

# PICTURING VANCOUVER

## *A Photo Essay*

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ELVIN WYLY AND GRAEME WYNN

**G**EORGE ORWELL IS NOT GENERALLY known as a geographer. Novelist, journalist, essayist, poet, literary critic, democratic socialist, yes; but geographer? Not so much. Why would one even begin to think along these lines? Because he was “down and out in London and Paris”? Because he wrote of the road to Wigan pier? Hardly. There is a better answer, perhaps, in his short essay “Why I Write.”<sup>1</sup> “So long as I remain alive and well,” he confessed in 1946, “I shall continue to ... to love the surface of the earth, and to take a pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information.” As geographers both, we find resonance in these sentiments and a kindred spirit that joins Orwell with other writers – like John Updike, who once likened the act of taking a snapshot to halting the flow of time – and insurgent artists like Marcel Duchamp with eyes for the “readymade” works in and of the city.<sup>2</sup> Orwell’s words offer an invitation to read the urban landscape – to succumb to an inductive fascination with the surface of the earth and all those solid objects large and small, natural and human-made, that we encounter in daily life. Even those “scraps of useless information” become, upon closer inspection, significant fragments of a complicated, multilayered text – a palimpsest – documenting the rhythms of change in the contemporary metropolis.

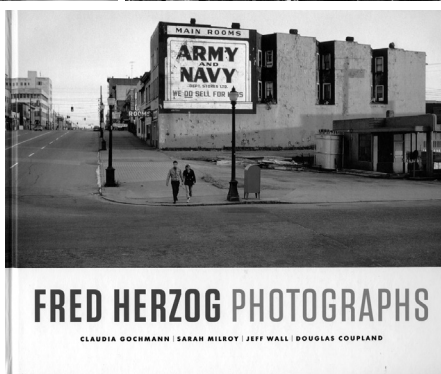
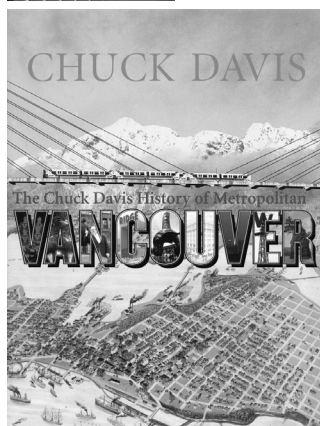
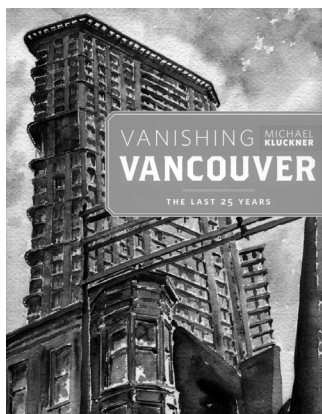
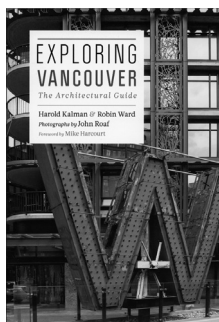
In this vein, we offer a small selection of Vancouver images (almost all of our own making), to complement the two articles in this issue of *BC Studies* that focus upon the city. Although we believe firmly in the value of the visual, what we offer here is, ultimately and obviously, a limited and somewhat adventitious effort to picture Vancouver, particularly the downtown core and older inner suburbs. We have drawn

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, “Why I Write,” first published in the short-lived literary magazine, *Gangrel*, (Summer 1946) and reprinted as Chapter 1 of George Orwell, *Such, Such Were the Joys* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953), also available at: [http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e\\_wiw/](http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw/). All subsequent quotes from Orwell are from this essay.

<sup>2</sup> John Updike, “Visual Trophies,” *The New Yorker*, 24/31 December 2007, 144–48. John F. Moffitt, *Alchemist of the Avant-Garde: The Case of Marcel Duchamp* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

illustrations from our personal collections both to illuminate some of the themes identified and events referred to in these two articles, and to invite readers to explore and think about the city with us. We have kept captions to a minimum, hoping that these pages will serve, like Orwell's good prose, as windowpanes from which we have struggled to efface our own personalities, while ever aware that we write and photograph "because there is some lie that ... [we] want to expose, some fact to which ... [we] want to draw attention." Desiring, as Orwell had it, "to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples' idea of the kind of society that they should strive after," we have, perhaps, fused "political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole," as Orwell did in *Animal Farm* (1945). But in the end, we find some justification for this in our shared conviction that "the job is to reconcile ... [our] ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us."



