

## City: prepare for the silver tsunami

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Good design helps make good citizens.

**D**id you know that in the City of Victoria, six of every ten dwellings are rental units and a rumoured seven of every ten people—especially in and around the city core—are renters? Look over there, 10 o'clock. For God's sake, don't look right at them! Yes, yes, right there: renters!

Humanity's wiring diagram may have its mysteries, but there is no missing that property ownership ("a piece of the rock," we say) is a desired status and an elevated form of tenure. It confers *gravitas*, true citizenship that reduces renters to a ghost-class—folks "just passing through."

Actually, my interest in this has nothing to do with class issues; and jokes aside, I want to be careful not to convey the false idea that renting means a diminished engagement in community life.

No, my interest is on the urban design side and begins with the premise that every bad building in Victoria diminishes both the city and its people; that is, reduces citizen expression. People are citizens—active, engaged members of the public life—only to the extent that a place is worth caring about; and this requires an emotional stakehold—in a building, a neighbourhood, a civic community. If buildings isolate or alienate people, file and forget them, we shouldn't be surprised if the atmosphere in the public realm starts to feel strange.

Allow me a calculated digression: the level of amenity at Victoria bus stops. The architecture of bus stop shelters—where shelters are even present—is a case of unambiguous Dickensian social messaging: "Public transit users, you are human refuse meant to suffer. However cold and wet it is here half the year, you don't deserve protection, warmth or dignity. You don't deserve the niceties of design. You are lumpen and powerless and deserve only a bench, not seating that would individuate you. Yours is a future of frustrated hopes and groundless expectation. Welcome to your shitty little life on the 'loser cruiser.'"

When I was a kid, my parents and I and their friends Joe and Anne Braunstein were out one evening for dinner at Katz's Delicatessen in Lower Manhattan. We were next up in the cafeteria-style sandwich line, and a slightly abstracted Anne was having trouble making up her mind. Joe, his eye on the impatient counterman, elaborately waved for the people standing behind us to go ahead. Anne apparently took this as criticism and disloyalty, and she fumed throughout a ruined dinner, complaining loudly to Joe, "That was an act of deliberate intent!" Joe kept denying it, claiming with theatrical innocence that he was just being polite to the couple behind, since Anne obviously needed more time to decide. The conflict was electric, and threw open the doors of adult disharmony—scandalous and thrilling to this nine-year-old: "acts of deliberate intent!"

Now, 60 years later, like Anne Braunstein, I see "acts of deliberate intent" in the design deficiencies of public transit amenities and in the barracks-like, soul-crushing presence of hundreds of both rental and owner-occupied apartment buildings in and around Victoria's central area, regardless how their developers, architects, and the City's urban land use policy folks may try to justify them.

There is no School of Developology. In a world where you can hardly make dinner without a professional credential, developers are un-obliged to demonstrate they understand what it takes to create buildings that

people will enjoy being in and around. No formal part of a developer's education bears on knowledge of a building's impact on the human psyche, or its contribution to the city's appearance and character.

This is a special irony in Victoria—a soul-stirring city whose entire reputation is built on the charm of its preserved architectural heritage—yesteryear's sensibilities, really—and the accident of a fabulous physical setting. No one says to visitors: "Ah, I have to show you Bay and Blanshard, run you past the apartment blocks on Cook Street, and finish the tour at View Towers!" Victoria's reputation hangs almost entirely on good urban character, too much of it inherited from earlier generations, too little of it created now.

I'm tempted to describe developers as the innocents (two words that normally repel each other like same-pole magnets). They create what policy tells them they may, or must. The City of Victoria's rules and design guidelines are mute on the subjective and borderless topic of creating dramatic, handsome, surprising, warm and welcoming buildings, but endlessly chatty about view corridors, build-to lines, ground-floor commercial, shadowing, and other "measurables."

Here's an energy theory: Exhaustion is built into policy and regulation. Policy requires policing, and with every erg of planning department energy dedicated to applying the rules, there is almost none left over to insist on and negotiate for fabulous buildings (deserved applause here to Victoria Councillor Pam Madoff who has made this concern her mission).

No preamble in the City's land use manual warns developers they don't have the right to produce bad or nondescript buildings. Nothing in the approval process solemnly reminds them that buildings are public statements, and that bad ones diminish both occupants' lives and Victoria's soul and good looks.

Still, not every building is a "fail," and there is room for praise. After all, developers are not vandals, and urban planners are not Sovietized. Leaving many unsung, I single out just-retired Heritage Planner Steve Barber (congratulations, Steve!) and Chris Gower, senior urban design planner, as two who, freed from workplace prohibitions, would likely deliver blistering reproach when presented with spiritless, utility-grade building designs.

On the market side, a well-earned shout-out to developer and tortured artist Don Charity and co-developer Fraser McColl, responsible for the Mosaic on Fort Street, the adjacent Jigsaw, the Reef in James Bay (across from David Butterfield's iconic Shoal Point) and their imminent project, Jukebox, near Vancouver and View. Charity shares with all developers a love of opportunity and profit, but his imagination is fired by grand design visions, starting right at the front door.

Don't you want developers to have design ego, fighting to outdo each other in producing distinctive, beautiful, livable buildings? The Jawls have done this with every project they have undertaken. Ian Gillespie (The Falls, Shutters, etc) clearly loves making flamboyant statements. Fred Rohanni and Bijan Neyestani have given us the graceful Aria and now the clever and referential Mondrian. Gordon and Chris Denford did wonders with the new Cherry Bank on Rupert Terrace and McClure Street. Chris LeFevre continues to expand his remarkable Railyards in Victoria West. David Price has produced the beautifully

## High quality water is vital for optimum health

scaled Swallows Landing buildings on the Esquimalt waterfront, framing and facing the Inner Harbour. Ric Illich has painstakingly resurrected the empty Hudson's Bay building, now The Hudson, and is building new residential at the rear. Pioneering Dave Chard at several downtown locations and Ken Mariash on the ridge above Songhees both have added quality to the Victoria skyline.

