

Sidewalks as a Focus of Public Life

The City of Vancouver's policy path to a vibrant pedestrian realm

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Abstract

When the City of Vancouver replaced their “one-size-fits-all” commercial zoning in the 1970s, they set the policy stage for development that enhances the pedestrian realm, and supports local business development. Forty years later, the positive effects of those and subsequent policy changes are evident, with the commercial West Broadway District demonstrating particularly good examples of these policies’ successes. As the City of Vancouver developed their award winning 2013 West End Community Plan, they drew inspiration from successes and lessons, based on their past experience with pedestrian-oriented design policy. This case-in-point highlights Vancouver’s successful public realm enhancement policies, elements of West Broadway’s built form that have arisen from those policies, and how the West End Community Plan learned from past experience.

Introduction

Over the past century, shifting mentalities about efficiency, safety, and quality of life have sculpted the structure of many cities in North America. In the wake of the Industrial revolution, people were eager to flee from inner cities, which at the time had become characterized by over-crowding, crime, and a jambalaya of often-conflicting land uses (Montgomery, 2013). It was during this era that a mass exodus from chaotic city centres took place, as people flooded to the sanctuary of the suburbs, where only those with cars could go (Montgomery, 2013). Automobile use boomed, while pedestrian infrastructure, small businesses, and dense city streets lost much of their relevance. Urban form manifested these new, auto-centric values, with widened streets designed for efficient car travel, degradation or elimination of sidewalk functionality, and a whole lot of parking space.

It did not take long for the pitfalls of this new kind of city to be exposed. In 1961, Jane Jacobs published her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which shifted dialogue and attitudes about cities, and peoples' role in them. Jacobs saw streets as public places ripe with potential for social interaction, community organization, and an overall healthy quality of life. Architect Jan Gehl followed the same line of thinking, and began converting streets into places for



Car culture in the 1960s (Source: streetsblog.org)

people, not cars, and boasts a trail of success stories around the world. In his 2013 book *Happy City*, Charles Montgomery ties together lessons from a wide range of authors and personal experiences to demonstrate how cities can be truly happy places for people to live. Indeed, a key ingredient for a happy city is a public realm where sidewalks become the focus of public life. But what are the ingredients for a vibrant pedestrian realm?

Many Canadian Cities have experimented with design patterns that foster convivial public street life, and the City of Vancouver is one of them (Grant, 2007). The remainder of this document shines a spotlight the urban design policies Vancouver has adopted to support pedestrian environments, how

these policies have impacted the built form and land use mix found in Vancouver's West Broadway District, and the lessons from past experience that informed the development of Vancouver's West End Community Plan.

Background

West Broadway's Pedestrian Realm Evolution

Located in Vancouver's affluent Kitsilano neighbourhood, the West Broadway District is characterized by an eclectic mix of boutique retail outlets, restaurants, and low-rise, mixed-use commercial development. Despite West Broadway's role as a major traffic arterial, the District has become a model pedestrian area with a thriving



Cyclists reclaiming West Broadway
(Source: Wikipedia)

local business environment. These successes can be attributed in large part to the City of Vancouver's evolving policy framework that sets standards for built form based on urban design principles for healthy pedestrian environments.

From the 1950s until the 1970s, a general commercial zone applied to almost all commercial areas in the City. This C-2 zone was permissive of a wide range of commercial and ancillary uses, including mixed-use buildings with commercial on the ground floor and residential on upper levels. The zone also permitted uses that facilitated automobile use, such as gas stations, auto sales lots, parking lots in front of commercial businesses, and drive through restaurants. In the 1970s, Vancouver City Council overhauled their regulatory framework to restrict auto-oriented uses, while introducing new policy to foster a healthy pedestrian and local

business environment. The City of Vancouver's urban design guidelines and specifications have been evolving since the 1970s, and have led to noticeable improvements in the public realm.

Outcomes

Policies and the Built Form

The following section highlights some of Vancouver's design policies and regulations, and includes photos showing examples of how these policies have played out in the West Broadway District.

Conditional Uses

The types of businesses in a commercial area can have a great deal of impact on peoples' desire to walk in the area. To ensure that commercial districts contain a mix of business types

that generates pedestrian traffic, permitted uses in Vancouver's commercial zones have been separated into two categories: those that are permitted outright, and those that require conditional approval.

