



Smart Growth on the Ground

FOUNDATION RESEARCH BULLETIN: Squamish

Research compiled by:

Design Centre for
Sustainability at UBC

No. 4
March, 2005

SENSE OF PLACE

1.0 Introduction

Creating a Sense of Place

Good places create an exhilarating fit between the human-built environment and the natural environment. Good places are filled with imaginative possibilities and are rich in a diversity of experiences and opportunities.

The Importance of Good Places

Good places are more loved. Their citizens are less likely to move elsewhere and their economies are invariably more robust. Others like to visit such places; the economy is further enhanced. And ultimately good places make everyday life more enjoyable.

A variety of ephemeral and physical landscape features, the manner in which the town is ordered in the landscape, the nature of the commercial-industrial activities, the nature of how the town protects and manages itself, its festivals and events, and the imagination it brings to the way and how it builds, affect the town's sense of place. The following discussion identifies a range of topics, issues, questions, as a challenge to all to imagine a more beautiful, evocative, and provocative place to live.

2.0 Sense of Place Attributes and Possibilities

The Valley Room

The Town of Squamish feels as though it is situated in the middle of one large, very grand room - a powerful valley room. This sense of a grand space energizes; and its valley edges - the mountain walls - describe the spirit of and possibilities inherent in the landscapes beyond the edge. A sense of the infinite emerges as such - a sense that is crucial to the imagination and overall sense of place of any great town or city. Preserving and, where critical, opening up views to this larger valley room assures this spirit of place and the infinite remains. At the same time, intimate, small scaled rooms also encourage imagination and an increased sense of place. Creating several well defined urban rooms would greatly improve the town's and, in particular, the downtown's sense of place.

The Valley Light

As a mountain valley town, the town receives the morning light more slowly and darkens more quickly in the evening. In the morning the east facing valley walls brighten the sense of the valley long before the sun reaches the surfaces of the downtown. And in the evening, the sun lingers on the Stawamus Chief, Mount Garibaldi and west facing valley walls. Assuring that significant views open from the town to both valley walls extends the hours and power of the light that is felt in the town. This added, soft backlighting, an alpen glow, gives a gentle sense of mellowness to the town rather than making it feel dark and gloomy.

The Summer Winds

Valley winds are a special feature of Squamish environment and an important aspect of the Town's character. Powerful summer winds pour down the valley and into Howe Sound creating an ideal condition for world-class wind surfing and gliding. These winds, however, could be used for other major activities including kite flying, wind sculpture, a wind festival, etc. At the same time, well-located wind buffers, wind mills, etc. could add an important creative dimension to the Town's story.

The Squamish Estuary

The Squamish River Estuary provides a powerful, living opening in the valley floor enlarging the sense of both Howe Sound and the valley. While access to the estuary from the town is relatively easy, both the proximity and spirit of the estuary have little impact or presence on the town centre and nearby development. Improving estuary edges on all sides and imagining stronger town estuary connections could add yet another important dimensions to the town's sense of place.

Dikes, Flood Control Measurements, Pumps, and Related Infrastructure

Flat mountain valley bottoms are prone to flooding. Over the years the Town has built up a huge network of dikes, pumps and other flood control, water-management devices. These form a powerful sense of the community and its place in the landscape. Where access along the dikes is available (such as to the wind spit at the mouth of the Squamish River) a free-spirited, more elaborate understanding of the place is felt. Where dikes are hidden or privatized the place feels constricted. Where a utilitarian approach is taken to pumping facilities a sense of what they do and their importance in the scheme of things is lost. Creative ways, not only to build such features, but to imagine them will prove to be crucial to the Town's long term sense of place and to its attractiveness as a destination for visitors.

The Sea to Sky Highway

The Sea to Sky Highway once presented a quiet almost dignified sense of community as one drove through the town. Mountain views, large cottonwood trees, forests, and main Town Park reinforced this image. Recent, highway related development, however, is creating an anywhere, strip-mall appearance to this passage through Town and, in turn, is making Squamish seem less inviting to the passerby. Specific ideas for controlling the image of the highway corridor are urgently needed.

General Circulation

Views down many of the town's secondary roads and main streets afford partial views to the major mountain peaks, notably Mount Garibaldi and Stawamus Chief. Such views are essential to one's cognitive structure of the place and greatly enhance the general enjoyment of moving through and around the town. Whenever possible the longest run of new streets (more north-south than east-west) should focus on major landscape features and the alignment of existing streets should be preserved or re-articulated towards such features as well. In addition, bridges, dike roads, channel roads, and forest roads add to the sense of a town in a landscape and should be preserved and enhanced at every opportunity. These actions make driving home, or to work, or about town, a more grounded, pleasant daily ritual.

Parks, Schools, and Open Spaces

Large park and school sites further the sense of the valley room particularly when organized and designed to enhance the space. Baseball fields, where the viewing stands face Mount Garibaldi or the Chief, add excitement and drama to the scene. They also add an enlarged sense of importance to the game. Such opportunities should be protected, enhanced, and expanded at every opportunity. Places that are filled in the middle with unnecessary "stuff" should be emptied in favour of development at the appropriate edges.

