downtown planning initiatives and examines them in greater detail.
Chapter 4. Case Study: Vancouver's Central Area Plan and the ‘Living First’ Strategy

Introduction

The 1990's has been a definitive period in reshaping Vancouver's downtown. Although once an area dedicated mainly to commerce, since the 1980s recession, the office market has continually declined while residential development in the core has increased considerably. Today, the downtown consists of an office core and retail district surrounded by a cluster of neighbourhoods, which effectively reverses the housing-office development ratio that existed nearly twenty decades prior (Hutton, 2007).

Approximately 150 condominium towers have emerged since the late 1980s, making it the fastest growing downtown in North America (Montgomery, 2006). In 2003, it was anticipated that the downtown peninsula population would grow to 111,220 by 2021 (City of Vancouver, 2003b); however, the current residential population has almost surpassed this projection. In 2006, the population on the downtown peninsula was 87,973, while the Central Area population (which includes Fairview and Burrard Slopes, Southeast False Creek, and False Creek South) was approximately 101,088 (City of Vancouver, 2007b).
These changes are a result of the 1991 *Central Area Plan*, a land-use policy guiding growth and development in the core, and the ‘Living First’ strategy, which summarizes the key principles of the 1991 Plan. The first part of this chapter provides an overview of the *Central Area Plan* including its development, purpose, and goals. The second part of this chapter describes the organizing principles of the ‘Living First’ strategy.

**Developing a Plan for the Core: 1991 *Central Area Plan***

Prompted by recent growth from Expo '86 and the subsequent investment and immigration inflows from the Asia-Pacific, the NPA majority Council authorized and approved the development of a new planning framework for the Central Area in 1987.

The Plan grew out of concepts and directions from previous downtown plans, such as the 1975 *Downtown Plan* and the 1974 *South False Creek ODP*. As office growth rapidly increased in the 80s, concern arose regarding the imbalance between residential and office use as zoning for housing capacity remained limited (Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). It was feared that this would create further problems in terms of transportation and affordable housing, which were issues raised in the *CorePlan* and addressed later in the *Central Area Plan* (Beasley, 2000; Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007).

Similar to the 1975 Plan and the *South False Creek ODP*, the 1991 Plan emphasized livability and urban design for a diverse group of residents. Like *CityPlan*, the 1991 Plan also supported neighbourhood planning. However, the *Central Area Plan* differs from previous plans in a number of ways as well. Although the 1991 Plan shared similar goals as the 1975 ODP, the ODP over-estimated commercial development and
allotted a large amount of space to office uses. In addition, the mixed use format for residential uses in the ODP “did not work” (Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). The 1991 Plan acknowledged and addressed the overly optimistic commercial designation in the core by re-adjusting the zoning to comply with current floor-space demand and development (Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007; Punter, 2003). In contrast to the CorePlan, the 1991 Plan did not involve a discussion of future industrial lands, as this was submitted in a separate city-wide industrial report. Moreover, the CorePlan was never adopted by Council and had been a bureaucratic exercise developed mainly by senior government staff. The Central Area Plan on the other hand, was a statutory policy approved by Council, and involved the public sector, private sector, and the community (City of Vancouver, 1991; Hutton, 2004).

**Central Area Plan (1991) Overview**

Community input was gathered in various sessions in 1988 to generate ideas and issues, and a draft of recommended policy approaches based on these comments was submitted to Council in 1989. Further research and refinement was undertaken for the draft policy and in June 1991, it was released for public commentary. On December 3, 1991, City Council adopted the Central Area Plan, a comprehensive policy framework for the downtown, which encompassed the downtown peninsula, the waterfronts, Central Broadway and the False Creek Basin (City of Vancouver, 1991). The policy identified the following seven goals for the Central Area:

- emphasizing downtown as an Economic Generator to promote its regional and international role for head offices, services and tourism;
- creating an alive downtown where a mix of activities allow people to live, work, and play;
- having a downtown for all people;
focusing on spirit of place and the Core’s unique characteristics, setting and heritage;

- ensuring a Central Area in nature which maintains and improves the natural setting;

- providing a walkable Central Area supplemented by transit and bikes; and

- having an accessible downtown which would not burden transportation.

(City of Vancouver, 1991, p.3)

These goals were to be achieved by re-ordering commercial capacity, support services, housing, retail, and livability. The Plan does not rezone land but provides guidance on development and rezoning applications.

**Commercial**

Although the importance of commercial uses was recognized, the Plan noted that there were excess office zones relative to transit and housing. To create opportunities for housing and protect heritage areas, the Plan consolidated the CBD into a compact area of high density and triple A office buildings along Georgia and Burrard. The medical and regional civic district was centred in Uptown-Central Broadway. No further office capacity was to be added, and limited commercial / office space was permitted in select areas such as False Creek North Apex and Coal Harbour East. As well, with the exception of heritage housing, housing was not permitted in the CBD.

**Support Services**

Support services, such as equipment suppliers, repair services, printers and designers, were seen as an essential component within the downtown office economy. However, new housing and redeveloping offices limited the land available for support services. The Plan aimed to ensure that, in the near term, adequate space would be provided for support activities that service the CBD. Small-scale commercial uses were permitted on the ground floor of residential units to enhance the livability, and to protect
heritage areas and support services, particularly in the Mt. Pleasant industrial area and the area south of Granville Island. The policy suggested that research be conducted on the role, needs, and location opportunities for support services over the long-term.

**Housing**

The Plan acknowledged that housing was “of major importance in achieving Central Area goals” (City of Vancouver, 1991, p.18). Housing was to occur in primarily residential neighbourhoods clustered around the CBD in order to create vitality and diversity, stimulate retail, and provide opportunities to live close to work. Some mix of retail and minor office uses may be integrated, but neighbourhoods were to consist primarily of housing, which would provide certainty for developers, focus community services, and ensure compatibility with public amenities. Choice of use was also introduced in the Plan, giving developers the option to build predominantly housing, predominantly office or hotel, or any combination in select areas such as Triangle West, Downtown South and parts of Central Broadway, which have traditionally contained a mix of housing and office, with a preference towards the latter.

The Plan supported increasing the supply of housing choice to allow for different household types and income levels. Diversity in housing choice would encourage housing
Figure 4.1 Central Area in the 1980s

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• Source: Hutton, 2005b

Figure 4.2 Central Area Plan 1991: Land Use Plan

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• Source: City of Vancouver, 1991
for families and children as well as rental tenure and affordable housing. Community amenity contributions (CAC’s) were applied as a condition of site specific rezonings in newly proposed areas of intensification to acquire amenities such as daycare and parks.

Livability

The Plan aimed to protect and enhance livability as densities increased, which was to be achieved by pushing high quality urban design and constructing a variety of densities to create a diverse downtown in terms of people, incomes, households, lifestyles, and character areas. Mix of uses were minimized to reduce conflict associated with different uses and population. Nightlife, entertainment, retail, and restaurants were perceived as potential nuisances and were “limited in or near primarily residential areas” (City of Vancouver, 1991, p.25). Monitoring, post-occupancy evaluation assessment, residential consultation and an area review were to be completed for new high-rise residential developments which would be used to correct problems in future developments.

Retail

The retail policy intended to limit and focus retail on key streets so that such uses contributed to public spaces. Retail spaces were to be compatible with adjacent uses, and contribute to street activity. Retail and commercial were distinguished as separate uses in the Plan, and underground malls, shopping malls, and retail concentration were limited to promote unique retail areas such as Robson.

