

VANCOUVER IN SLICES

A Review Essay

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THIS IS NOT A GUIDE TO LOCATING the best pizzerias in British Columbia's largest city. My title is an echo of one that I have long secretly, and curiously, admired for its sheer panache: *New York in Slices: By an Experienced Carver*. Published in 1849 by the firm of W.F. Burgess, this slender, 128-page volume sold for thirty-seven and a half cents and brought together a series of thirty-four pithy essays that first appeared in the *New York Tribune*. Written in vigorous – some might even say purple – prose, these “slices” cut to the heart of the city to reveal its dark underbelly. The “experienced carver” (now known to have been George G. Foster) was a “muckraker,” one of the earliest in a considerable and important line of commentators and social reformers (among them Henry Mayhew, Charles Booth, and Seebohm Rowntree in Britain, and Herbert Brown Ames in Montreal) who sought to raise public awareness of the extent and human consequences of poverty and destitution in the great metropoli of their times.¹

My purposes are different. This is a review rather than a report, a reflection on the work of others rather than a correspondent's account from the depths of the urban jungle. Explaining the mix of historical narrative, personal opinion, and informed critique woven around a rich array of illustrations (many from his own skilled hand) in *Vanishing Vancouver*, Michael Kluckner compares himself disarmingly, and far

¹ *New York in Slices: By an Experienced Carver* (New York: W.F. Burgess, 1849). George G. Foster was also the author of *New York by Gas-Light With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), which also explores the seamy side of the newly emerging metropolis. The reprint of some of Foster's writing as *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) includes a fine introduction by Stuart Blumin that sets Foster's life and work in context. See also Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London: Griffin Bohn and Company, 1861); Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 17 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1902-03); B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1901); Herbert Brown Ames, *The city below the hill: a sociological study of a portion of the city of Montreal, Canada* (Montreal: Bishop Engraving and Printing Co., 1897).

too humbly, to a “crow following the plough ... picking over the work of others.”² Here I would seize the description for myself – without any sense of self-effacement. Neither architect nor urban designer, I bring the broad concerns of a geographer and citizen to a handful of books that focus, in the main and in one way or another, on the built environment of Vancouver.³ For the most part, these works offer views of, and insights into, elements of the material fabric of the city. They say little – directly – about its social characteristics, about its ethnic diversity, about the engines that drive its economy. They are each, in their own way, pieces cut from the whole. And yet the physical and the social, the political, the cultural, and the economic are not easily sliced asunder. “Making architecture,” asserts Adele Weder in a brief essay that opens Macdonald’s *Guidebook*, “is, at its core, a political action. Implicit in the design approach is the decision to encourage or thwart public gatherings, nurture or displace the poor, ignite or asphyxiate streetlife, rabble-rouse or calm the streets.”⁴ Indeed.

Reflecting on these Vancouver books leads me to think about wider issues than those upon which they ostensibly centre – and I find them particularly valuable for that. Reading them, I cannot forget the experienced carver of New York. He too had an eye for the physical fabric of his city. “BROADWAY,” begins Slice 1, “narrowly escapes being the most magnificent street in the world.”⁵ Elsewhere Foster describes Manhattan as “a panorama of palaces, variegated with eager groups of men apparently engaged in the discussion of lofty themes, upon which hang most momentous issues.” But the glories of this magnificent city were, in his judgment, but a cloud of appearances, and it seems to me that it is as important in early twenty-first-century Vancouver as in mid-nineteenth-century New York to attend to “a few of the black shadows which the City throws across our glass.”⁶

² Michael Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver: The Last 25 Years* (North Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 2012), 15.

³ The books at the core of this review are: Chris Macdonald (with Veronica Gillies), *A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2010); Harold Kalman and Robin Ward, with photographs by John Roaf, *Exploring Vancouver: The Architectural Guide* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2012); Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012); Fred Herzog (with essays by Claudia Gochman, Sarah Milroy, Jeff Wall, and Douglas Coupland), *Photographs* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2011); and Chuck Davis, *The Chuck Davis History of Metropolitan Vancouver* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2011).

⁴ Macdonald, *Guidebook*, 15.

⁵ *New York in Slices*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3, 5.

“Shadows on glass”: the phrase resonates. It catches much of the contemporary architectural scene – “glass and transparency are a common preoccupation of contemporary architecture almost everywhere, [but] their role is more deeply entrenched in Vancouver,” observes Matthew Soules in another brief essay in the Macdonald book.⁷ It stirs memories: did not Doug Coupland once characterize Vancouver as a *City of Glass*?⁸ It provides a handy foil and temporal measuring stick: *Vanishing Vancouver*, says journalist Frances Bula, provides a “new collection of visual records of our city before glass.”⁹ And perhaps it reflects something of what Mike Harcourt had in mind when he wrote, in the Foreword to Kalman, Ward, and Roaf, that to study the architecture of Vancouver is “to look into both its past and its future.”¹⁰ George Foster meant his words slightly differently, of course. His glass was a telescope (spyglass) bringing the hidden and obscure into view, or a mirror reflecting the social injustices buried beneath the glittering surface of New York, but conjoining Foster’s image of shadows on glass with the content of these books provides welcome licence to ponder a number of larger questions that flutter intermittently across Vancouver’s impressive façade, that lie ignored behind the widespread fascination with that form of urban design now known as “Vancouverism” (a high-density, multi-use core, well-developed transit, and thoughtful planning) or that remain buried beneath the city’s seemingly irresistible drive to remake itself.¹¹

The works that prompt these reflections are brought together here by virtue of their relatively recent publication, and they form a correspondingly serendipitous and diverse sample of a much larger literature. It is as well, then, to acknowledge, at the outset, that the Vancouver limned in these five volumes has been the subject of much earlier writing, image-making, and commentary. This earlier work refines, extends, qualifies, and perhaps even refutes interpretations offered below. In 1999, the Vancouver Public Library produced a poster celebrating a tight selection of works entitled *Vancouver in Print: 100 Books from*

⁷ Macdonald, *Guidebook*, 181.

⁸ Douglas Coupland, *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland’s Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2000).

⁹ Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), back cover.

¹⁰ Kalman et al., *Exploring Vancouver*, vii.