Greenways Everywhere

Connected open space systems that link the waterfront, with the downtown, schools and parks, allow pedestrians and bicyclists to roam with ease through the larger community. Such opportunities encourage citizens, children in particular, to know their community better and to have an enlarged view of themselves and their role as citizens in the community. Open space systems that link the Town to the landscapes beyond the edge of the town further expanded the citizen's sense of place and environment. Such open space systems should be designed with various time periods in mind - a one hour journey, morning or afternoon journeys, and full day outings. Such systems also establish a more powerful image of the community in visitors' minds; visitor's will, as such, be more likely to rent a bike and explore the town and landscape. And with Squamish already possessing a strong reputation as a great area for mountain bikes, a major system of local and regional trails can only further than reputation.

Being Up-Front and Creative About Industry

While it is clearly important to maintain a healthy existing industrial base and attract new industry, the manner in which such industry builds can have a positive or negative impact on the town's overall sense of place. Invariable only a little imagination and a slight shift in building habits is needed to reinterpret whole industrial areas and give them an element of fun, beauty, and education. In turn these places become front yard rather than back yard places in the community. Consider a recycling plant that makes one of its walls out of recycled materials; perhaps built as a community art project. Or consider a grand summer solstice party at the container port - a once a year treat when the place is opened to the public.

A Downtown with a Place and a Purpose

A healthy downtown needs to have powerful location in the larger landscape. It also needs a diversity of employment, some major traffic generators, and a sense that it is the spiritual and civic heart of the community. New big box retail along the highway clearly pulls use away from the downtown. This can only be countered by making the downtown a more unique and loved place. Entertainment facilities, additional festivals, more everyday events, special urban squares for outdoor markets and festivals, and well defined streetscapes with connections to the larger landscape are essential. In this respect, a well-defined, achievable program for attracting citizens and visitors to the downtown needs to be defined.

In examining the downtown, it should be noted that street end destinations which encourage people to walk up and down the streets and around the town, are also important and require particular attention when planning and distributing activities and facilities in the downtown. Such people movement has a huge psychological component to it that needs to be tested. Blank places in the town journey which discourage the walker from going further need to be eliminated and replaced with spaces and activities that lure the walker on.

Revisiting the Waterfront

In particular, however, connections to the waterfront and the Channel are especially important. Such connections need to reinforce the Town's entertainment opportunities, water festivals, civic events, and special community facilities. A swimming pool with a view of the water and the Chief, or an outdoor summer theatre by the water are but two such possible examples.

The waterfront should also allow people to watch the everyday activities of work - boats loading and unloading, barges towing, etc. Too clean a waterfront is equally uninviting. And the changing tides and water flows should also be enhanced.

The Need to Fix Various Elements of Festivals and Events

Major festivals and events are often the life-blood of a community. They are those times that people eagerly anticipate and plan for year in and year out. Fixing special places as visible, daily memories of those festivals can do much to give an added sense of warmth to a place. Such features as an awards podium, a plaza for the wind-up dance, or a town parade gate can also serve as powerful images in the promotion of the event to outsiders.

Expanding on Squamish and Place as the Outdoor Recreation Capital of Canada

Given the amazing Town setting and the larger landscape, as the Outdoor Recreation Capital of Canada, Squamish can do much to further its reputation. From additional international events, races, and challenges of every sort, to the commercial activities that are attached to such events, a concerted effort to further the Town's image in this regard can only lead to an expanded and unique sense of place. Making a list of additional short-term and long-term possibilities, as such, is crucial at this juncture in the history of the town.

Provide Additional Community Programs and Places that Thicken the Sense of Place

Other community programs and places can emerge through the growing arts focus in the community, including both the visual arts and theatre. Summer art schools, major art fairs, a "Legends of BC" summer theatre, and similar programs need to be identified, assessed, and given possible locations and imagined physical forms. In so doing, a thicker sense of the possibilities for place can be realized.

Special, Place-Specific Details

In confronting just about any development in a particular place and landscape, special place specific ideas can emerge. These special details do, however, require designers, developers and citizens being attentive to such possibilities. As a case in point, consider the requirements for elevating houses above a certain flood level (on average about three feet) to the north of the Town. The sense of street and the walls along the street that rise from this requirement can either be a causally collection of individual, haphazard creations or a larger, collectively conceived wall that catches everyone's attention. Invariably great places have not one, but ten or fifteen such special details that are essential components of their unique sense of place that everyone understands and comes to see. The levees and pump houses of New Orleans, the seawalls of Vancouver, or the street signs of Saltzburg are but a few notable examples.

3.0 Design - Planning Implications

Many of these ideas are obvious - others seem superfluous given the many tasks facing this Smart Growth study of Squamish. Collectively, however, these moves do add up to the Town potentially developing a stronger sense of what its future image and its future hopes as a place are all about - and such a sense is crucial. Within, the context of this study, the beginnings of such an imagination take place and as many possibilities, ideas, speculations as are possible are encouraged. They serve as a starting point for a larger place-making imagination to emerge in the Town.

Contact Us

Design Centre for Sustainability

University of British Columbia, 394-2357 Main Mall, V6T 1Z4 t. 604-822-5148, f. 604-822-2184

For more information visit the following websites: www.designcentreforsustainability.org, www.sgog.bc.ca