The ‘Living First’ Strategy

During a conversation between Larry Beasley, the Director of the Vancouver Planning Department at the time, and a colleague nearly a decade after the Plan’s
adoption, the outside observer speculated that the 1991 policy was in effect a ‘living first strategy’ as it attempted to accommodate growth and densify the population by preferencing residential uses (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). The term, ‘living first’ is commonly used today, particularly by the media and in public discourse, to describe a set of policies that promote the creation of residential neighbourhoods downtown (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). It is worth noting that the 1991 Plan is a statutory plan adopted by Council, whereas the ‘Living First’ strategy is a planning term coined by Larry Beasley and is essentially a summary of the major elements and goals of the Central Area Plan (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007).

Beasley (2000) indicates that the Vancouver urban model “focuses on housing intensity; housing diversity; structuring for coherent, identifiable and supportive neighbourhoods; and fostering sustainable domestic urban design and architecture” (p.2). The strategy promotes the advantages of an urban lifestyle as an alternative to the single family dwelling lifestyle in the suburbs. Land-uses were re-ordered in 1991 in favour of residential, public, and other uses in the CBD fringe and inner city to achieve housing, protect heritage areas, and concentrate employment in areas well-served by transit (Hutton, 2004).

One of the organizing principles for downtown housing revolved around limiting commuter and vehicular access into the core (Beasley, 2000). Therefore, additional bridges and traffic were not to be built, but transit, walking and biking were promoted through spending and allocation of space. Another principle was to maintain the existing character of the city. For instance, new road grids, place names, and open space
networks were extended from existing ones.

Developing complete neighbourhoods at a pedestrian-scale was another important principle for downtown housing. It emphasized a mix of uses, amenities, a local commercial high-street and ‘third places’ where people can gather when not at home or work. A related principle insisted on the integration of a rich housing mix including market and non-market housing, mixed incomes, special needs housing, and various housing types (family, couples, and non-family). Opportunities for families and children were to be provided through the development of row-housing.

Another fundamental notion stated that housing, work, and services should be within close proximity to each other. The public realm was acknowledged as a significant aspect of community identity and social life, which was enhanced through various means such as sidewalk beautification, street art, lighting and signage (Beasley, 2000). The strategy also emphasized open space and green linkages to provide connectivity from the neighbourhoods to the edge of the water and to public spaces via a walkway and bikeway system. Costs for amenities and public utilities are bourne predominantly by developers through DCL’s and CAC’s, which reduce/eliminate the burden on taxpayers.
Urban design was of primary importance to high density housing in Vancouver and design guidelines were facilitated through zoning. Guidelines regulated various features such as sidewalks, office towers, in-street uses, retail, green space, sun/shadow, private and public spaces, and landscaping. Principles of environmental sustainability were also integrated within design guidelines.

Process was an essential component of the ‘Living First’ vision (Beasley, 2000). In Vancouver, a “co-operative planning approach” was employed, as staff, politicians, developers, and citizens engaged in dialogue to discuss plans. In addition, planning was based on a discretionary regulatory framework where incentives and guidelines were emphasized over hard regulation.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to demonstrate how the Central Area Plan and the ‘Living First’ strategy have emerged from previous downtown policies. However, these initiatives also depart from previous policies as they focus primarily on residential uses as the predominant land-use. This section also described the main components and principles of both the 1991 Plan and the ‘Living First’ strategy.

The adoption of the Central Area Plan and the principles of the ‘Living First’ strategy have led to a new trajectory for the core. The strategy has arguably been quintessential in shaping the current downtown into a compact, high-density residential community filled with amenities and recreational and leisurely spaces. Sixteen years after the adoption of the 1991 Central Area Plan, the impacts of the ‘Living First’ strategy have become more evident. The subsequent chapter examines the impacts of the
‘Living First’ strategy and analyzes the implications of a predominantly residential downtown.
Chapter 5. Impacts and Implications of the ‘Living First’ Strategy

Introduction

The ‘Living First’ strategy is receiving more attention within the Planning realm as accounts of its success have been widely celebrated both nationally and abroad (Berelowitz, 2005; Boddy, 2004; Punter, 2003). However, the impacts and implications of this strategy have not been widely researched. This chapter provides a general analysis of the ‘Living First’ principles in a Vancouver context. The first part of this chapter assesses the ‘Living First’ strategy as an urban model and discusses its impacts on the core. The second part of this chapter looks at the potential planning implications of a residentially oriented downtown and explores the issues and challenges that have arisen in relation to the strategy.

This section contends that while the ‘Living First’ strategy has been beneficial from a residential, environmental, and transportation perspective, the strategy has simultaneously generated a residentially dominant downtown, which has implications regarding conflict of uses, imbalance between commercial and residential uses, social conflict, and housing affordability.

Impacts of the ‘Living First’ Strategy

Residential Land-Use Impacts

From a residential land-use perspective, the ‘Living First’ strategy has successfully addressed one of the major issues from the previous decade as it has reversed the commercial-residential ratio from the 1980s. While investment and development in the 1970s and 1980s focused largely on the commercial sector in the
CBD, investment has now shifted to residential development in the CBD fringe and inner-city (Hutton, 2004). Housing has risen steadily over the past two decades with the construction of residential development exceeding commercial construction (see Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1). From 1981 to 1985, 5,048,206 square feet and 5,832 residential units\(^4\) of development were completed for residential uses in the Metro Core. These numbers increased in 2001 to 2005, with 11,902,097 square feet and 12,635 units completed (City of Vancouver, 2006b).

**Table 5.1 Development Completions in Metro Core**

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- Source: City of Vancouver, 2006b

**Figure 5.1 Completion of Space in the Downtown Peninsula 1981-2005 (millions of square feet)**

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- Source: City of Vancouver, 2006b
Conversely, non-residential development\textsuperscript{5} was highest in 1971 to 1975 with roughly six million square feet completed, but this number plummeted to approximately three million square feet in 1986 to 1990. Over the last fifteen years, non-residential development has fluctuated between three and five million square feet. In particular, commercial development has had less build out in the 1990s than in the 1980s (City of Vancouver, 2004a).

The strategy has also been highly successful from a residential perspective as the core has seen remarkable growth. The strategy to consolidate the CBD and rezone underutilized industrial space and approximately eight million square feet of commercial/office land to facilitate residential development has “provided a mass of housing stock, new neighbourhoods, and demonstrated that density could be done in a livable way” (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). A number of new residential communities have since been developed, such as Coal Harbour, Pacific Place, International Village, Granville Slopes, North False Creek and the City gate project. In addition, neighbourhoods such as Yaletown, Downtown South, and Triangle West have been accommodated through infill and redevelopment (Hutton, 2004).

To accommodate additional residents, there has been an increase and intensification of housing capacity in the core (Hutton, 2004). The 76-acre development in False Creek South created residential capacity for 2,811 residential units and housed 4,900 people, and in False Creek North, 3,516 units for 5,236 people were completed on a 110-acre area (City of Vancouver, 2007d).

The strategy also introduced additional housing stock and a greater range of
housing types such as high-rise apartments, rowhouses, and townhouses (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). In 2001, both the West End and Downtown peninsula contained a large percentage of higher density dwelling types (see Table 5.2). Apartment buildings of five storeys or more represented 82.6 percent of the downtown area and 76.1 percent in the West End, while apartment buildings under five storeys represented 15.5 percent of the former and 21.9 percent of the latter. Conversely, the City of Vancouver had a greater mix of dwelling types as single detached housing, apartment buildings under five storeys, and apartment buildings of five or more storeys fell within a similar range at 27.7 percent, 33.8 percent and 21.8 percent respectively.