¹¹ Definitions of “Vancouverism” are loose and legion. This one broadly follows Mike Harcourt in Kalman et al. *Exploring Vancouver*. Kalman calls it “dense but civilized urbanism” (*Exploring Vancouver*, viii and 2). The fullest treatment is probably John Punter, *The Vancouver Achievement: Urban Planning and Design* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003). See also Trevor Boddy, “Vancouverism and Its Discontents,” *Vancouver Review*, 5 (2005), available at: http://www.vancouverreview.com/past_articles/vancouverism.htm; and Trevor Boddy, “New Urbanism: ‘The Vancouver Model,’” *Places* 16, 2 (2004): 14–21.

a Century Past, and the ensuing dozen years or so have seen many additions to the list of books on the city.¹² Several of these slice through the complexities of this immensely complex, diverse place, focus heavily on aspects of its material fabric, and let their pictures do a good deal of the talking, in much the same manner as do the books at the heart of this review. Without attempting to catalogue them, one might begin a list of examples with Coupland's *City of Glass* (2000); Chuck Davis's *Vancouver Then and Now* (2001); the works of Fred Thirkell and Bob Scullion on Vancouver postcard producers entitled *Vancouver and Beyond: During the Golden Age of Postcards, 1900-1914* (2000), Frank Gowen's *Vancouver, 1914-1931* (2001), *Breaking News: The Postcard Images of George Alfred Barrowclough* (2004), and Philip Timms' *Vancouver: 1900-1970* (2006); Heather Conn's *Vancouver's Glory Years: Public Transit, 1890-1915* (2003); the exhibition catalogue *Unfinished Business: Photographing Vancouver Streets, 1955 to 1985* (2005); Michael Kluckner's *Vancouver Remembered* (2006); Eve Lazarus's *At Home with History: The Untold Secrets of Greater Vancouver's Heritage Homes* (2007); Brad Cran and Gillian Jerome's *Hope in Shadows: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside* (2008); and Charles Demers, *Vancouver Special* (2009).¹³ More recently, we have John Belshaw and Diane Purvey's *Vancouver Noir* and, offering a different set of slices (almost entirely temporal, and about which a little more will be said), *The Chuck Davis History of Metropolitan Vancouver* ("fun, fat and full of facts" but heavily larded with pictures of places, people, and things).¹⁴ And finally there are those important products of Vancouver's place as a leading centre of contemporary photographic art in which (as with the *Fred Herzog Photographs* volume considered here) images are indubitably the centre of the frame. Among these a handful stand out: Herzog's earlier *Vancouver Photographs* (2007); Stan Douglas's *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2002); his *Stan Douglas: Abbott and Cordova, 7 August 1971* (2011); and Russell Ferguson, Dieter

¹² See www.vancouverhistory.ca/vancouver_books_1880.htm.

¹³ Coupland *City of Glass*; Chuck Davis, *Vancouver Then and Now* (Vancouver: Magic Light Productions, 2001); Fred Thirkell and Bob Scullion, *Breaking News: The Postcard Images of George Alfred Barrowclough* (Surrey, BC: Heritage House, 2004); Fred Thirkell and Bob Scullion, *Vancouver and Beyond: During the Golden Age of Postcards, 1900-1914* (Surrey, BC: Heritage House, 2000); Fred Thirkell and Bob Scullion, *Frank Gowen's Vancouver* (Surrey, BC: Heritage House, 2001); Fred Thirkell and Bob Scullion, *Philip Timms' Vancouver* (Surrey, BC: Heritage House, 2006); Michael Kluckner, *Vancouver Remembered* (North Vancouver: Whitecap, 2006); Eve Lazarus, *At Home with History: the Untold Secrets of Greater Vancouver's Heritage Homes* (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2007); Brad Cran, *Hope in Shadows: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2008); and Charles Demers, *Vancouver Special* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009).

¹⁴ John Belshaw and Diane Purvey, *Vancouver Noir, 1930-1960* (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2011).

Roelestadte, and the Vancouver Art Gallery's *Roy Arden: Against the Day* (2007), in which Arden's lens is turned upon both traces of the past and the abrupt appearance of the new in the local scene.¹⁵

The 2012 Herzog book is a compilation of colour photographs of street scenes, almost all of them from Vancouver in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Words are few. Each of the 165 or so photographs, reproduced full-page, has a terse caption, typically consisting of two or three words and a date. They are preceded by four brief essays by Claudia Gochman, Sarah Milroy, Jeff Wall, and Douglas Coupland. These amount to no more than twelve thousand words, with Milroy's biographical reflection, the best among them, accounting for slightly more than half of the total. *Vanishing Vancouver* looks back across the fabric of the city captured (in part) by Herzog's lens to document some of the changes that have occurred in buildings, streets, neighbourhoods, and lives in Vancouver during the last quarter century or so and to ponder some of the implications of these. In a manner that those familiar with Kluckner's earlier books will recognize, *VV* is an eclectic, but never dull, collage of Kluckner's own watercolours, old photographs (drawn from archives, postcards, and magazines) and a substantial, notably wide-ranging, well-informed, and deeply opinionated text.¹⁶

Whereas Herzog is forever out-of-frame – for all the art-historians' efforts to connect his work to that of other street photographers such as Cartier-Bresson, Harry Callahan, and Robert Frank – he *seems*, to anyone who just looks at these photographs, to “simply” point his camera, click his shutter, and move on – Kluckner is centre stage. Dozens of the images in this book – endorsed M.KLUCKNER or with an [MK] mark – are clearly products of his artist's eye and painterly talent. The authorial “I” also finds its way into the text, which otherwise espouses a standard third-person objective point of view. Kluckner traces the genesis of this book to his return to the city in February 2010, after a prolonged absence, when he confronted the challenge of “making Vancouver home again.” His writing is lively and straightforward as it

¹⁵ Fred Herzog, *Vancouver Photographs* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2007); Stan Douglas, *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2002); and *Stan Douglas: Abbott and Cordova, 7 August 1971* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011); Russell Ferguson, Dieter Roelestadte, and the Vancouver Art Gallery, *Roy Arden: Against the Day* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2007).

¹⁶ Earlier items of relevance here are Michael Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (North Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 1990); Michael Kluckner, *Vancouver Remembered: Vancouver the Way It Was* (North Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 1993); Michael Kluckner, *Vanishing British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005); Michael Kluckner, *Michael Kluckner's Vancouver* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 1997).

engages several “themes” that he sees as central to understanding change in the “modest” and “shabby vernacular” elements of his city. Among these are: the working harbour, the shop, the house, the apartment, and gardens and agriculture. Kluckner draws on a mountain of local detail and demonstrates a fine eye for arresting visual juxtapositions as well as a flair for identifying compelling instances and telling anecdotes. He also demonstrates a memorably playful sense of humour in detailing the realms of “condonauts” and the challenges inherent in a city divided between “fee-simpletons in their wooden houses” and “strata-titlers clustered along the transit routes and on the downtown peninsula.” Ultimately, Kluckner is concerned that “the poetry is seeping away” from his Vancouver, and his book is both an extended paean to what is being lost and a rumination on how best to shape the future.¹⁷ As founding president of Heritage Vancouver and sometime chair of the Heritage Canada Foundation, Kluckner comes by his concerns honestly. Idiosyncratic it may be, but this book is an important contribution to civic life and to the ongoing debate about the future and the future of the past in Vancouver. It solidifies Michael Kluckner’s reputation as an engaged and reflective citizen, and as an urban thinker who is as deft with his pen as with pigment.

