

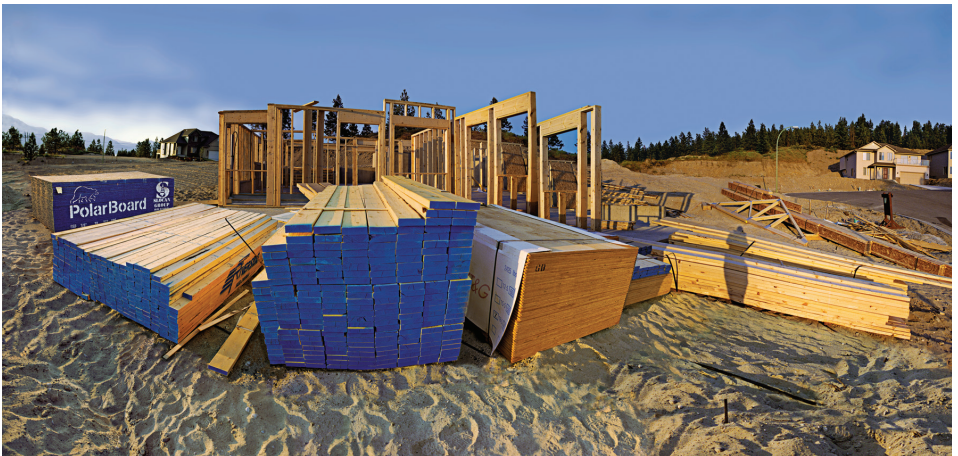
FROM FORESTED HILLS TO PAVED PLATEAUS

A Photo Essay

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Clearing land for development in West Kelowna, 2000.



Construction site, new development in south Kelowna, 2000.



Log float on Okanagan Lake, 2002.



Log pile in West Kelowna, 2002. This image captures, for me, many of the positive and negative things about, and the contradictions inherent within, British Columbia. It represents the vast forests of the province, a renewable resource if handled properly, and the lumber industry, one of the major economic foundations of the region and a traditional source of livelihood for many. On the other side of the coin, it speaks to clear-cutting and forest loss due not only to widespread logging but also to the current plague of pine beetle. It also indicates the transformation of the environment through the clearing of natural habitat in order to make way for shopping malls and land developments, which includes the building of monster homes.



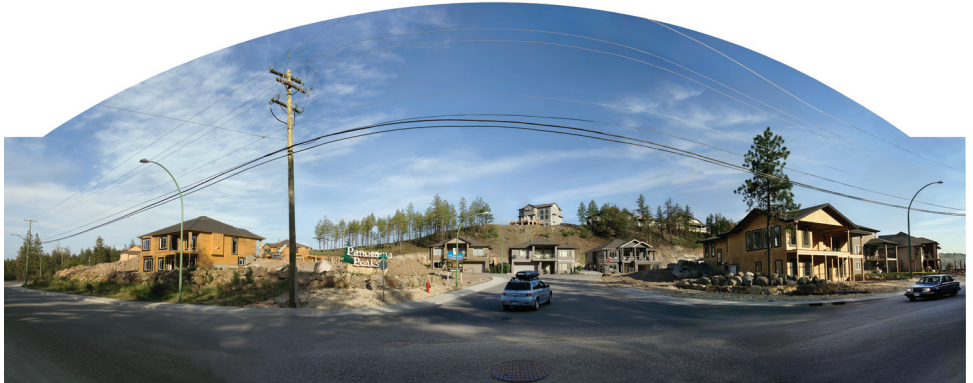
New clearing. Future entrance to *Panorama Peaks* real estate development, 2002.



Clearing and preparing land. Future entrance to *Panorama Peaks* with remaining lone tree, 2003.



Top: Clearing land, future cul-de-sac, upper level, *Panorama Peaks*, 2003. Bottom: First completed house, upper level, cul-de-sac, *Panorama Peaks*, 2006.



From top to bottom: Entrance to *Panorama Peaks* with new road and dead lone tree, 2005. *Panorama Peaks* entrance, with remaining stump and sign, 2005. *Panorama Peaks* entrance with lone tree, 2006. *Panorama Peaks* entrance with lone tree, 2007.



Panorama Peaks entrance (from the side) with lone tree, 2007.



Panorama Peaks entrance (from the side) with lone tree, 2010. The lone tree has long held a major place in the history of Canadian art. From Tom Thomson's painting of the majestic lone pine against a powerful background of churning lake water and stormy clouds in *The Jack Pine* 1916-17 to Jeff Wall's *The Pine on the Corner* 1990, a photograph depicting a lone tree towering over the corner of a Vancouver street, it has come to symbolize not only the sublime in nature but our contradictory and most often destructive relationship to it.

I MOVED TO THE OKANAGAN from Toronto in 1998. Like many a newcomer from the paved streets of a large urban centre, I was seduced by the BC landscape. I don't know exactly what I expected to find in my new location, but somewhere deep in my subconscious mind I clung to a timeless mythic construct about living in the mountains.