Uses that are well known to generate foot traffic are permitted outright. Some of these include: Arts and Culture Indoor Event, Grocery/Drug Store, Beauty Salon/ Barber Shop, Laundromat/ Dry Cleaning, Photography Studio, and Retail Store.

The commercial zones also contain a list of about 60 conditional uses- from "Second Hand Store" to "Detoxification Centre"- that may be permitted, subject to the approval of Vancouver's Development Permit Board or the Director of Planning. Conditional uses are not limited to the 60 in the list; "comparable" uses may also be



West Broadway street frontage with a mixture of outright and conditionally permitted uses (Source: Madeleine Koch)

permitted, subject to approval.

When an application for a conditional use is made, it is judged based on the degree to which it complies with the City's guidelines for commercial development. These guidelines encourage applicants to make a range of design considerations surrounding: street character; noise screening; weather protection and awnings; pedestrian-oriented uses; frontage character; height; setbacks; and parking provision.

Frontage

Business frontages are an important interface in a pedestrian environment. Not only can they be used to draw in customers, they can also add greatly to the overall visual appeal of the pedestrian realm.

Vancouver's policies and regulations encourage businesses to spill onto the sidewalk, by having interesting window displays, outdoor fruit and vegetable displays, restaurant patios, and flower stands. Another way the City works to maintain visual interest is by limiting business frontage length to 15.3 metres. This rule can be relaxed, though, if a pedestrian amenity such as a courtyard, patio, or parklet is installed along the extended portion of the frontage.

Businesses requiring larger floor areas have navigated this frontage requirement by using "T" shaped floor plans, where the bottom of the "T" fronts on



This West Broadway grocery store exceeds the maximum frontage limit, but maintains appeal to pedestrians by providing a public seating area with weather protection along a portion of its frontage (Source: Madeleine Koch)

the sidewalk, and the top of the "T"- containing the bulk of the store space- is located at the rear of the building. This allows more of the street frontage to be occupied by smaller businesses.

Height

Building height has been limited to around four storeys in commercial zones, to ensure that sunlight can enter pedestrian areas, to retain attractive views, and to upkeep the character of commercial areas. If relaxations are permitted to allow taller buildings, upper storeys may need to be set back to reduce their impact.

Another important height consideration is the floor to ceiling height of commercial buildings. Taller ceilings are encouraged on the ground floor of buildings, to allow plenty of light to enter stores, to ensure

passersby can easily see into them, and to facilitate future adaptation of the space for uses that requires tall ceilings, such as restaurants.



Oriented east to west, this four-storey, mixed-use commercial-residential building enjoys plenty of sunlight (Source: Madeleine Koch)

Managing Cars

On many streets, cars take precedent over pedestrians. In pedestrian environments, thought, foot traffic comes first. It is important that the role of cars is given careful consideration when planning for pedestrian-oriented areas.

To ensure that sidewalks and business frontages are uninterrupted by parking lots, only a single lane of parallel on-street parking is permitted in front of businesses, and sidewalks must be clear of cars crossing them. Parking may be located at the rear of commercial buildings, using back lanes for access. Drive-through restaurants and automobile repair shops are prohibited in commercial areas, as these are obviously unsupportive of a pedestrian environment.



On street parallel parking does not interfere with the continuity of sidewalks or business frontages, and can act as a buffer between pedestrians and the road (Source: Madeleine Koch).



Streetscaping elements (Source: City of Vancouver)

Beautification

Street beautification measures can go a long way toward boosting pedestrian usage of an area. Vancouver's policies encourage the use of storefront awnings, canopies, fascia signage, unique shop frontages, display windows, and high quality architectural design. Where courtyard areas are developed to make up for larger store frontages, design guidelines encourage using special paving, weather protection, landscaping, benches, and orienting these areas southward to maximize sun exposure. Street trees are also an essential element of the streetscape, as they add visual appeal, and provide shade in the summer months.

Lessons Learned

Informing the West End Plan

As demonstrated by areas like West Broadway, Vancouver's pedestrian-oriented design policies have been largely successful. These successes informed the development of Vancouver's PIBC award winning 2013 West End Community Plan, which encompasses three distinct village areas: Davie, Robson, and Denman. While each village has its own distinct character, the three are similar in that they all consist of commercial strips with high usage from both visitors and locals. A major goal of the West End Community Plan is to recognize the village areas as places to gather, socialize and celebrate, and to establish strong

pedestrian environments within and between the three villages.