Exploring Vancouver and Chris Macdonald’s *Guidebook* are both architectural guides. The former is remarkable. It is a direct descendent of a volume with the same title published by architectural historian Harold Kalman in 1974 and reissued four years later.¹⁸ The 1978 edition then formed the basis of a third, expanded and updated imprint, published in 1993, in which Kalman collaborated with artist, designer, and photographer Robin Ward and geographer Ron Phillips.¹⁹ For this latest edition, John Roaf, who worked with Kalman on the 1970s editions and is now an internationally acclaimed architectural photographer, was

¹⁷ Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), 9–15, 158. See also “condonauts,” 158; “fee-simpletons” and “strata-titlers,” 216; “poetry,” 212. George McWhirter, ed., *A Verse Map of Vancouver* (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2009) offers another distinctive set of “slices,” in verse and pictures, of the city. In “Date Stamp,” Gudrun Will reflects on the practice adopted early in the twentieth century of imprinting the date of construction into the concrete of city sidewalks, and she muses that, early in the twenty-second century, paths “scarred and buckled” by time “might just be the only remaining features of today’s streetscapes” (34). One also thinks of the first verse of John Donlan’s “Babies Cottage” here: “Where do we come from? / What are we? / Where are we going? / Don’t ask” (144).

¹⁸ Harold Kalman, *Exploring Vancouver: Ten Tours of the City and Its Buildings* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1974); and Harold Kalman, *Exploring Vancouver 2: Ten Tours of the City and Its Buildings* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1978).

¹⁹ Harold Kalman, Robin Ward, and R. Phillips, *Exploring Vancouver: The Essential Architectural Guide* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993).

brought back to Vancouver from the United Kingdom to provide new colour illustrations – and the results are superb. For an architectural guidebook to stand the test of time (and usefulness) through almost four decades in a city as rapidly changing as Vancouver speaks volumes to both the quality of its conception and the willingness of the author(s) to adjust their handiwork to altered circumstances.

Like its 1993 precursor, the 2012 version of *Exploring Vancouver* is organized into fourteen chapters presented as tours of selected Vancouver neighbourhoods and nearby suburbs. Changes in the tables of contents over twenty years reflect changes in the geography of the city and the broadening range of notable architecture. Chapters on some sections of the city – the West End, Shaughnessy Heights, the West Side, UBC, and South Vancouver – appear in both editions, although much has changed within these areas and specific entries (each including a building photograph, address, the name of the architect, date of completion, and a short description of the building, the history of its use, etc.) have been altered and revised accordingly. Gastown and Downtown East, separate chapters in 1993, are united in 2012, but Chinatown and Strathcona have diverged sufficiently over the same period to warrant separate treatment. Discussions of the western and southern parts of downtown and of West and North Vancouver are now amalgamated into single chapters. A 1993 chapter on False Creek South now encompasses both sides of the creek east of Burrard Bridge. The East Vancouver of 1993 is now East Vancouver and Grandview, and Mount Pleasant and Fairview; while Richmond, New Westminster, and Burnaby each gain stand-alone status.

With clear and useful maps charting sensible routes linking chosen sites in each of the fourteen sections of the city, and a short (perhaps too short?) text sketching the place of each in the urban fabric, this guide is a model of its kind. If it falls short, as I believe it does, of Kalman's averred ambition to tell the story of Vancouver through its buildings, this owes more to its pointillist approach, and the enormous challenge of creating big things from tiny parts, when those tiny parts are neither chosen nor located to one's own design, than to any specific shortcomings. The fourteen slices of Vancouver laid out in these pages are as varied as they are intriguing. The authors eschew the foolish temptation to label good and bad architecture and mark their Vancouver canvas, instead, with some 450 sites of significance "for their social past, for their anecdotes, for the people that were there, and for the architecture."²⁰ Seen as a book

²⁰ Harold Kalman, quoted in John Mackie, "Vancouver's Story in Brick, Steel and Concrete" (review of *Exploring Vancouver*), *Vancouver Sun*, 16 May 2012.

to walk or cycle with on weekends, at \$24.95 *Exploring Vancouver* offers unbeatable value for body and brain.

A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Vancouver is an altogether different, and slighter, work – but then, as Vancouver architecture critic Trevor Boddy notes, “all other guides are fly-bys” in comparison with *Exploring Vancouver*.²¹ A companion volume to others on Montreal and Toronto, the *Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture* sets its stall on architectural excellence – the first principle for inclusion was “a high level of design accomplishment” as acknowledged by professional peers – and is resolutely contemporary, considering only the two decades since 1990.²² Fewer than sixty buildings/locations/precincts are featured; there are good colour photographs of each, usually a floor plan, and basic details about the architect and engineering firms involved, plus a brief gloss discussing the architectural significance of the project. Descriptions are clustered according to the geographical propinquity of the projects but absent any attention to the social and historical, and with so few sites spread from West Vancouver to Richmond, UBC to Simon Fraser University, and Downtown to Surrey, there is little sense of neighbourhood distinctiveness. Two short essays rather curiously bookend the treatment of individual projects. Adele Weder’s “An Urban Collective” dances around the Stan Douglas mural depicting the Gastown riot of 1971, on display in the remade Woodward’s complex, to claim (in an argument to which we must return) that the “shiny newness” of central Vancouver reflects not a “manifesto of clarity and order” but a series of “backstories of complex negotiations between public and private interests whose endgame is the greater public good.”²³ This, says Matthew Soules in his concluding essay, has made Vancouver a “supermodel,” the archetype of a livable sustainable urban utopia admired by one and all – except that this dizzyingly attractive creation displays worrying similarities to Disneyland, where, architecture critic Michael Sorkin has suggested, subjectivity is understood “entirely in terms of consumption and spectatorship,” behaviour is tightly regulated, and architecture and space are “a territory of fixed and inflexible meanings.”²⁴

Comparing the illustrations in Macdonald’s *Guidebook* with Herzog’s photographs adds substance to this spectre of contemporary Vancouver as Disneyland, a place of clean, safe fun, “designed to the last detail”

²¹ Trevor Boddy, “Blurb,” on back cover of Kalman et al., *Exploring Vancouver*.

²² Macdonald, *Guidebook*, 9.

²³ Adele Weder, “An Urban Collective,” in Macdonald, *Guidebook*, 15–19.

²⁴ Matthew Soules, “Supermodel,” in Macdonald, *Guidebook*, 179–84. The Sorkin quotations are from Soules’s essay.

