

# Globe Review

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## A VILLAGE FOR THE PEOPLE



**Vancouver gets it right** Currently home to some 3,000 athletes, the Olympic Village is also an impressive model of sustainable planning. It will not cure the woes of the Downtown Eastside – but its inspired template does catapult the city into a new league of urban daring. **Lisa Rochon** reports **PAGE 5** ➤

## ARCHITECTURE » THE VANCOUVER OLYMPIC GAMES



## IT TOOK A VILLAGE, BUT THEY GOT IT RIGHT

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VANCOUVER

To openly admire the Olympic Village is a risky business. Heaping praise on a large-scale waterfront development lacks the appropriate Canadian reticence. You can already hear the chorus: From behind their masks, they hail as disingenuous any applause for a project built during the economic collapse and requiring a \$700-million bailout by a city. More than that, we don't do new urban neighbourhoods well in this country, so surely this one, the last developable site on the shores of Southeast False Creek in Vancouver, warrants the typical lashing. But when I saw it from across the creek, and then up close, what became clear to me was this: The Olympic Village is a serious urban accomplishment.

Optimists, be warned. Southeast False Creek, currently a heavily guarded Pleasantville for some 3,000 athletes, will not cure the woes of the Downtown Eastside; neither will SFU Woodward's, an inspired collision of mixed-use buildings, a public atrium and progressive social programs next to the troubled area. Southeast False Creek – simply known these days as the Olympic and Paralympic Village – cannot take responsibility for an entire city. But, as a city master-planned, 50-acre (20-hectare) neighbourhood, it represents a new set of aspirations and an inspired template. It will do for Vancouver what the St. Lawrence neighbourhood did for Toronto in the 1970s – catapult the city as a test zone of urban daring.

In draft form – originally imagined by former Vancouver planner Larry Beasley – the new, high-density development of 1,100 residential units seemed merely a dreamscape. Planners and architects in Vancouver had become consumed by the holy trinity: glassy point towers blessed with a street-level base building and a sacred view cone to the mountains. But with the athlete's village – an eight-city-block waterfront site cursed, apparently, by a lousy location and mediocre views to the mountains – Vancouver has scored big-time. The neighbourhood accommodates a dramatic mix of incomes. There's a building specifically designated for the elderly, and several for startup families. What's been built includes deep sustainability: urban agriculture on 50 per cent of the rooftops, and heating from a highly sophisticated district energy centre.

Mid-rise buildings – between four and 12 storeys – are commonplace in cities such as Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Berlin. Now, Vancouver has built a credible crop of them. There's a shift away from exultant views of the mountains to something more intimate and, ultimately, more urban. That's



Top: The green roofs of the village – where urban agriculture finds a place on 50 per cent of the rooftops – establishes an exhilarating visual rhythm. Above: The 1930 Salt Building, once a refining plant, has been painted a bold red and will serve as a recreation hall. Right: A lamppost in the plaza. ANNA ZALEWSKI FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL



## Across Vancouver, Olympic additions that inspire and impress



Kids and adults can play the ropes at the Ontario Pavilion like strings on a gigantic harp.

On parking lots poised to be dug under to accommodate Vancouver's next onslaught of condominium towers, you'll find dozens of temporary Olympic structures that should have been left at the circus. Off-the-shelf white tents are a common no-brainer and include the offensive Canada House, the architectural commission that the federal government apparently forgot to commission, which may explain why it is a big old flappy tent from a Chicago supplier. But not all is lost. A handful of temporary pavilions deliver some much-needed visual electricity to the Games.

## ONTARIO PAVILION

A dead-simple but sublime intervention of sailing ropes, pulled taut, has transformed the exterior of the Ontario pavilion into a kinetic sculpture. The curving exterior skin of blue-and-white ropes is mounted on a light frame of wood extended from the roof. Approach the building from either side, and the images behind the ropes appear to subtly change. Examined up close, the intense vertical drop of the ropes hints at a waterfall. Imaginatively designed by Hariri Pontarini Architects of Toronto with interior design and programming by Lord Cultural Resources, the pavilion, which cost \$4.65-million to design and construct, features free indie-band concerts and brave new worlds in technology, showcasing a 4-D theatre with movable seats and sprays of mist. 88 Pacific Blvd.