For decades, Vancouver’s policy framework has encouraged mixed-use development, with commercial uses on the ground floor, and residential use above. Residential mixed use is touted as allowing residents to easily access commercial services without needing to use a car, which in turn reduces carbon emissions, gets people active, and frees up time. While the values of mixed-use development are unarguable, Vancouver’s experience has proven that this type of development can be at odds with certain commercial uses –such as bars, restaurants and late night patios- that are both disruptive to nearby residents, and essential to a fun and convivial public realm.

In the Spring 2015 edition of Plan Canada, Michael Gordon and William Dunn explain that, of the

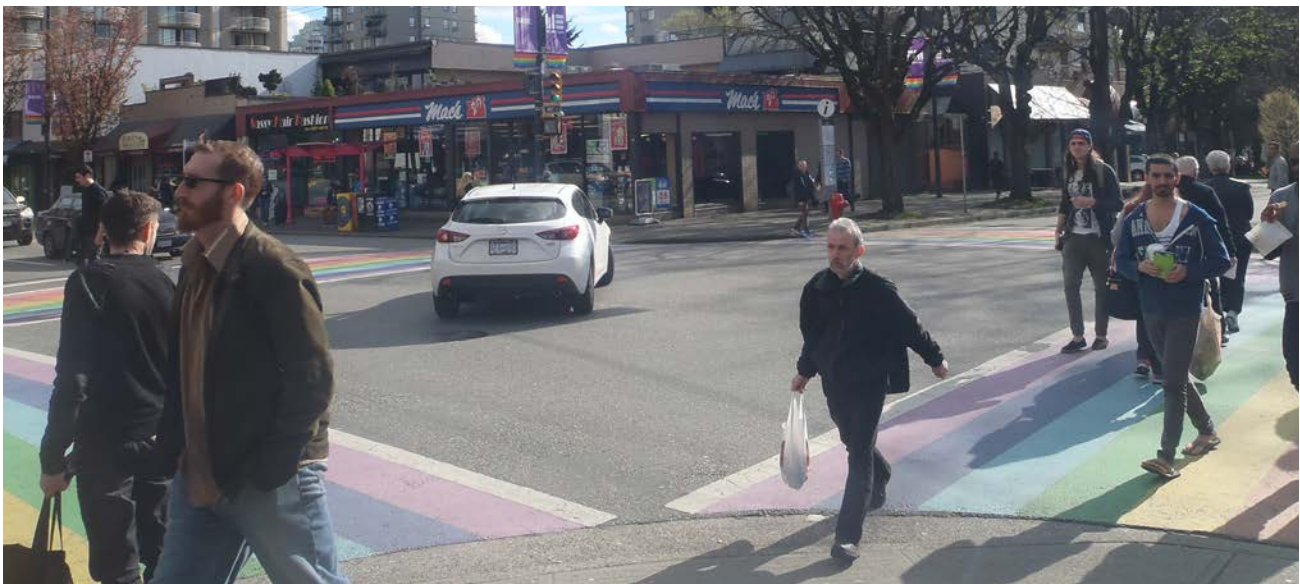
bars and restaurants in the West End, only a small percentage are located on the ground floor of mixed use buildings. Where residential mixed use does exist in areas with nightlife and restaurants, residents have brought forward complaints about noise and odours. This points to the incompatibility between residential use, and the types of commercial uses that make places vibrant at all times of the day. In the West End, this is a significant dilemma, as late night patios, late night businesses, bars, and restaurants are key components of the community’s character and culture.

During the West End Community’s planning process, it was decided that the villages should “continue to be memorable places where the community can socialize and patronize businesses that are open late into the evening, with minimal impacts on nearby

residents” (Gordon & Dunn, 2015, p. 23.) For this reason, the new plan restricts residential use in village areas.

Conclusion

Over the past four decades, Vancouver has successfully manipulated their policy and regulatory framework to facilitate the development of a healthy pedestrian realm throughout much of the city. By balancing widely accepted planning principles for walkable neighbourhoods with the unique realities of Vancouver’s West End Villages, the City’s newest plan is a “made in Vancouver” approach to supporting pedestrian realm vibrancy by preserving the elements that make the West End Villages such great places to be at all times of the day.



Rainbow crosswalks in Davie Village celebrate the area’s LGBTQ culture (Source: Madeleine Koch)

Resources

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