(Sorkin again) in which the liberating and challenging possibilities of urban life are severely constrained. Herzog's Vancouver is a much less ordered, far grittier place than the millennial city. Robin Laurence nicely captured the essence of Herzog's vision in a review of his book in *The Tyee*. The newly arrived immigrant from Germany, he explained,

was captivated by the raw vibrancy of what he saw: the throbbing neon, shiny cars and flashy billboards; the barber shops, coffee shops and cocktail lounges; the thronging Saturday sidewalks of Hastings Street; the movie theatres of Granville Street, and the food markets of Chinatown. Equally, his eye was drawn to the gritty and the shabby, the downside of the commercial dream: the squatters' shacks beside the railway tracks on Burrard Inlet, the wrecked cars abandoned in a vacant lot at Georgia and Dunlevy, the gaunt old men, ragged kids, and peeling paint of Vancouver's Eastside.²⁵

Pondering these images within sight of the 160 or so glass-sheathed, high-rise residential towers built north and west of False Creek since 1995, I am also captivated by the raw vibrancy of Herzog's pictures. They remind me of how much the central city has changed in my own thirty-six years as a Vancouverite, and lead me to think about the spatial as well as the temporal dimensions of change: many of Herzog's Vancouver images from the 1960s put me in mind of New Westminster in the early 1980s, and some evoke the streetscapes and cafes one might have found in more remote small towns a decade or so ago.

All sorts of things are bundled up in such idle reminiscences. In the formal terms of academic geography they cause me to think of the uneven imprint of creative landscape destruction across the urban system. They also bring me to realize that Herzog's vanished Vancouver is part and parcel of the poetry that Michael Kluckner sees "seeping away" from the city. Herzog's "Magazine Man," and "2nd Hand Store Boy" are perhaps not as long gone from the city as the "Paper Vendor," the fins on the "beautiful, dutiful" Chevy Wagon that adorned a downtown billboard in 1959, and the two-bedroom, half-basement house advertised for \$8,500 in 1961, but this is a radically different place from that of half a century ago, cleaner and tidier, more stylish, less tough and somehow, perhaps, less intriguing.

More to the point, if the two celebrity authors who contributed short essays to the Herzog book are any guide, Vancouverites are deeply

²⁵ Robin Laurence, "Fred Herzog's Gracious, Ghastly City: The Émigré Photographer Captured a Forever-Lost Vancouver in Kodachrome," *The Tyee*, 2 December 2011, available at <http://theyee.ca/Books/2011/12/02/Fred-Herzog/>.

divided in their reactions to these changes. For Doug Coupland, Herzog's Vancouver is like a bad dream incarnate. He is struck by the "utter filthiness" of the place. "Smog. Litter. Garbage. Black grit. Billboards," these are the inconvenient truths of Vancouver's past. "Vancouver was *ghastly* back then. What was society thinking?"²⁶ For Jeff Wall, by contrast, this place presented a "real beauty" to Herzog's lens. It was human in scale, everything about it had a "gracious air of appropriateness." For Wall, Herzog's pictures are a form of "affectionate reportage" made possible because the places and structures of the city evoked "an impulse to savour, celebrate and commemorate." How different, says the most famous of the city's contemporary photographers, from the present, when few of Vancouver's buildings are appropriate to their settings and most are "vulgar, cheap, ugly and even ridiculous."²⁷

It is common, these days, to attribute transformations such as that experienced by downtown Vancouver between the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to the twin forces of globalization and neo-liberalism, tsunami-like influences sweeping unevenly, but ultimately irresistibly, across the globe. There is an air of inevitability about this reading, summarized in Soules's contribution to Macdonald's guide: "Livability" is "a manifestation of globalization's dominant worldview," and globalization is "an ideological condition" that "prefaces a lifestyle urbanism that is shaped by the preoccupations of the influence-wielding middle class."²⁸ From here it is a short step to recognizing that capitalism, and neoliberal precepts wary of government intervention in the marketplace – the very foundations of globalization's worldview – help pave the way for profit-driven development agendas and allow urban designers new freedom (the results of which Jeff Wall so laments). In short, the process runs like this: cities become linked in to global networks; they grow wealthier; their prospering citizens elevate "fitness, leisure and comfort" above all other desiderata of urban life; to satisfy their requirements, developers create glistening amenity-filled precincts; and the triumph of the new middle class is complete.

But I doubt that things are quite this simple. Cities are immensely complex entities and they are shaped by countless swirling cross-currents

²⁶ Douglas Coupland, "Somebody Spoke and I Fell into a Dream," in Herzog, *Photographs*, 25–26.

²⁷ Jeff Wall, "Vancouver Appearing and Not Appearing in Fred Herzog's Photographs," in Herzog, *Photographs*, 21–24.

²⁸ Soules, "Supermodel," 181. See more generally Kris Olds, *Globalization and Urban Change: Capital, Culture, and Pacific Rim Mega-Projects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

of influence.²⁹ Adele Weder's reference to the "backstories" behind Vancouver's shiny new façade signals the existence of different opinions about the course of change (and the comments of Coupland and Wall suggest these differences may have been quite marked). We know, moreover, that making architecture and building cities are political acts undertaken in complex circumstances shaped by economic, cultural, and historical factors – all of which signal the inevitability of contestation, debate, and ultimately compromise, and remind us that understanding the processes of city building rests upon how, and how much of, each story is told.

Consider, by way of illustration, several stories about the Woodward's redevelopment project, which is discussed in four of the books under review here (and is featured in its original incarnation as Woodward's Department Store in Herzog – as a dark shadow behind a bright neon sign pointing to its parking garage).³⁰ Macdonald's guide is generally positive about the project and tells us that this extensive redevelopment "involves a mix of market and non-market housing units," various retail spaces, and government offices as well as a day care and university facilities. We also learn that it retains fragments of the original (1908) building, that it makes notably high-density use of its site, that it is bold in conception, and that it promises to add vibrancy to its neighbourhood.³¹ Kalman, Ward, and Roaf draw the veil back a little further. The eponymous store closed in 1993. In 2002, squatters occupied the building. The city bought the property a year later, in an "attempt to jump-start revitalization." Architects and developers came together to develop "a real village on one super-block, comprising three new building blocks and the rehabilitated original 1903-08 building." There are two hundred social housing units and five hundred market condominiums. Heritage and amenity density bonuses allowed almost a million square feet (about 92,000 square metres) of floor space on the site, which altogether

²⁹ On this point see, for example, Douglas C. Harris, "Condominium and the City: The Rise of Property in Vancouver," *Law & Social Inquiry* 36 (2011): 694-726; and Nicholas Blomley, *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³⁰ Davis, *Vancouver*, lists a score of references to "Woodward's" but, in the manner of the book, each is a factoid. The treatment is episodic and no entry moves very far beyond a simple recitation of specifics. For example, 12 September 1901: "Charles Woodward, who had opened a small store on Westminster Avenue (now Main Street) in 1892, incorporated Woodward's Department Stores. Three days later, excavations began at the northwest corner of Hastings and Abbott Streets for the construction of a four-storey emporium. The lot itself ... hadn't cost Woodward much: it was a swamp 2.5 metres (8 feet) below the sidewalk elevation. The city drained it for him. The new store threw open its doors on November 4, 1903" (47).