Given some good developers and successful projects, then, what brings fresh urgency to this matter?

You mean, you haven't heard of the "silver tsunami?"

That's downtown pub owner Matt MacNeil's phrase for it. MacNeil believes there is an enormous wave of new retirees from Toronto and other eastern urban centres who are "tired of the cold, tired of shovelling" who will be moving here very soon. He contends that they're urban, well-heeled, and don't want the burbs or Oak Bay monoculture; they want stylish condo and apartment living close to Downtown with its shopping, services, amenities, good dining, cool coffee joints and energy. He tosses out the number 10,000 and envisions a "belt-line" of buildings loosely ringing Downtown. It doesn't take much imagination to appreciate the economic and social transformation such numbers would bring to the core.

The math is this: 10,000 people would represent another 75 to 100 fairly hefty buildings shouldering the downtown core. That's a lot of buildings! Few downtown streetscapes would remain unchanged; and promising though it might be economically and culturally, can you imagine the consequences and impacts to Victoria's visual and social identity of getting the architecture and urbanism wrong?

Can you sense the potential for our laggard city (with the best of intentions, of course) to be locked into "my mouth says yes, but my eyes say no" mode, insanely policing the bonus density rules and regulations, when it needs instead to be setting the design terms and conditions for all these buildings, and planning and executing extensive public realm improvements?

Good as it would be to have so many new people calling Downtown their home, we must ensure that these newcomers are given not only Downtown living opportunities, but also legitimate grounds and an authentic social framework that will connect them to both the pleasures and responsibilities of city life here.

These concerns may seem hand-wringing and abstract, but it took a televised conversation last month between celebrated journalist and commentator Bill Moyers and David Simon, creator of *The Wire* and *Treme*, to help me to work out the human calculus. Said Simon, acidly reflecting on the state of the commons in these winner-take-all times, "There is no society; there's just you."

At its best, Victoria is a place where society and common cause still prevail. People often read Victoria's social cues simply as charming architectural heritage coupled to a dozy lifestyle; but society, as Simon means the word, is actually our "secret sauce."

Making the case for great buildings, I finish by invoking poetics: We can lose the charm of our city a building at a time, and insidiously lose its character in an even smaller increment: a citizen at a time.



Gene Miller, founder of Open Space Cultural Centre, *Monday Magazine* and the Gaining Ground Conferences, is currently writing *Massive Collaboration: Stories That Divide Us*, *Stories That Bind Us* and *The Hundred-Mile Economy: Preparing For Local Life*.

Structured water is the ultimate health food. Diane Regan, owner of Triangle Healing Products, compares it to water that is tumbling down a waterfall—if you can capture a glass and drink it, you feel invigorated.

"Our tap water is dead. It sits in a holding tank and is then forced through old pipes in order to get into our homes. Structured water is the most impressive thing I have found, after four decades in the business," says Diane.

Natural Action Water units are easy to use in your shower, under your sink, in your garden or at your house's water main inlet. The most popular is the hand-held portable unit. Simply pour your water into the unit, where it tumbles through geometrically-designed balls, becoming structured along the way, mimicking the way water moves in a waterfall. The water itself is the only thing that moves—there are no mechanical parts and nothing to replace.

When water is "structured" in this way, all its "negative memories" are erased, allowing it to return to its natural state of perfect balance. Anything unsupportive to life (such as chloramine) becomes benign, its harmful effects neutralized, and all beneficial mineral activity is enhanced and more easily absorbed.

Positive effects are numerous. Structured water prevents and removes corrosion of pipes; improves crop and garden growth; coffee tastes better; cut flowers last longer; pets and livestock are healthier; and fish tanks are cleaner. People find that they drink more water yet make fewer trips to the bathroom. This is because structured water is properly absorbed by the cells within your body, making it a truly effective hydrator. Athletes love it.

Diane invites you to visit Triangle Healing Health to taste a glass of structured water, while you check out the large leafy plant whose sparse branches and thick rubbery leaves have been dramatically transformed to plentiful branches covered with dark green soft leaves. Plants, notes Diane, are immune to the placebo effect!

On the topic of water, Triangle also offers the Kenrico Ion Shower Head, a fully transparent showerhead filled with natural quartz, citrines crystals and rare Japanese hot spring minerals. This unique showerhead promises to refresh, reinvigorate and revitalize as it soothes away stress, stimulates blood circulation and even treats certain disease symptoms—all with a lifetime warranty.

Kenrico also makes the Forever Alkaline Water Stick Purifier often referred to as "A Magic Wand that lasts for a lifetime." Not only does it transform regular water into alkaline water; it also adds magnesium and purifies water by reducing bacteria and other contaminants. The mini cylinder can be used with your water bottle, thermos and other containers. It too comes with a lifetime warranty.

Spring is a fantastic time to cleanse and renew your body. Come to Triangle Healing Products and find out more about how water is a vital part of your healthful journey.

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Triangle Healing Products, its owner, its employees do not provide medical advice or treatment. They provide information and products that you may choose after evaluating your health needs and in consultation with health professionals of your choosing.



Top: Kenrico Ion Shower Head  
Bottom: (r) Portable Natural Action Water unit; (l) Kenrico Water Purifier