## FOUR HOST FIRST NATIONS PAVILION

For the first time in history, indigenous peoples are being formally recognized as Olympic co-hosts. The Four Nations – the Lil'wat, Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh – are celebrating the historic partnership with a high-profile pavilion on the plaza of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre. Al-

though the raised plaza establishes an awkward connection to Georgia Street, the pavilion rises above the visual discord to deliver an engaging landmark. Skillfully designed and detailed by Hotson Bakker Boniface Haden Architects. Corner of West Georgia and Hamilton streets.

## ALBERTA HOUSE

At last, the cowboy hat has been left back at the ranch. This pavilion's roof plane tilts up on steel-grid columns to invigorate the corner of Robson and Beatty. Inside, within walls of Western red cedar, visitors are exposed to modern designs by Albertans. Mo-Ling Chui of brand.LIVE is the creative director not only of the pavilion but of what she calls "the Alberta activation." Chui worked with Capsule Designs in Vancouver and Andrew Gray of Inform Engineering to effortlessly express the new Alberta motto: Freedom to create, spirit to achieve. Corner of Robson and Beatty streets.

## GRANVILLE STREET

Okay, so it's not a pavilion, but another big design winner is Granville Street. Its trolleys have been diverted. Its overhead cables and poles are gone. Its benches and vertical lighting beams are a pleasure to behold. After years as a construction site, Granville Street has morphed into a \$24-million pedestrian-only delight. Designed by Derek Lee and his team at PWL Partnership Landscape Architects Inc. with collaborator Bill Pechet, Granville sets a Canada-wide standard for elegance.

» Lisa Rochon

a radical concession for Vancouverites.

Green roofs have established an exhilarating new visual rhythm. The buildings turn the corner in elegant ways, the landscaping is generous, and there are open corridors in the non-market (affordable) housing for natural cross-ventilation.

There's intelligence, too. That seniors' building is designed to be "net-zero," with much of its heat harvested from solar thermal hot-water panels and from the excess energy of the Urban Fare grocery store located at its base. And there's aesthetic intrigue. The use of coloured cladding is a welcome gesture, and reminiscent of what the Nordic architects do so well.

Remarkably, for an affordable-housing complex, is the use of fritted glass. The lime-green material, with its finely embedded patterning, is exceptionally long-lasting, notes project architect Stuart Lyon of GBL Architects, a Vancouver firm that specializes in social housing. Lower maintenance costs will pay off over time.

Implicit within the redevelopment of Southeast False Creek is the reclamation of a forgotten part of the city. Over the last decade, the city of Vancouver has ensured the remediation of the shoreline, the establishment of wetlands, and the creation of walking and cycle paths and public plazas along the seaside. All parking is buried underground. Where once the Squamish used to winter, there are now benches of stackable timbers and large granite chunks of rock leading down to the water's edge.

Some of the interventions – vestiges of rail lines; a bridge made of rusted, oversized pipe; and water troughs – smack of theme-park overzealousness meant to pretty up a historic site. That said, there are also interesting moves to maintain the visual dynamic on the site. The 1930 Salt Building, painted a bold red,

once refined raw salt before being converted in the 1980s into a paper-recycling plant. Now, its massive wooden timbers have been gracefully restored by Acton Ostry Architects and it's been set up as a recreation hall for the athletes. A waterfront plaza, by Phillips Farevaag Smallemberg, features highly stylized red lamps.

Then there is the \$36-million Community Centre by Walter Francl Architecture Inc. and Nick Milkovich Architects Inc. + Arthur Erickson. Cutting a dynamic profile along the waterfront, the building accommodates a daycare and play area on its rooftop (even if it suffers from an overly austere cladding in zinc). All in, the city has invested \$300-million to build the community centre, restore the salt building, construct 250 affordable residential units, and invent all of the public spaces.

Winning the Olympic bid meant that 10 to 15 years of building was suddenly compressed to five. Getting the job done required impressive collegiality and political will. Norman Hotson, the architect behind the legendary success of Granville Island, provided leadership in finding ways to design a new, livable typology for Vancouver – from high-rise to mid-rise.

A few years ago, there was talk of creating a version of the Hamptons along the waterfront; possibly a fishing village. A coalition of some 100 architects from Vancouver joined arms to put an end to such chatter.

Instead, it was resolved to create a new dynamic for urban living: buildings with transparent zippers for stairs and easy places for people to congregate. Buildings where the poor score some fritted glass, and where the entire neighbourhood might score a LEED gold rating, or even platinum. The Olympics forced the issue. And, with grace and determination, Vancouver has run with it.