³¹ Macdonald, *Guidebook*, 44.

constitutes “a utopian vision of homes and workplaces where people of all ages and incomes might co-exist harmoniously.”³²

Kluckner fills in still more details in the course of offering a more measured, more critical assessment of the project. An early proposal to develop mixed housing on the site in 1995 foundered, at least in part, on local opposition. The provincial government acquired the site in 2001 but then did little before optioning it to a private developer who promised to honour the building’s heritage designation while constructing 417 market rental units. Local people objected and began the “Woodward’s Squat.” The city then acquired the property for about a quarter of the price the province had paid for it. By 2006, all of the market units in the forty-three-story tower that dwarfs neighbouring heritage structures were pre-sold. Little of the original store (beyond 1906 facades at the corner of Hastings and Abbott streets) was saved, as the entire project focused on an internal courtyard and turned away from the street. Although often touted as a bridge between the impoverished Downtown Eastside and upmarket areas to the west, Kluckner notes: “the entire development angles to the west, away from the mean streets. Gentrification never had such powerful symbolism.”³³

Further elaboration, not to be found in any of these sources, reveals an even more complicated story. The demise of the Woodward’s store chain was the product of many things, including changing transit patterns, shifting retail preferences, and the firm’s ill-advised expansion strategy.³⁴ Downtown Eastside activists were lobbying for a mixed-use conversion of the site almost a decade before the store was shuttered. The transfer of the property from the province to the city was part of the negotiation required to secure council support for the 2010 Vancouver Olympic bid.³⁵ The enormous Stan Douglas mural, commissioned by the developer at a cost said to be upward of \$1 million, and conceived as a subversive statement about a crucial moment in the community’s history – when people who thought they had a right to occupy this space were denied it by the city and the police – has drawn aesthetic attention but animated little social reaction. *Abbott and Cordova, 7 August 1971* is, in its

³² Kalman et al., *Exploring Vancouver*, 21–22.

³³ Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), 46–48.

³⁴ A fine treatment of the complexities involved in such changes is provided by: Sonia Ashmore, Bronwen Edwards, and David Gilbert, “Mr Bourne’s Dilemma: Consumer Culture, Property Speculation and Department Store Demise – the Rise and Fall of Bourne and Hollingsworth on London’s Oxford Street,” *Journal of Historical Geography* (forthcoming).

³⁵ Michael Harris, “The Woodward’s Experiment: Who Says East Is East, West Is West, and Never the Twain Shall Meet?” *Vancouver Magazine*, 1 September 2009. See also http://www.vanmag.com/Real_Estate/Feature_Stories/The_Woodwards_Experiment.

broadest reading, an invitation to discuss the politics of urban conflict. It seeks to open a conversation about public demonstrations arising from class, lifestyle, and other issues and official resistance to them. It depicts the disruption of a hippie “smoke-in” by city officials.³⁶ It is a technical masterpiece, and its one-hundred-square-metre translucent glass surface offers an arresting spectacle, but it may speak more to the nostalgia of today’s high-end condo-buyers than to the marginalization and oppression of the poor and homeless whose place the Abbott and Cordova area has been for many decades. Rendering “the historical record as carefully framed urban scenery for a new generation” does little to address the real problems facing Downtown Eastside residents as a result of rising real estate values and various bureaucratic interventions.³⁷

What then, to make of all of this?³⁸ Certainly, the redevelopment project, long in gestation and much debated, was heavily shaped by local considerations and was not simply the product of global forces. It was, in many respects, a political hot potato, tossed back and forth between different interests until particular circumstances (a left-leaning council, the Olympic bid) created the basis for action. But there is more. Michael Kluckner reminds us that Bob Rennie, the realtor charged with selling the majority of what eventually turned out to be 536 condominium units (in two towers that shared a symbolic? nostalgic? “W” address), coined the slogan “Be bold or move to suburbia” to market them. This was only part of a sophisticated sales pitch – which included complimentary coffee and W-shaped cookies glazed with neon-red icing (evoking the famous sign atop the original Woodward’s store) for those waiting in line to purchase, as well as an “impressively oversized, 1 x 1.5-foot mar-

³⁶ Leigh Kamping-Carder, “At the Gastown Riot: Vancouver Artist Stan Douglas Reimagines a Neighbourhood’s Troubled Past,” *The Walrus*, July/August 2009, available at: <http://walrusmagazine.com/articles/2009.07-profile-at-the-gastown-riot-stan-douglas-walrus-vancouver-art/>.

³⁷ Weder, “Urban Collective,” 19.

³⁸ Robert Enright, ed., *Body Heat: The Story of the Woodward’s Redevelopment* (Vancouver: Blueimprint, 2010) purports to offer an answer. According to one account, “The book’s editor is acclaimed Art Critic Robert Enright, who conducted all the interviews [some twenty-three] and edited a series of essays, by Christopher Macdonald, Dr. Alberto Perez-Gomez, May So and Reid Shier, which provide insight into the diversity of issues confronted in the process. It also includes a myriad of images, historical photographs and memorabilia, amazing construction photographs, contextual documentary photography and architectural drawings.” See http://www.readleaf.ca/blueprint/book.php?book_id=1/. A rather different assessment, and one of the latest contributions to what is likely to be a continuing debate about the Woodward’s project, is Andrew Longhurst, “Aestheticization and Consumption in Advanced Capitalism: The Woodward’s Redevelopment as a Landscape of Class Power,” *Trail Six: An Undergraduate Journal of Geography*, 6 (2012): 2-15, available at <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/trailsix>.

keting package bursting with glossy layouts,” which one reporter later calculated amounted to 166.5 square feet (or almost a third of the size of the smallest market units, which encompass approximately 50 square metres, and about half the size of the single social housing units) – but it was immensely revealing.³⁹

In *The Uses of Disorder*, a short but prescient book published in 1970, sociologist Richard Sennett argued that disorder and diversity are essential attributes of cities.⁴⁰ In his view, the inherent magic of urban life – its capacity to challenge and inform, to stimulate and provoke, and to teach lessons about “the true complexity of life and human relations” – comes from the unpredictable, even anarchic quality of existence within a dense, rich, close, and inescapable mix of classes, ethnicities, and cultures. Forty years ago, he was making an argument against the homogeneous monotony of American suburbia, sorted by demography, socio-economic status, race, and aspiration into “communities of will” by “people who [were] afraid to live in a world they [could not] control.” Today, as expensive condominium units drive ever deeper into parts of Vancouver once occupied by rooming houses and formerly genteel but fading walk-up apartments, and poverty is pushed to the periphery, we have to ask whether the “secure cocoons” of an earlier suburbia have not been woven anew into the purified “apotheosis of contemporary urban living” signified by podium towers of steel and glass.⁴¹

Through much of the modern downtown peninsula-Yaletown-False Creek North area I suspect that the answer is (an arguably slightly muted) “yes.” But the Woodward’s project is generally said to break the mould. It is, by most accounts, an experiment designed to demonstrate the possibilities of what Sennett called disorder but what proponents of the scheme describe as inclusiveness. Here people radically different in wealth, privilege, social position, ethnicity, culture, and background are intended to encounter one another in the course of their everyday activities. Whether consciously or not, project architect Gregory Henriquez reiterates the essence of Sennett’s argument by insisting that “the whole city should be mixed-use. Anything less is a tragic mistake.