Table 5.2 Percentage of Dwelling Numbers by Dwelling Type in the Downtown and West End (2001)

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- Source: City of Vancouver, 2001a; 2001b

In addition, 'Living First' has established downtown living as a popular housing option (Boddy, 2004). Living in the core is seen as highly desirable and this is often attributed to the strategy's emphasis on livability and urban design (Beasley, 2000). The development of new neighbourhoods has been accompanied by investments in public amenities and the provision of recreational and leisurely spaces, which include additions and improvements to the public waterfront, walkways, and bikeway systems (particularly around False Creek and the Peninsula), and the construction of facilities such as daycares, community centres, and a library (Berelowitz, 2005; Hutton, 2007). The core has acquired approximately five kilometres of new seawall on the downtown peninsula and
more than 26 hectares of new waterfront parkland (Punter, 2003). These amenities have been acquired from Development Cost Levies (DCLs) and Community Amenity Contributions (CACs)\(^6\) where planners negotiate with developers to provide amenities or cash-in-lieu in exchange for additional density; thus, removing some of the tax burden from ratepayers and shifting it towards developers.

High urban design standards have also contributed to the appeal of living downtown. Guidelines have regulated landscaping features such as trees and sidewalks and the urban and structural environment such as the spacing and height of buildings. High-rise buildings are designed to pedestrian scale so as not to create an imposing and impersonal structure. Tower buildings along the water are slim and constructed on small floor plates with specific distances between the neighbouring tower to maximize views and minimize apparent volume (Punter, 2003).

The core has proven to be an attractive and desirable place to live, which is demonstrated by the substantial growth in the residential population. From 1991 to 2001, there was a population change of 22,803, a 48 percent increase for a total population of 70,090 on the downtown peninsula\(^7\) (City of Vancouver, 2004b). From 2001 to 2006, the downtown peninsula had experienced an overall population growth.
of 25 percent adding 17,900 more residents for a total residential population of 87,973 (City of Vancouver, 2007b). By 2030, the population of the downtown peninsula is projected to reach 128,400, while the Central Area population is expected to be 156,600 (City of Vancouver, 2007c).

From a local perspective, the downtown peninsula has the highest concentration of people per hectare than any other neighbourhood in the city (City of Vancouver, 2007a). From a national perspective, of the three largest Canadian Census Metropolitan Areas, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, Vancouver had the fastest population growth in the core (Heisz, 2006). 18.6 percent of Vancouver’s population growth occurred within five kilometers of the Central Area, compared to 0.8 percent in Montreal and 9.4 percent in Toronto (Heisz, 2006).

It can be argued that the ‘Living First’ strategy has positively impacted housing affordability. ‘Living First’ is primarily a land-use management and urban structure strategy and not a “social community planning instrument” (Hutton, 2004, p.1966); however, it has attempted to address the issue of housing affordability. By dedicating 20 percent unit capacity to social/non-market categories, it is argued that the strategy creates opportunities and secures social housing that would not otherwise be provided (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007).

Moreover, by ensuring a significant amount of housing capacity, the strategy, in turn, offset prices. As one Planner explains, “for market housing, we can’t control what the unit eventually sells for. What [Planners] can do is to make sure we have enough housing capacity within our zoning that we aren’t artificially straining the market...[and] inflat[ing] prices” (Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). Another Planner
expands on this idea: “If you have no housing and people are moving here, what happens to the housing prices? They go up because there isn’t [a house] and everyone wants it. So if you have as much housing as you can provide, you’re at least increasing supply” (Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007).

This situation has been conveyed in the West End, a downtown neighbourhood that has traditionally been more affordable. As development activity began to increase, planners feared that the redevelopment of the West End would make the area less affordable. Thus, by “opening up new housing opportunities in Downtown South, Yaletown, North Shore, False Creek and Coal Harbour, it took the pressure off of the West End and stabilized rental prices” (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). Approximately 18,000 to 20,000 market rental housing were retained (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). According to the 2001 Census, the number of housing stock in the West End has remained steady, totaling 24,800 in 1976, fluctuating between 25,000 and 26,000 from 1981 to 1991 and rising slightly to 28,948 in 2006. The majority of housing built between 1961 and 1980 and the age of the dwellings imply that very few new buildings have been built in the West End (City of Vancouver, 2001b).

**Transportation Impacts**

The strategy has also been beneficial from a transportation viewpoint. A growing number of residents have been accommodated without increasing road capacity on existing bridges and roads. As one Planner notes, “Once we got to a certain point of density, proximity and mix...you’d get a much broader range of transportation choices” (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). Limiting commuter.
access into the downtown has thus encouraged alternative modes of transportation (Beasley, 2000). Work, transit, services and living spaces were located near each other, and residential neighbourhoods were developed around a smaller and more focused commercial core to address the issues of long distance commuting and traffic congestion, which also complies with the regional objectives outlined in the Greater Vancouver Regional District’s (GVRD) 1996 *Livable Regional Strategic Plan* (Smith, 2006).

Downtown residents are less likely to drive and more likely to walk or bike. It is estimated that two-thirds of all trips in the downtown are made by foot, bike, or public transit (Montgomery, 2006; Stubbs, 2006). As one Planner (personal communications, Apr.5, 2007) mentions,

> People [were] substituting feet for wheels. They weren’t driving as much or even using transit as much because now as densities increased and the uses also increased to supportive retail, restaurants, cultural facilities, workplaces, people were walking more...By giving people more choices, it took the pressure off of [the] transportation system as far as car dominance was concerned.

Although it would be ideal to have the majority of the population live close to work, a commute outwards is inevitable. Not everyone will live near where they work, as “some people chose to live downtown and maybe take the skytrain out to the Expo line and get to Metrotown. Some people live in one place [and] work elsewhere” (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). Many factors pay into live-work location and although this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that overall, the in-commute to the downtown peninsula is greater than the reverse commute out of the city as 102,800 people commute into the core and 16,400 complete the reverse commute (City of Vancouver, 2007e). Thus, the commute from downtown to the suburbs\(^8\) has not occurred.

As one Planner argues, the “majority of people who live downtown work
There is no discernible outbound increase in cars in the morning or inbound increase in the afternoon” (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). There are 312,700 jobs in the City of Vancouver, with roughly 200,000 of these jobs located in the Metro Core (City of Vancouver, 2005a; 2005b). Of the 200,000 jobs in the Metro Core, 53 percent of these jobs are held by Metro Core employees living in the city, while 22 percent of these jobs are occupied by residents of the Metro Core. 57 percent of those living in the Metro Core work in the Metro Core, 23 percent work outside the city, eleven percent work in the rest of the City and nine percent have no fixed work place (City of Vancouver, 2005a).

In relation to other cities in the GVRD, Vancouver had the highest percent of its own residents living and working in the same municipality, with 69 percent of residents staying in the city to work while 31 percent commuted out of the city for work (City of Vancouver, 2006a). Conversely, Burnaby had 34 percent of its residents remaining in the city to work, followed by Richmond with 24 percent, and Surrey/White Rock with 14 percent (City of Vancouver, 2006a).

Alternate modes of transportation promote a healthier lifestyle and reinforce the city-wide commitment to environmental sustainability as there are fewer cars on the road, which will likely decrease the amount of greenhouse gas emissions. Downtown air quality has improved and the monthly mean indices have fallen by half since 1981 (Punter, 2003).

**Implications of the ‘Living First’ Strategy**

The Central Area has achieved substantial population growth and improved the employment, transportation and housing balance. However, the prominence of housing
has a number of land-use, social, and environmental implications in terms of conflicts between residential uses and entertainment districts, commercial displacement, social conflict, and housing affordability. This section examines the implications of the 'Living First' strategy and addresses the issues that have been identified in popular discourse and the media.