My search for a permanent place to live quickly left me disillusioned. Incongruous situations and ironic juxtapositions seemed to fill the views and to lie around most corners in my new environment. I was ill-prepared to enter the suburban mazes with their walls of plastic building materials fabricated to look like wood from the forests that had once stood in their place. In general the affordable, newer homes were uninspiring, nondescript structures, covered in vinyl siding or stucco and situated on artificially plateaued and treeless lots. Any sense of connection to the vaunted beauty of the Okanagan Valley, its mountains, forests, and orchards, was lost; rarely were these features visible from the curbed and sidewalked streets of these new subdivisions.

My work as an artist reflects my place in (and reactions to) the society and culture in which I live. After moving to Kelowna I was struck by the contradictions between our society's relationship to the landscape and our beliefs about what constitutes a healthy environment. Time and again, it seemed to me, residents of the Okanagan Valley revealed the premium they placed on nature's beauty by their willingness to pay top dollar for dwellings with panoramic views, yet they were simultaneously complicit in exploiting and destroying this sought-after commodity through deforestation, land restructuring, and sprawling urbanization.

There is no small irony in the fact that the best and most expensive lots offer an unobstructed panoramic view of the forest and hills beyond, a calculated result of the land clearing and preparation required for economic construction. Consider, as a case in point, the recent development of Kirschner Mountain on the northeast edge of Kelowna. The initial website promoting this real estate speculation waxes lyrical: "It certainly seems magical, a mountain protected by another mountain just to one side and bordered by canyon, farm, orchard, creek and parkland. A place not infrequently lit by the Northern Lights, where the full moon casts blue shadows on firs and pine. A place where the lake view, while spectacular, is just one of many eye opening, heart expanding ways of looking outward."¹ A year later, this was the view from one side of the magical mountain.

¹ <http://www.kirschnermountain.com> (viewed 5 December 2010).



View of new clearing from the *Panorama Peaks* development, 2007.



The reality of the view from *Kirschner Mountain*, 2007.



Preparing roads, future entrance to *Panorama Peaks* with remaining lone tree, 2004.

As each new enclave carves another scar onto the face of another hill, the pristine views featured in real estate promotions to attract buyers anxious to acquire their own spectacular panoramas are “magically” transformed into yet other suburban landscapes.

Questions of water shortages and of environmental and social sustainability do come up in the local press and are even subjects of heated debates in public fora, but they never seem to affect what eventually happens. What is occurring in the Okanagan is, of course, just one more example of what Douglas Booth calls the “Suburbanization of the Mountain West.” In his book, *Searching for Paradise*, Booth outlines the evolution of small cities in the American mountains and traces a story that closely mirrors the patterns of upscale housing development in the Okanagan.² Promotional materials for expensive homes, primarily marketed to those with “footloose” incomes,³ feature recreational opportunities, retirement resorts, golf courses, wineries, ski resorts, lake access, and, perhaps foremost, natural and beautiful environmental settings (often within interface zones prone to forest fires).

One sunny afternoon in 2002, not far from my home, I noticed a new clearing in the woods. On a large sign picturesquely set among the trees was a description of the proposed development, *Panorama Peaks*. It was then that I began to document the birth of an instant community, a new suburb. The series is entitled *From Forested Hills to Paved Plateaus*.

Over the next few years, I observed how the forest was felled and the land was levelled by powerful machinery, how the area was severed into

² Douglas Booth, *Searching for Paradise: Economic Development and Environmental Change in the Mountain West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

³ *Ibid.* 35.

flat serviced lots, how the new streets were paved, and how the lighting standards were installed.

Then houses began to fill the waiting streets and “For Sale” signs came and went before residents even moved in. Gradually, people other than construction crews began to appear in the rapidly changing landscape. Evidence of families and recreational toys appeared on driveways, and within a few years a small playground was built in the middle of the subdivision. By 2007, the initial project was complete and populated even as new phases were still under way.

Although scholars cannot agree on a precise definition of the suburb, Panorama Peaks exemplifies, for me, the typical new Okanagan (and perhaps more broadly Canadian) version of this long-lived and widely variant phenomenon. It is a place of:

low-density living;

large, single-family homes with big yards;

middle-class, mostly white, residents;

curving streets that end in culs-de-sac;

two or more cars per household – needed for life in a setting in which one has to drive everywhere, including to the nearest shopping facilities (generally, extensive big box destinations) a few kilometres down the highway;

limited access to almost non-existent public transportation;

houses that are lived in for relatively short periods of time before people move on; and

formal landscaping that is not native to the area.

With this series of images I aim to create an observation point that enables the viewer to contemplate how our society, our identity, and the environment itself are being modified and structured by the way we clear the land, build our homes, choose our materials, and surround ourselves with these newly fabricated spaces.

REFERENCES

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- Jackson, T. Kenneth, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).