³⁹ Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), 48; “Condofest: Tim Carlson queues up for a Woodward’s Unit,” *Vancouver Review*, 10 (Summer 2006), available at http://www.vancouverreview.com/past_articles/condofest.htm. See also, Brian Hutchinson, “the Woodward’s Project: From high above to down below,” *The National Post*, 5 June 2010, available at: <http://news.nationalpost.com/2010/06/05/the-woodwards-project-from-high-above-to-down-below/>.

⁴⁰ Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

⁴¹ Soules, “Supermodel,” 180; Krisztina Kun, “Raising the Roof: Housing Activism in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside,” *Upping the Anti* 4 (2007), available at <http://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/04-raising-the-roof/>.

Human lives are not meant to exist in compartments.” In this positive view, the Woodward’s precinct is a bold step forward, a reflection, to borrow the epigraph of a book examining Henriquez’s professional practice, of architecture as “a poetic expression of social justice.”⁴²

These are noble sentiments. But will – can? – the hope embodied in them be realized? Vancouver has taken small steps down this road before. False Creek South was designed as a mixed-use, socially diverse development. City planners have worked extremely hard to place “social housing” units alongside clusters of high-price, high-rise condominiums. Even older, leafier inner-suburbs have moved in this direction as demographic cycles, changing patterns of immigration, and rising real estate prices have made neighbours of people of very different ages and backgrounds. But juxtaposition does not guarantee neighbourliness – or inclusiveness. Sceptics aver that people experience tension as commonly as they do comfort and that they get miserable when forced to confront great class and wealth divides on a daily basis; most of us, it seems, are happier shopping, living, and eating together with folks broadly similar to ourselves. This socio-psychological predisposition is not easily disregarded. Together with the inescapable economic lure of more property for fewer dollars in the far suburbs and low-cost automobility, it has sustained urban sprawl through half a century and more, even as academic critics and urbane commentators have pointed out cracks in the picture windows of suburbia, dismissing them as wastelands of dull consumerism and deriding them as places where women are condemned to deliver children – once obstetrically and by car forever after.⁴³

There are also good reasons to be cautious about the rhetoric and practices of real estate promotion in Vancouver. The slogans used to promote condominium sales in the city (“Be Bold...”; “The Next Real Estate Hot Spot ... Pitt Meadows”) are intended to differentiate projects rather than to characterize them accurately.⁴⁴ The oft-referenced “edgy” area east of the W-towers and the inclusion of Simon Fraser University’s School for the Contemporary Arts as an anchor tenant in the Woodward’s project hint at a development designed to attract what Richard Florida called the creative class, but the furnishing and pricing of units sug-

⁴² Harris, “Woodward’s Experiment”; Gregory Henriquez, *Towards an Ethical Architecture* (Vancouver: Blueimprint, 2006).

⁴³ John C. Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Craigrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁴⁴ A quick survey of the real estate section of a local newspaper will provide plenty of grist for this mill. For an interesting and sustained commentary, see <http://condohype.wordpress.com/>.

gested that the developers had a different clientele in mind.⁴⁵ Marketing systems depend upon the creation of “buzz” by whatever means and are not necessarily scrupulous about the images they peddle.⁴⁶ Indeed, and for all of the rhetoric about “inclusiveness,” the physical configuration of the Woodward’s complex segregates social and market housing in ways that make a vertical gated community of the latter.⁴⁷ Nor can we assume that buyers are responding to the particular marketing message crafted for each project. Reported conversations with those waiting in line to buy into the W-towers reveal that a fair number were planning to “flip” their properties as soon as prices climbed.⁴⁸ Still, the Woodward’s experiment comes as rising gasoline prices, the spectre of peak oil, and rising concerns about anthropogenic climate change are challenging the wisdom of continuing suburban expansion. For all its flaws, we need to pay close attention to the results of this juxtaposition of people and uses because such arrangements may be a more significant part of our future than they are of our present.

The Woodward’s redevelopment project may be a bellwether in other ways. Earlier in this article, I deliberately abbreviated the title of Kluckner’s *Vanishing Vancouver* as *VV*. Two “V”s – double vé – dubleve – W. Although the rusted neon-red W – once the tallest object east of the downtown core – has been brought to ground and displayed in the project plaza, allusions to it (and “the past”) are a prominent part of the redevelopment. There are residential towers W-43 and W-32; there is a new W atop a tower above the old store; there is the W₂ Media Café, a “10,000-square-foot crossmedia centre” in the atrium of the complex;

⁴⁵ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ See “What’s Wrong with This Picture?” 22 March 2012, at <http://whispersfromtheedgeoftherainforest.blogspot.ca/2012/03/whats-wrong-with-this-picture.html>.

⁴⁷ A pattern reinforced by the restriction of Club-W use to condominium owners and their guests. See Brian Hutchinson, “The Woodward’s Project: ‘Not My Reality’ at the 42nd-Storey Rooftop Spa,” *National Post*, 26 June 2010. For other facets of regulation intended to ensure particular forms of orderliness in this “mould-breaking” space, see Brian Hutchinson, “The Woodward’s Project: We Wish to Warn That You Are Being Warned,” *National Post*, 28 June 2010, which opens with the lyrics from “Signs” (1970) by the Five Man Electrical Band: “Sign, sign, everywhere a sign / Blocking out the scenery breaking my mind / Do this, don’t do that, can’t you read the sign.” Pondering the Woodward’s redevelopment, its art school, its mural, and the rhetoric surrounding all of this leads me to wonder, darkly, whether we are collectively inclined to aestheticize poverty rather than to address it. For some discussion of the challenges, see Gordon W. Roe, “Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the Community of Clients,” *BC Studies* 164 (2009-10): 75-101; and Karen Bridget Murray, “Making Space in Vancouver’s East End from Leonard Marsh to the Vancouver Agreement,” *BC Studies* 169 (2011): 7-49.