**Land-Use Issues and the Entertainment District**

As the downtown becomes more neighbourhood oriented, it will affect the types of uses that can locate nearby as these uses must be compatible with housing. The *Central Area Plan* (1991) consolidated and designated entertainment uses to specific areas to minimize noise and odour nuisances on residential neighbourhoods. While clustering uses has been beneficial for enhancing residential and transportation goals and providing efficient servicing, the concentration of nightlife activities in the entertainment district, particularly on Granville Street, has been problematic and presents ongoing issues (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr. 4, 2007).

Focusing these uses has amplified externalities as all the key informants suggested that there were too many bars and nightclubs along the Granville strip. The Neighbourhood Integrated Services team, a collaboration of City employees and community agencies working to solve community problems, regularly receives noise complaints from residents as club and party-goers continue their revelry at nightlife establishments into the late hours (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr. 4, 2007). Security has also become an issue and patrolling police officers are not an uncommon sight on Granville Street. These issues have been exacerbated by Council's decision to extend bar hours to four in the morning as a result of pressure from media and
bar owners who referred to the City as “No FunCouver” (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007).

However, it is also argued that while noise from the entertainment areas may be a nuisance, to a certain extent, it is also expected. As one Planner mentions, “When the largest demographic is between 20 to 35...there is going to be noise and activity and that is part of the downtown” (Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). Such complaints illustrate the paradox and challenge of planning for downtown housing. Downtown is seen as the hub of activity, which is one of the reasons for the high demand to live there, but at the same time, many residents do not want the externalities that go along with it. Hence, planners struggle with creating the nightlife needed to facilitate an ‘alive downtown’ while maintaining a sense of quietness typical of a residential neighbourhood.

**Residential and Non-Residential Uses: Concerns of Commercial Displacement**

A substantive issue in relation to the success of the strategy’s residential component is the amount of residential development compared to commercial development. Some critics argue that the residential strategy has been so successful that it threatens to displace (or replace) commercial uses and employment areas (Baker, 2007). There has been increasing pressure from the development industry to convert existing office buildings to high density residential uses in areas that are designated for commercial uses in the CBD and CBD expansion areas (City of Vancouver, 2004a). More developers build residential developments since it is significantly more profitable than developing other uses (Baker, 2007). More specifically, residential development generates a higher return yield, roughly five times more than commercial (Boddy, 2004).
While the *Central Area Plan* does not permit housing in most areas of the CBD apart from heritage retention spaces and hotels, commercial to residential land-use change has already occurred near the core, which is exemplified by the conversion of the Duke Energy (West Coast Transmission) building. It is estimated that approximately 970,000 square feet of commercial space is located in buildings that might convert in whole or in part to residential. Heritage density, which assists in preserving heritage buildings in Gastown, Chinatown, and other parts of downtown, “choice of use” and heritage areas are experiencing a similar trend of preferencing housing over commercial development (City of Vancouver, 2004a).

Hence, Boddy (2006) contends that ‘Living First’ has evolved into ‘condos only’. He argues that the orientation towards a predominantly residential downtown may result in the core becoming a ‘bedroom community’ or ‘dormitory suburb’ (Boddy, 2005; Loy, 2005). Critics argue that residents will live in the downtown but commute out of the city for work as commercial and business functions move to the suburbs and neighbouring municipalities. The Transportation section earlier in the thesis refutes the notion of reverse commuting. Moreover, one Planner argues that the notion of ‘Living First’ meaning ‘Living Only’ is a misconception since the strategy “doesn’t mean ‘Living First’ instead of jobs; it means...a balance of jobs and housing, and at the time, we had...to get more housing close to jobs” (Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). The *Central Area Plan* eliminated residential from the CBD to maintain the area’s focus on jobs.

In addition, contrary to popular conception, commercial development has not remained stagnant while housing expanded; commercial growth has occurred albeit in
longer cycles, and not as rapidly as residential or as in the past (Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). Since 2000, two million square feet of office space has been/is currently being built. Seven office towers have been constructed, including Bentall V and Shaw Tower on West Cordova Street (City of Vancouver, 2007e).

The Planning department has indicated that there is currently enough commercial capacity to accommodate job growth which “has continued unaffected by residential growth” (City of Vancouver, 2007e). The largest growing sector is Business services which includes computer services, advertising, accounting, and law, and these occupations have more than doubled in the past 20 years (City of Vancouver, 2007e). Moreover, the Central Area is currently the largest retail, hotel, and office centre in the region with over 60 million square feet of commercial space (City of Vancouver, 2007b; Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007).

However, although downtown employment and commuting is not presently an issue, it may become a concern in the future. According to the Metro Core Jobs Plan, the demand for future job space is expected to exceed current zoning supply (City of Vancouver, 2007f). In projections for 2031, it was estimated that the demand for new job growth would require additional supply of job space “to allow the land and leasable space markets to operate effectively” (City of Vancouver, 2007f, p.3).

In the event that such space was not provided, the loss of commercial capacity could change the downtown character from one that is primarily commercial to residential, which has a number of implications (City of Vancouver, 2004a). From a planning perspective, the shift from a commercial to residentially dominant downtown without the necessary regulations and plans in place would result in reduced measures to
manage land-use and development to ensure that future needs or even current needs will be met.

As the number of residential developments continues to rise, it may have an impact on land values. Residential uses have a higher value and may drive up the property value, potentially overriding other uses. In addition, with an already limited land base and viable commercial spaces being replaced by housing, commercial spaces will be able to charge a premium price for their downtown location (M. Dhaliwal, personal communication, Sep.4, 2007). Commercial uses that are not able to afford the land consequently may locate elsewhere, such as the suburbs, where costs will not be as high. Therefore, a reduced amount of commercial space could affect job growth and employment capacity. Furthermore, changes to employment growth and the number of office towers in the downtown may affect the future role and function of the downtown within the region.

The reduction of remaining large sites near the existing CBD and the presence of a primarily residential area may also discourage many major office developers and tenants from moving there. Many businesses locate to the core because a downtown location is typically associated with a sense of prestige. For instance, a building that overlooks a residential space may not be appealing to an internationally renowned firm (Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). In a City report, staff also speculated that if particular areas that are well served by transit were converted to residential uses, transit usage would be more reduced than if they were developed for commercial (City of Vancouver, 2004a).

Planners recognize that a new strategy must be developed to meet today’s
changing demand (Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). The first policy to address the issue of commercial land was adopted in 1997 and entertained the consideration of residential rezoning in the CBD only to achieve key public objectives, specifically heritage retention, and if sufficient office space was maintained for the 20-year office space demand. In 2004, an additional interim policy was approved limiting market residential and mixed use areas east and west of the CBD.

In the mean time, a moratorium has been placed on new housing near the business district in non-residentially zoned areas until further study. Additional research is also being conducted by the Planning Department through the Metropolitan Core Jobs Plan to determine “whether, how, and where the downtown office core should expand” (City of Vancouver, 2004a) in order to accommodate Vancouver's business growth, transportation needs and economic activity.

**Environmental and Social Impacts**

It is argued that density combined with infrastructure is beneficial for the environment as it can lower the City’s ecological footprint⁹ (Groe, 2007). Frank, Stone, and Bachman (2000) contend that higher population and denser road networks can reduce the distances traveled as more people walk, transportation routes are shortened, and more travel options are available. In addition, Walker and Rees (1997) note that compact dwelling types, such as walk-up apartments and townhouses, use less energy because the shared walls produce an insulating effect and the reduced space per capita equates to less heating being consumed.