Representations of Vancouver on the covers of recent books.



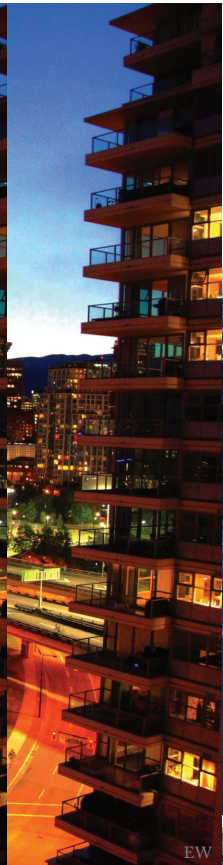
Advertising hoardings say it all – and more.



Smoke rises from the vehicle fires of the 2011 Stanley Cup Riot. Watching from a distance, a radio host in Michigan proclaimed that “Vancouver is the next Detroit.”

Opposite: The broken windows of The Bay, a full city block in the downtown core, were quickly covered by plywood sheets. Over the next several days, nearly every square centimetre of every sheet of plywood was covered with graffiti – nearly all of it insistently positive, community-building graffiti.

As in many other cities, the proliferation of surveillance cameras is now evolving into daily self-surveillance, as consumers live more and more of their lives on social networks and mobile devices with unstable boundaries between privacy and publicity. QR codes are spreading throughout the city, while billboards and bus-shelter ads promote “smarter cameras” with “FaceID” features that automate the speedy translation of a local, place-based image into a searchable graphic commodity that can circulate freely on the Cloud.



City of glass: all about surfaces and effects, appearances and ornaments as “the relative immateriality of glass ... allows architecture to flirt with non-materiality, and ultimately non-existence.”

– M. Soules in Macdonald, *A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Vancouver* (2010).







Vancouverism: “tall, widely separated, slender towers interspersed with low-rise buildings, public spaces, small parks, and pedestrian friendly streetscapes...”  
– *New York Times*, 28 December 2005





“The city is constantly changing and yet it retains potent memories in its streets and sidewalks, fences and alleys, buildings and vacant lots.”

– Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place* (1995), p. 247



Vancouver Supermodel: “this part of the city is the second densest in North America. How can that be? It feels so spacious, so orderly ... this place, this city, just might be utopia.”

– M. Soules, in Macdonald, *Guidebook*



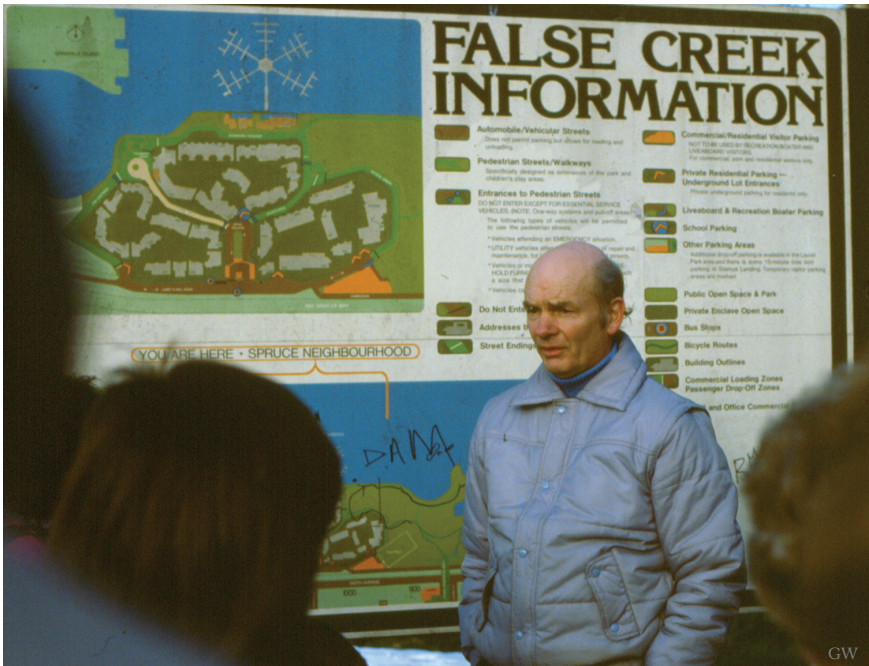
Neon: once a key part of the vibrant, modernist, commercial world, a symbol of glamour, excitement, and big-city living, even as it signed what Douglas Coupland laments as an “unquestioning obeisance to advertising”; today it seems a tawdry and disfiguring remnant displaced by sophisticated algorithms that deliver targeted advertising through smartphones.