⁴⁸ “Condo fest. Tim Carlson queues up for a Woodward’s Unit.”

and there is “Club W,” a rooftop recreational space for condominium residents, with eighteen trees, a lounge, and a whirlpool/hot tub in the shape of a ... W.⁴⁹ But the past is pastiche – here and in so many other ways in this determinedly forward-facing city. Note how each of the three descriptions of the Woodward’s project discussed above proclaims that parts of the original building were retained or rehabilitated in the redevelopment, but they are mostly less clear about how much and are rather uncertain about when the “old bits” were built. Vancouver heritage commission chair Richard Keate reportedly likened the preserved sections (of utilitarian façade) to a jewel box, implying that the shiny valuable attention-getting pieces were within. Kluckner suggests that the best that can be said of the redevelopment, from a heritage preservation perspective, is that “the operation was a success but the patient died.”⁵⁰

Although the City of Vancouver has had authority, since 1974, to designate buildings, structures, and lands as heritage sites and to regulate alterations to them, and added “more tools for the protection and management of ... heritage resources” twenty years later, this power has been exercised piecemeal and is broadly more persuasive than coercive. Still it has made a difference. In 1974, forty-eight downtown buildings deemed to possess significant historical value were designated for protection; in the 1990s, the heritage planning department developed an innovative system of density-transfer arrangements that initially allowed heritage buildings to sell their air-space to developers and then evolved into a density bank that rewarded developers for their heritage preservation efforts. For reasons too convoluted to explain here, but well summarized in Kluckner’s book and not unconnected to the massive infusion of heritage credits from the Woodward’s project (which involved more demolition than preservation) into the density bank, the city’s heritage program has had a difficult last decade. However, this may be less surprising than the achievements of the preceding quarter century in a city and a society “drunk on the now and the new.”⁵¹

It was the sheer pace of change in the physical fabric of the city (and a sense of “anger at the disposal of beautiful houses and gardens, cast

⁴⁹ “Located in the Woodward’s Atrium, W2 Media Café is an artist-run, globally networked media arts lab, Incubator, community meeting space and social enterprise cafe serving artists and residents of the Downtown Eastside and Vancouver.” It serves “healthy, high quality food and drink” and employs Downtown Eastside residents. See <http://www.creativetechnology.org/page/w2-media-cafe>. See also Les Twarog and Sonja Pederson, “Woodward’s-W32,” at <http://www.6717000.com/woodwards/>.

⁵⁰ Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), 46.

⁵¹ The phrase quoted by Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), II, comes from American architect Carl Elefante.

away as if they didn't have any value at all") that prompted Michael Kluckner to produce his first *Vanishing Vancouver* volume, and a similar sense of angst informs his second.⁵² Now, though, he writes from and about a place loud in its official ambition to become the most ecologically responsible city on the planet. And this context adds both pertinence and poignancy to his extended reflection on what we have lost and are losing. *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012) reminds us that Vancouver civic leaders and bureaucrats have deployed smart words and phrases aplenty to describe or mark aspirations for Vancouver. Livable-city rhetoric segued into discussions of sustainability that spawned catchphrases (and initiatives) such as "ecodensity" and encouragement for the development of lane houses and LEED-certified buildings all in the cause of making Vancouver the greenest city in the world by 2020.⁵³ Like the idea of architecture as an expression of social justice, this is a noble dream, and it is one in which every citizen is asked to play a part "to rethink, re-evaluate and re-imagine the way Vancouver works and how we lead our lives."⁵⁴

There is much to strive for here. We have, surely, to recognize that current consumption trends and patterns of behaviour cannot continue indefinitely. And who among us would not want to live in a place at once "more resilient, healthy and prosperous" than the one we now know?⁵⁵ Again, however, we need to interrogate the rhetoric and "mind the gap" between words and deeds. Many enthusiastic advocates of "Green" Vancouver are frequent users of YVR, one of North America's busier airports, and – to put none too fine a point on it – the city's path of good green intentions is paved by the displacement of certain forms of land use and production to the periphery. Indeed, there are hidden, or at least generally overlooked, challenges to the achievement of sustainable urban living even within the showplace precincts of inner-city Vancouver. These challenges may begin with questions about the real costs and benefits of current enthusiasms for "farmers' markets" and urban food production, but they go far beyond these to require serious thought about common ways of everyday living – a task for which Kluckner is a timely, helpful guide.⁵⁶ The argument at the core of *VV* is that Vancouverites and British

⁵² Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), 9–10.

⁵³ Erick Villagomez, "Who's Been Densified, Who Hasn't? It's Time for 'Equal Density,'" *The Tyee*, 18 February 2008.

⁵⁴ Vancouver's Greenest City Action Team, "Vancouver 2020: A Bright Green Future," available at <http://vancouver.ca/greenestcity/>.

⁵⁵ Vancouver's Greenest City Action Team, "Vancouver 2020."

⁵⁶ For example, Peter Ladner, *The Urban Food Revolution: Changing the Way We Feed Cities* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2011); Kate Petrusa, "Fresh Roots Urban Farm on the Cutting Edge of Food System Education, one Schoolyard at a Time," 6 May 2012,

Columbians (to say nothing of those beyond the province) need to think again about their preference for things new over old, disposable rather than reusable, stylish above reliable.

Intoxicated by fashion and innovation though the majority may seem to be, Kluckner is less inclined to see Vancouverites as cultural dopes than as pawns of policy and regulation.⁵⁷ We act within contexts framed by innumerable factors, some within and some beyond our immediate control. And *Vanishing Vancouver* is, in some sense, an extended indictment of the hypocrisy, or short-sightedness, or perhaps more accurately the simple failure, of those bearing the responsibility to connect the dots between policies and ideas, practices and aspirations. Zoning bylaws and building codes impose very particular patterns on cities. Implementing rules to achieve one end often forecloses opportunities to respond to other needs. Block after block zoned for single-family residential use may keep potential noisy and noxious uses away from peoples' homes, but excluding commercial use precludes the development of convenience stores and other low-order retail within easy walking distance of most homes, encourages the use of cars for short and frequent trips, reduces the prospects of incidental social interaction, and removes informed and concerned eyes from the street. So well-intentioned efforts to create a "no-surprises," aesthetically pleasing, and relatively uniform neighbourhood can work against environmental sustainability and undermine community coherence.

In similar manner, responses to the leaky condo crisis of the 1980s and 1990s yielded building codes and insurance policies that worked against the retention of old but perfectly functional windows and siding in the renovation or conversion of much of the city's early twentieth-century housing stock. Property taxes work other effects, bolstering the view that land is valuable and buildings are disposable. How can a perfectly sound, well-maintained, snug and tastefully decorated two-hundred-square-metre house of 1920s vintage, with upgraded plumbing, wiring, kitchen, and bathrooms, on a ten-metre-by-forty-metre lot that would sell for \$1.5 million be "valued" at less than \$90,000 when a fifty-square-metre lane house on the same property would cost at least \$250,000 to build? The message is clear: out with the old, in with the new. Heavy

available at <http://ubcfarm.ubc.ca/fresh-roots-urban-farm-on-the-cutting-edge-of-food-system-education-one-schoolyard-at-a-time>.