On the other hand, while the structure may be more environmentally sustainable, lifestyle and personal consumption patterns have an affect on urban footprints as well.
For example, the 80 acre former industrial land that will be converted to residential uses for the Southeast False Creek’s Olympic village is expected to cater to the high-end consumers who may have an unsustainable lifestyle (Groe, 2007).

It raises the questions: for whom is the Central Area intended? Who is benefiting from the strategy and who is left out? It is argued that the consolidation of the CBD has prevented the office sector from overrunning marginal communities and heritage districts containing SRO’s, and provided a measure of protection from inflationary pressure and displacement for lower income residents (Hutton, 2004). However, it has also been contended that ‘Living First’ caters to a more affluent class of service industry elites such as managers, professionals, creative service workers, entrepreneurs and knowledge industry specialists, which is evident in the allocation of land resources to the consortium of entertainment, recreational, cultural and retail amenities that have emerged (Hutton, 2004; Ley, 1996).

Enhancing urban design, civic investments and public realm improvements have not only reinvigorated streets and public spaces, but they have also enhanced the attraction of the core to gentrifiers among the ascendant service class (Hutton, 2004). While no data has been acquired/is available regarding displacement, a potential implication of social upgrading may be the weakening of working class neighbourhoods through job displacement and income loss, as gentrification may price-out low-rent uses and households, and accentuate the dichotomy between the rich and the poor (Punter, 2003).

Affluent condominium neighbourhoods, such as Yaletown and Coal Harbour, provide a stark contrast to the severe social problems evident in the DTES, the area that
borders the Central Area. While these areas are close geographically, they exist as socially and economically distinct neighbourhoods. The DTES is the poorest neighbourhood in Canada with long-standing issues of crime, poverty and homelessness. In contrast, new condominiums along Main Street and the developments around International Village demonstrate remarkable urban design but raise social concerns regarding expansion, encroachment, and the displacement of residents with more modest incomes. While policies for residential development to ‘go east’ to Granville Street and DTES may provide solutions to encroachment into commercial areas, it may perpetuate encroachment onto lower income areas in the DTES.

A specific image of downtown as a place for the wealthy is projected in the media which further emphasizes the class conflict. For example, many of the new condominiums in Yaletown are aimed at young urban professionals (Boyce, 2006). One ad for the Homer and Helmcken area emphasized the condo’s proximity to boutiques, high-end grocery stores such as the Urban Fare, where exotic items like kopi luwak coffee beans (a ‘delicacy’ coffee bean from the feces of a tiger) are sold for $600/gram, a French bakery, and a dog spa (CBC News, 2002). An advertisement for the Shangri-La building at West Georgia and Thurlow boasts ‘private access estates’ and ‘limited opportunities’. Both the discourse of the Shangri-La and the amenities in the Yaletown advertisement create a sense of exclusivity for those with above average income.

More telling is an ad for the new Woodward’s building where a portion of the units are dedicated to social housing. The ad promotes the Downtown Eastside (DTES) as a ‘cutting-edge community’ and encourages the viewer to ‘live in the downtown’s most extraordinary new address.’ Landmark buildings such as the Harbour Centre
Tower, Canada Place and the Simon Fraser University campus are prominently displayed in the ad whereas the Woodward's building is barely visible, which is an attempt to link the prestige of these buildings to Woodward’s. The ad emphasizes a sense of ‘newness’ and disassociates the building from its historical and geographical locale, thereby eradicating and negating the deeper social issues of the DTES.

**Social Sustainability**

The lack of socio-economic diversity in the core has implications in regards to social sustainability (Montgomery, 2006). In terms of the social composition in the downtown, approximately half the population living in the West End and the Downtown area in 2001 were between the ages of 20 to 39 (see Table 5.3). This is followed by the 40 to 64 age cohort and then residents aged 65 and over. Roughly six percent of the total population in the West End and approximately eight percent in the Downtown were 19 and under, making them the smallest proportion of the population in both areas. This raises the questions: what will happen when the 20 to 39 cohort has children? If they move out of the downtown, what will happen to the downtown?

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**Table 5.3 Percentage of Age Demographics for Downtown and West End Disaggregated by Age Cohorts (2001)**

- Source: City of Vancouver, 2001a; 2001b

While the *Central Area Plan* recommended the dedication of 25 percent of new condominium units to be ‘suitable for families’, there is an under-representation of families in the core. According to a City report, couples with children at home and single parent families typically lived in areas with a number of single residential housing rather
than in areas with high-density apartments (City of Vancouver, 2003d).

It is argued that few with small children can afford to live downtown (Boddy, 2005; Montgomery, 2006). Although Montgomery (2006) implies that this decline is due to skyrocketing property values, other factors may affect this trend, such as the opportunities and services for children and location of employment. The issue is somewhat of a catch-22: while the downtown has a low proportion of children, in order to attract more families, more facilities will be needed. However, these amenities cannot be sustained without a substantial number of school-aged children.

**Housing Affordability**

The lack of socio-economic mix and the pricing of new condominium units have prompted concerns on the issue of affordability. Montgomery (2006) contends that there is a widening gap between those who can afford to buy in the 'livable' downtown and those cannot afford it. Inflationary rents in the central city housing market have driven many new economy workers to live in suburban neighbourhoods (Hutton, 2007). Thus, not only are lower income occupants displaced, but the middle class are also being 'squeezed out' of the downtown (Montgomery, 2006).
As Berelowitz (2005) argues, the new condominium tower "offers a lifestyle and format of tenure that only the wealthy can afford" (p.176). For instance, the Shangri-La starts at approximately three million. This luxury 'lifestyle centre' is targeted at the upper-echelons of society and illustrates the trend of more expensive condominiums colonizing the downtown peninsula where viewscapes and proximity to the water generally have the highest land value (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.4, 2007). The smallest one bedroom unit (less than 800 square feet) in the 1000 Beach Avenue Tower was listed up to $368,500 back in 1991 and prices have only increased since then (Berelowitz, 2005). The average new apartment price in Yaletown, for instance, starts at $300,000 with 80-90 percent of the purchases made by owner and occupants (Boyce, 2006). A proportion of new buildings in the core are often market-priced strata titled condominiums, which Berelowitz (2005) advocates will affect the mix of income, age, social group, and tenure options of those who live downtown.

However, housing affordability is a complex issue. Affordability has been a long-standing issue in Vancouver, which has consistently ranked as one of the most expensive cities in North America to live in. As one Senior Planner (personal communication, Apr.4, 2007) mentions, the high price is attributed to the limited land-base and the high demand to live in the city. Moreover, affordability is not just a local concern but it is also a regional and provincial issue that municipalities across the Lower Mainland are grappling with. Thus, questions are then raised about the responsibility and provision of core need housing initiatives, whether it is sufficient to simply provide sites for this housing, and whether it is possible that social housing can be obtained through other means (Punter, 2003).
In addition, the notion of affordability is dependent upon how it is defined. It prompts question as to what is considered affordable. Planners argue that notions of affordability in the Central Area need to be considered within a broader context. While housing costs in the core are higher than the above average income, housing is more expensive closer to the water in places such as Coal Harbour, Bayshore and Georgia Street because it is new housing. As one Senior Planner mentions, “One has to look at the whole downtown peninsula not just a series of waterfront condos” (personal communication, Apr.4, 2007).