The Woodward's project remains controversial, although Downtown Eastside activist Jim Green praised it as "a project that started as a community development dream" and said (see right): "You have a microcosm of the planet right there in the Downtown Eastside," we want this project "to be an example of how people can work together in peace and harmony." The vast atrium featuring Stan Douglas's "Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971," (on the left in the view above) aims to instantiate what Richard Sennett called a "purified identity" and the prominent single-word installation running to the right is an obvious attempt to reinforce what he would have described as a "community of will."





The development of False Creek South owed a great deal to Walter Hardwick, geographer and Vancouver Alderman, seen here in the late-1970s explaining the overarching design, the mix of housing types, and the inclusion of accommodation for different socio-economic groups realized in the landscape above.



False Creek North: ca 1982 and 2012.



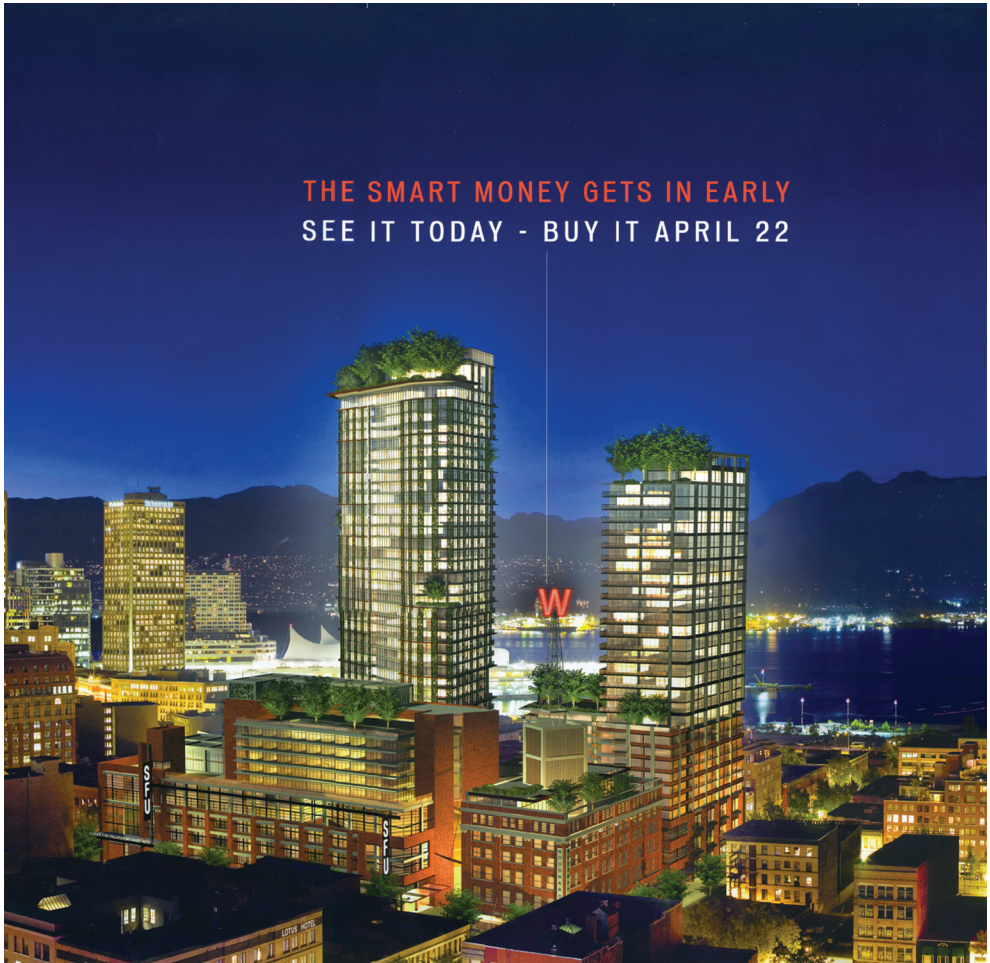
Fine new homes capturing super views – but often developed without concern for the environmental costs.





Facets of the “livable city”: pricey star-architect-designed buildings; co-operative housing in the condominium forest; social housing hard by a major traffic artery; being seen to be green; and confronting the (un)affordability of housing – ironically on Walter Hardwick Ave., in the Southeast False Creek neighbourhood.





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“The dreams of ‘Dream City’ (Berelowitz, 2005) are vivid indeed: ‘Be bold or move to suburbia.’” Woodward’s project brochure by Westbank Projects, photography by John Sinal. Reprinted with permission.