⁵⁷ This is a point also made by Mike Harcourt in the Introduction to Kalman et al. *Exploring Vancouver*: "As this book deftly shows, the mix of [Vancouver] neighbourhoods ... are [sic] a consequence of policy decisions" (vii). In Davis's *Vancouver*, by stark contrast, things just happen.

machinery does the catastrophic work of demolition and resculptures the site, leaving only “environmentally important” and bylaw-protected trees behind; heavy trucks haul the debris to expanding landfills; rains carry away the loose surface; soon a new, much larger house made of new materials (all requiring energy to produce and bring to the site) is advertised at a price far in excess of that brought by its immediate predecessor. It is ironic, given the pace of residential demolition and replacement in a city chasing green leadership, to read Carl Elefante’s comment that “the greenest building is the one that is already built.” We would do well, as we confront such paradoxes as these, to ponder Kluckner’s awkward question: “Who does the city make laws for?”⁵⁸

There is, in short, much to chew over in the “slices” of Vancouver offered by these five books. Although they catalogue, enumerate, and illustrate more than they analyze and interpret (noting that *Vanishing Vancouver* is perhaps something of an exception to this generalization), they mark important characteristics of the varied, dynamic urban environment of Vancouver, even as they suggest the complexity of several of the tensions and challenges confronting Vancouverites early in the twenty-first century. In their efforts to detail the fabric of the city, these works might be placed within that long, broad descriptive tradition known as urban realism, the beginnings of which are pointed to in the opening paragraph of this article. Here, as in the photography of Roy Arden, however, realism is a “strange category that is constantly being placed under strain.” Much as Arden’s realism “dwells somewhere between the absolutely literal and the metaphoric which transcends the literal” these books seem to me to transcend Vancouver to raise important questions about how we (sentient inhabitants of a major but relatively new city and society) engage with our physical surroundings and the stream of time.⁵⁹

Consider the extent to which these books adopt what we might call a neo-impressionist – or pointillist – approach to the city. Exemplified most strikingly by Fred Herzog’s *Photographs* this approach invites – and relies on the ability of – readers to blend fragments into a fuller picture; or to impose their own particular interpretation on the content; or to

⁵⁸ Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), 212. The broader issues in this and the preceding paragraph are discussed at some length in Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), and the Elefante quote is from page 32.

⁵⁹ The discussion of and the quotations relating to the work of Roy Arden (including the *impassibilité* quote below) are drawn from Shep Steiner, “Photography in the Neighborhood of Materialism,” in *Roy Arden, Selected Works 1985-2000*, exhibition catalogue, Oakville Galleries (Oakville: Oakville Galleries, 2002).

be satisfied with their grasp of bits and pieces. Here we confront the implications – if not perhaps directly the consequences – of Roland Barthes’s seminal 1967 paper pronouncing “the death of the author,” which argues that “a text’s unity lies not in its origins [its context and creator] but in its destination [its reader].”⁶⁰ In *Photographs*, Herzog is a classic “scriptor,” a term Barthes used to destabilize the idea of author/authority and to identify the person who produces but does not explain a text. Liberated from the “tyranny” of a single interpretive voice, the photographs in Herzog’s book are left to the reader to decipher. So (to echo again a commentary on Arden’s oeuvre) engagement with these seemingly straightforward depictions of the city creates a sense of “being lost in a thicket of details – eye darting here and there like a bird watcher intent on identification.” Extending this metaphor, one has to note that, in Barthes’s view, there is no reason why birders have to agree on what they have seen – and that this is in some sense demonstrated by Jeff Wall’s and Douglas Coupland’s assessments of Vancouver in the 1950s. Their radically – even disconcertingly – different reflections on Herzog’s photographs put me in mind of an observation made by Shep Steiner, that “the impassibilité of Arden’s photography makes any ascription of meaning gratuitous.”

Understanding that a text is a multidimensional identity, that everyone who approaches it is likely to respond to it in his or her own way, and that individual and societal preoccupations change with time (so that each generation writes its own history) is one thing. Eschewing authorial, or authoritative, interpretation is another thing entirely. Or at least that is how it seems to me. That is, also, why I prefer Kalman et al. to Macdonald, and Kluckner to Herzog, and why I find Chuck Davis’s *Metropolitan Vancouver* so frustrating. Kalman and especially Kluckner are sufficiently present in their texts to help me decide why I should care about the things of which they write. I may disagree with them. But at least I find enough in their pages to debate the merits of their claims. They open the possibility of conversation. By contrast Herzog and Davis seem vacuous. Davis’s “book” has been well described (in a review in this issue) as a “chronology of factoids.”⁶¹ Though it gives the appearance of “bursting at the seams,” it is neither comprehensive (an impossibility) nor analytical, it lacks proper scholarly apparatus (cross-referencing, a

⁶⁰ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Aspen* 5/6 (1967), reprinted in Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–48, available at <http://www.deathoftheauthor.com/>.

⁶¹ John Douglas Belshaw, review of C. Davis, *The Chuck Davis History of Metropolitan Vancouver*, *BC Studies* 175 (2012): 130–31.

reliable index), and is hardly open or reflexive about its criteria for inclusion/exclusion. Such assemblages as these slice through the temporal and spatial fabric of the city and may be useful, at one level, as sources of specific information or of a captivating image, but they eschew the larger intellectual responsibility of telling the kinds of stories that help people make their ways through the world.

More than this, I would suggest, the kinds of textual “slices” considered here have their aural and digital counterparts in sound bites and tweets. As these forms increasingly dominate communication and representation in the (post)modern world, both the time and space available for contextualization, reflection, and contemplation seem to shrink. As the relentless, rapid turn of the news cycle and the contemporary fusillade of poorly connected, largely distinct fragments of information gain sway, perspective grows hard to come by. As imitation, appropriation, “mash-ups,” and pastiche extend their grip over cultural and artistic expression, the world becomes collage, in which meaning and coherence are as difficult to find as they are in undifferentiated assemblages of images and factoids bound between covers. This does not augur well for those, like Kalman and Kluckner, who appreciate the “humanity, sensitivity to architectural space and to landscape” of earlier generations of Vancouver building, and who recognize, in the face of the pervasive celebration of Vancouverism, that this may not be “a suitable model to face future complexities of sustainability, patterns of settlement and affordability.”⁶² Idealism, Kluckner concludes his preface, “rests comfortably on the pages of a book, but is harder to achieve in reality.”⁶³ My concern is that a society caught up in a maelstrom of change fuelled by the market, powered by the rhetoric of development, steered by infatuation with the new, and guided by media that leave little space for reflection is less and less able and inclined to separate gold from dross and rise to the challenges necessary for the formulation of meaningful ideals and the development of socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable urban life.

⁶² Kalman et al., *Exploring Vancouver*, 3.

⁶³ Kluckner, *Vanishing Vancouver* (2012), 15.