As well, it is argued that the notion of affordability is frequently focused on the dwelling (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). Often left out of discussions regarding affordability is the cost of elements other than the building structure itself, such as transportation, well-being, quality of life, and amenity benefits. Living downtown and being able to walk and take transit as a mobility option saves money in terms of transportation-related costs such as insurance, vehicle, gas, and maintenance costs (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007). Living downtown is also more time efficient than the suburbs since “[y]ou’re spending the equivalent of two working days a week getting out to your place and back so that’s diminishing your quality of life rather than being able to walk or ride a bike” (Senior Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007).

According to survey of 31 cities conducted by Century 21 on the international housing price survey for first-time homebuyers who work downtown, Vancouver placed among the “ten most expensive housing markets per square foot in the world for entry-level home buyers working in the downtown business districts” (Century 21, 2007) with
$577 housing price per square foot (see Table 5.4). However, Century 21 (2007) concludes that in comparison to other international cities, Canadian cities in general pay less money per square feet and enjoy a shorter commute to work downtown.

Table 5.4 International Housing Survey of Average Commute Time to Work Downtown and Housing Price per square foot

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- Source: Century 21, 2007

The provision of amenities is another consideration not taken into account. As the Senior Planner (personal communication, Apr.4, 2007) emphasized, “If you live in downtown Vancouver, you’ve got the wonderful waterfront park; you’ve got a waterfront walkway; you’ve got all sorts of vibrant, active public spaces. You can walk around – that’s your public realm, that’s your backyard”.

However, despite the health and aesthetic benefits, as one consultant notes, “It is hard to call it affordable, but it is an alternative” (Consultant-Planner, personal communication, Mar.28, 2007). Such notions demonstrate that the downtown housing market is geared towards a more privileged class who have the opportunity to choose and purchase a dwelling in the Central Area. This in turn perpetuates issues presented earlier in the thesis, such as social equity issues and the widening gap between the wealthy and less affluent.
Towards an Residential Urban Model

Despite the challenges and issues that have emerged, the ‘Living First’ strategy provides a suitable urban model for cities that are looking to develop downtown housing. The strategy addresses a broad range of goals from housing capacity, transportation options, environmental sustainability, and land-use organization. The ‘Living First’ strategy creates aesthetic residential communities which are regulated by urban design guidelines and landscaping/zoning requirements. It also establishes a distinct ‘urban’ lifestyle through the provision of parks, amenities, and public realm features for both active and passive recreational activities. Services, jobs, and housing are planned close to transit to encourage alternate (and health-enriching) modes of transportation such as walking or cycling.

Concentrating land-uses creates a compact living environment, which is an efficient use of land in terms of the cost and the provision of hard and soft services such as community facilities, utilities, and infrastructure. In addition, with clear residential and transportation objectives, the planner is able to determine what uses are compatible (and non-compatible), which services and amenities are needed and where they need to be delivered. The strategy also emphasizes environmental sustainability, not only by broadening transportation choices, but also in terms of intensifying and re-using under-
utilized brownfield sites, which have resulted in smaller ecological footprints (Groe, 2007).

The strategy also serves as a model for public involvement and inclusion. The development of the Central Area Plan and subsequent ODPs have included participatory public processes where the communities were invited to collaborate with planners and developers, and provided input at various stages of the planning process. While the process may be extensive and time-consuming, the benefits are long-term, and ensure that plans are supported by the community.

**Replicability and the Vancouver Context**

However, a question is then raised: how replicable is this model for other cities? Cities should be cognizant of the Vancouver context since, to a certain extent, the success of the ‘Living First’ strategy is specific to Vancouver’s unique circumstances. Downtown Vancouver is one of the only major North American cities without a freeway system which permits the city to limit commuter access. In addition, its location, amidst mountains and an ocean, as well as its climate, facilitate its unique urban form and landscape. Thus, slim glass towers along False Creek are conducive to Vancouver’s mild climate. The principles of focusing on street life and avoiding underground and above-ground walkways further exemplify this. However, in colder and more northerly cities such as Edmonton, temperatures reach -40 degrees with wind-chill, and such building materials and street life throughout all seasons may not be feasible.

Demand is one of the key aspects to the ‘Living First’ strategy’s success. There is a huge demand for residential development in the Central Area, which subsequently enables the city to negotiate density in exchange for amenities. However, in cities that
are less developed and more eager for investment, they may not have such bargaining options. In addition, density, proximity, and mix are identified as essential aspects of Vancouver’s success. All three must be present and once a certain threshold is attained, it provides a much broader range of transportation choices and facilitates the use of amenities (Director of City Program, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007).

Another key element of its success is the notion that the strategy has been supported by politicians and the public who have helped shape neighbourhood visions. The strategy was designed to address the specific issues affecting Vancouver at the time whereas municipal plans and strategies must consider the needs of their own city. There are no templates or formula for revitalization success, but rather examples to draw upon to inform downtown plans.

**Conclusion**

Almost two decades after the approval of the *Central Area Plan* and the subsequent ‘debut’ of the ‘Living First’ strategy, the impacts and outcomes of this strategy are now more apparent. The Central Area has undergone a reversal, moving from a commercial dominant downtown in the 1980s to a downtown that is predominantly residential, which has had land-use, social, and environmental implications. The ‘Living First’ strategy has provided additional housing stock and diversified dwelling options from apartments to row housing, and the increased number of residents in the core through urban design guidelines and amenities which have increased the appeal of the core. In addition, the strategy has incorporated social components through its dedication of housing units to social and family housing and retention of affordable housing in the West End. The strategy has also provided alternate
modes of travel which have numerous health and environmental impacts.

However, although the ‘Living First’ strategy has successfully established residential and transportation objectives, the Central Area grapples with the challenges that have emerged from the strategy’s apparent over-success. One planning challenge is trying to balance a mix of activity on Granville Street to facilitate a lively downtown while simultaneously providing a livable residential community.

The imbalance between commercial and residential (with implications of displacement) has been another concern. The speculation of reduced commercial capacity also raises issues in terms of land values, reverse commuting, and future job growth. Social conflict and exclusion issues have also emerged. It is argued that the downtown is increasingly catering to the more affluent, as families with children and the middle class represent only a small portion of the downtown population. In turn this has implications in regards to housing affordability and social sustainability. However, despite these aforementioned challenges, the ‘Living First’ strategy sets an exemplary model for other cities to follow, but planners are cautioned that the Vancouver model is in part unique to its conditions and context.

The following chapter provides a summary of this thesis and re-examines the key research questions posed at the beginning of the paper. Drawing upon the main research findings of Chapter 5, the chapter offers recommendations for future downtown planning policies and strategies, and opportunities for further study.
Chapter 6. Revisiting the ‘Living First’ Strategy: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter revisits the problem statement and research questions outlined in Chapter 1 and summarizes the research findings. The chapter then provides recommendations and topics for further research.

Summary of Research

This thesis explored the ‘Living First’ strategy as an urban model by identifying the subsequent impacts and implications. This paper argued that although the ‘Living First’ strategy has successfully achieved residential and transportation goals, the housing-oriented strategy has land-use, environmental, and social implications. Four questions were posed and examined in the course of this paper:

- What are the strengths and limitations of the ‘Living First’ strategy as an urban model?
- What are the impacts and implications of Vancouver’s urban model?
- What are the range of issues associated with the ‘Living First’ strategy?
- How can future plans and policies mitigate the challenges presented by this strategy?

Research was undertaken through key informant meetings, a literature review, and data analysis based on information from Statistics Canada and City of Vancouver documents. The literature review explored the theoretical perspectives that are associated with the shaping of the 20th century downtown, such as Post-Industrialism and globalization. It is argued that the emergence of downtown housing as an increasingly popular downtown revitalization strategy has been facilitated by local government initiatives and new urbanist principles. While housing may reinvigorate streets and increase activity in the core, it is argued that downtown housing caters largely to the more
affluent, which can lead to social exclusion and dislocation, and conflicts between residential uses and other land-uses such as commercial and entertainment. In order to gain a greater understanding of contemporary Vancouver, this thesis explored the planning circumstances of the Central Area from the 1960s to 1990s. In particular, this paper examined the Southeast False Creek ODP, the 1975 Downtown Plan, the CorePlan, and the 1991 Central Area Plan, which this paper argues, have acted as strategic precursors to the ‘Living First’ strategy.

**Summary of Findings**

The ‘Living First’ strategy has been a double-edged Planning sword: on the one hand, it has successfully increased housing capacity and created a greater mix of housing types. The provision of amenities and focus on urban design have contributed to popularizing downtown living and today, the downtown peninsula population is 87,973 with demand continuing to rise. Densifying residential development and locating housing near employment, services and transit has provided multi-modal transportation in the Central Area. However, downtown housing has raised a number of challenges. The strategy has led to conflict between the entertainment and residential community. The concentration of bars and nightclubs has generated numerous complaints as the desire to create third places and a vibrant downtown remains at odds with a livable neighbourhood.

Another challenge involves the amount of residential to commercial uses as residential becomes a stronger presence in the core. The media has questioned whether residential development downtown will displace commercial uses. These concerns have occurred in housing(optional) zones which have typically resulted in housing developments due to higher yield returns and land values over other uses. The loss of
commercial capacity has implications in terms of rent and land purchases, as many businesses may consider other locations such as the suburbs where rent is cheaper. The *Metropolitan Core Jobs Plan* (City of Vancouver, 2007f) argues that current zoning can accommodate job growth but in the future, more commercial capacity will be needed to provide adequate job capacity. Thus, the *Metropolitan Core Jobs Plan* continues to research various policy directions that will ensure the availability of job space by 2031.

While it is argued that displacement will result in the Central Area becoming a 'dormitory suburb' or 'resort' area, statistics provided by the City of Vancouver’s Transportation Department indicate reverse commuting has not occurred as transportation both within and to/from the downtown has not significantly changed. Critics also argue that the high housing prices have pushed out the lower and middle class from the Central Area, while Planners have noted that housing affordability is an issue across the Lower Mainland. The strategy has attempted to address this issue by allotting housing units for families and lower-income populations. Nevertheless, housing prices are generally high in the Central Area, which suggests that the downtown is geared towards the more affluent. This may lead to issues surrounding social sustainability and the under-representation of the middle class.

This thesis contests that despite the challenges, the 'Living First' strategy is a suitable model for other cities. Planners must keep in mind that the strategy is distinct to Vancouver’s needs, and hence, aspects of the 'Living First' principles need to be tailored to each city.
Recommendations for Vancouver's Central Area

Anticipating Future Needs

Balancing land-use has been a key element in planning for the Central Area. The 1970's concern of a commercial office sector overrunning residential uses was amended by the 'Living First' strategy, which was developed when residential uses were a priority. However, as one Planner mentions, the 'Living First' is "what worked for Vancouver because it needed housing at the time; now it is a job first policy because this is what Vancouver needs now" (personal communication, Apr.5, 2007).

The Metro Core Jobs Plan study falls within the scope of this objective. With reverse concerns of residential uses encroaching onto commercial property becoming an issue, the 'Living First' strategy is being re-evaluated through the Metropolitan Core Jobs Plan to determine whether a new planning directive strategy emphasizing commercial uses may be more appropriate to meet the current downtown needs. In order to create a downtown that is economically, environmentally and socially sustainable, the core must be comprised of a balance of uses. In addition, it is not only about meeting current needs but projecting and planning for future capacity and uses without foreclosing options.

Broadening the scope of Vancouver's economic opportunities may provide a viable solution to the cyclical office economy. For instance, educational institutions such as English-as-Second-Language colleges, university campuses, and career colleges play an important economic role for the province and Vancouver's Central Area. The Central Area may focus on non-traditional commercial sectors or combine social and economic goals through innovative Community Economic Development (CED) enterprises.
addition, planning policies and strategies should be re-evaluated and monitored on a regular basis to ensure they are timely and effective. Evaluations could look at the following considerations: whether improvements are needed; if objectives are being completed; and if supporting strategies are conforming with overarching policies.

Recommendations:

- Expand upon the research currently being conducted by the Metropolitan Core Jobs Plan study in regards to current and future land-use and business trends.
- Monitor, evaluate, and update (when necessary) current plans every five to ten years to ensure relevance and effectiveness.
- Explore ways in which to diversify and expand upon economic opportunities.

Planning for Social Sustainability

Planning for social sustainability is also crucial for the downtown, particularly in matters of rising housing prices and affordability. The widening gap between the rich and the less affluent raise concern that the downtown will become an aesthetically pleasing city with social inequality problems.

Provision of affordable housing needs to incorporate multiple groups, including the lower income group, the middle class, and families with children. Discussions of housing affordability are often limited to low-income housing and while initiatives exist for low-income residents, housing for middle-class residents is largely omitted. For example, a proposal to dedicate one third of the 2010 Olympic Athlete’s Village units to the middle class was turned down by Council. However, it is argued that “if [the middle class] could afford space here...[t]hey would be two-bicycle families instead of two-car families” (Montgomery, 2006, p.56), which suggests that the middle income class may contribute to sustainability efforts.

Blomley (2004) points out that social mixing may not improve social and
economic conditions for renters, as limited interaction between renters and owner-occupiers may lead to social separation. While the land-use strategy has no means to control such measures, it can create more interactive public spaces such as community centres to increase social interaction.

Creating a broader socio-economic mix in the downtown will not only provide opportunities for social diversity and thus, sustainability, but it will also enhance vibrancy and reduce social conflict. Establishing more affordable housing for a wider range of social and economic classes is a difficult task to achieve solely from a municipal perspective in terms of budget and resources and will require some form of assistance from senior levels of government and the private sector (Planner, personal communication, Apr.5, 2007).

**Recommendations:**

- Establish and promote partnerships between municipal, regional, and provincial governments to address the issue of housing affordability.
- Collaborate with various stakeholders to develop initiatives to create more family housing and non-market housing, and remove barriers for lower/middle income workers.
- Examine options for improving social equity, including the development and expansion of social or community programs.

**Directions for Further Research**

There are numerous ideas discussed in this thesis that would benefit from further research.

This thesis focused primarily on the Vancouver context and the impact of the ‘Living First’ urban model. The topic of urban models would benefit from a comparison of downtown housing strategies across North America. It would contribute to a greater body of knowledge regarding urban revitalization. As well, while there is no standard
template to downtown development success, a comparison study could establish ‘best practices’ guidelines that would act as a starting point for cities looking to develop downtown plans and strategies.

Currently, a large portion of the population living downtown are in the 20 to 35 age range and childless, which has implications in terms of the future downtown needs as the population ages. Research could explore the following questions: what will happen once these couples have children? Is the current downtown suitable for families? Does the downtown have the infrastructure and services set in place to accommodate families?

Related to this issue, as more families move to the downtown and childless couples begin to have children, they will require schools, childcare services, amenities and community facilities. A population and demographic forecast to predict potential needs would be beneficial for planners to accommodate the services and housing needed to sustain future communities, including families with children.

Although recognition of the need for balance has led to a movement from a residential focus to a job/office orientation, it raises a number of questions: is office growth still viable? Is there an optimal balance between residential and office and if so, how can this be achieved? What is the role of suburbs in regards to establishing and maintaining tenancy downtown? The Metro Core Jobs Plan is exploring these issues and the study would likely benefit from additional research investigating the trend towards the simultaneous diversification and specialization occurring in the core’s economy, and the potential resurgence of office growth from the Asia-Pacific market (T. A. Hutton, personal communication, Aug. 10, 2007).

Further research may also examine successful mixed-use buildings in other cities.
In particular, East Asian cities may provide innovative strategies that may be adapted within a North American context. While most North American cities are physically and temporally (diurnally) segregated with office spaces active during the day and diminishing as the day progresses, in Asian cities, multiple uses for one space at different times of the day are generally acceptable (Ford, 1994).

Montreal and Hong Kong exemplify the notion of mixed-use buildings. Hong Kong allows for both commercial and tenancy to facilitate all day usage. In Montreal, the Place-Ville Marie building is used for shops, offices and restaurants during the day, but at night, the penthouse remains open for the restaurant and nightclub, Club 737 Altitude. This option could reduce the concentration of clubs in one area as well as utilize office buildings more efficiently and effectively since these buildings are typically under-used during the evenings. However, impacts such as noise would need to be further assessed. A case study on other cities may also shed some light on balancing the 24-hour city concept and working through noise management and security issues in entertainment areas.

Conclusion

Downtowns are ever-changing places. Their functions, their boundaries, and their very character. (Birch, 2002, p.17)

Downtown Vancouver has experienced considerable change within the last four decades. While the 1970s and 1980s established an expansive CBD, from the 1990s to the present, the core has undergone rapid growth in terms of high density condominium towers and the residential population, which is attributed to the ‘Living First’ strategy. This planning directive sought to counter the commercial-residential imbalance by creating a smaller, more focused CBD surrounded by high density residential
communities. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, while this housing-oriented strategy has provided opportunities to address residential and transportation concerns, at the same time, it has also raised a number of challenges in terms of displacing commercial uses, highlighting social tensions and reinforcing issues of housing affordability. Although challenges are expected with any urban model, the strategy highlights a number of principles such as urban design, limiting commuter access, and promoting public spaces which may act as ‘springboards’ to inform downtown planning in other cities.

As cities constantly evolve, planning policies and strategies need to accommodate and adapt to change in order to reflect these new circumstances. Vancouver is now shifting towards a new approach of protecting office capacity and encouraging new office construction, but it simultaneously grapples with issues of market demand, economic trends, and the potential impacts of the 2010 Olympic Games, which may further complicate issues of downtown housing demand and affordability. While the Central Area continues to strive towards facilitating the necessary and often elusive notion of balance, it remains unclear whether the ‘job first’ strategy will be able address the challenges from the ‘Living First’ strategy.
Notes

1 While the definition of what spatially constitutes downtown varies (Ford, 2003; Hutton, 2007), the terms, downtown, city centre, core, Central Area, and downtown core are used interchangeably throughout this thesis. The term ‘downtown’ encompasses a larger area comprised of the Central Business District (CBD), the frame, and the inner city. The term ‘CBD’ refers to the part of the central city where financial, business, and office functions are carried out. The CBD fringe or ‘frame’ refers to the area surrounding the core where low-value services and quasi-industrial activities are contained. The inner city refers to a diverse space containing industry (manufacturing, warehousing, and production), and a mixture of social, occupational, and housing types and forms, which derive from working class residences, often from the early 19th century.

2 Referred to as Metropolitan Core Job Plan throughout the remainder of this thesis.

3 For a more detailed history, refer to T.A. Hutton (2005b).

4 Measured in five year intervals (City of Vancouver, 2006b).

5 Defined by BC Assessment authority as offices, retail and restaurant space, hotels, industrial, and institutional buildings; offices represented half of the non-residential space downtown and only a third of non-residential space in the Metro Core (City of Vancouver, 2006b).

6 The initial cost of DCLs, which include parks, daycare, replacement housing and infrastructure/services (water, sewer, transportation, drainage), are financed by developers while operation and maintenance is paid for by property tax. CACs finance amenities such as community centres and social housing (City of Vancouver, 2004a).

7 This number excludes False Creek South, Fairview and Burrard Slopes, and Southeast False Creek (referred to as the ‘Central Area’ in City documents).

8 Referred to as a ‘reverse commute’.

9 Ecological footprint is defined as the “biological productive land and water that a population occupies, measured by the resources it consumes and the waste it creates” (Groe, 2007, p. 32).
References


-- (2005a, October 26). “Core Residents and Where They Work”. Vancouver, BC: City of Vancouver.


Environment and the Economy.


Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Key Informant Questions
The following is a list of questions that may be asked during the process of the interview. As this interview is meant to generate open-ended feedback, additional questions may be asked to follow-up with the interviewee’s response. However, these questions will be inclusive of all possible topics to be discussed.

A) Pre-context
- What is your role / affiliation with the Central Area?
- What discussions went on prior to the commencement of this strategy?
- What issues sparked the need for this Plan?

B) Context
**Central Area Plan & the ‘Living First Strategy’**
- What were the intended goals / objectives of this strategy?

Impacts
- Have the goals of the Living First Strategy been met?
- What are the impacts of the Living First Strategy/Central Area Plan on:
  - Social: people, housing, demographics, residential diversity
  - Land-uses: office, support services, housing, livability, retail
  - Economic: market / land value / property prices/taxes
  - Physical: built environment / form
  - Transportation
  - Public realm: parks, pedestrian amenities, open space; public facilities: cultural/ amenities.
- Several concerns/issues have emerged in public dialogue regarding residential development downtown. What are your thoughts on:
  - affordability
  - conflict amongst uses and users
  - Vancouver becoming a suburb
  - social equity

Evaluation
- What aspects of the Living First Strategy have been successful?
- What aspects of the Living First Strategy have presented challenges? Expected? Unexpected?

Implications
- What are the future and / or long-term implications of the Living First Strategy on the Central Area?
- Is the Living First Strategy a replicable model for other cities to follow as a downtown revitalization strategy?
- If this plan could be re-written, what would you change and what would remain the same?
Appendix 2: ‘Living First’ Strategy Summary

‘Living First’
- a strategy for accommodating growth and densifying the residential population in Vancouver’s downtown core
- emerged approximately 10 years ago and embodies many of the elements of the Central Area Plan (1991)
- an urban model created by the City of Vancouver to bring out the advantage of an urban lifestyle versus a suburban lifestyle.
- emphasis is on urban design to enhance livability

Basic Organizing Principles for Downtown Housing
1. Limit commuter access into downtown.
   - walking, biking, and transit get priority for both space and spending
   - congestion as an ‘ally’ in choosing to live downtown

2. Extend the fabric, patterns and character of the existing city rather than see new areas developed in ways that make them distinctly separate and different.

3. Develop complete neighbourhood units at a pedestrian scale with mixed use, utilities, amenities, and associated local commercial high streets.
   - include “third places” where people can gather (other than work and home)

4. Insist on a rich housing mix, which includes market and non-market housing; mixed incomes; family and non-family housing; special needs housing; & unique housing choices.

5. Home, work, and services should be as close together as possible.

6. Use of public realm to promote community identity & social life.
   - sidewalk beautification, street art, unique styles of lighting, signage.

7. Importance of open space and green linkages.

8. Ensure cost of public utilities and facilities borne primarily by development to avoid burdening the existing taxpayer for the costs of growth.


Sources: