

Transformative vs. Supportive

The Case for Economics in Architecture

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As a field full of optimists and dreamers, every student, intern, and architect wants to believe their designs will positively impact their community. No doubt the smallest architectural interventions will affect at least one person's daily life for better or for worse. However, one of the biggest fallacies I've encountered both academically and professionally is the widely held, ego-fueled belief that architecture alone can transform communities for the better. This belief has led only to failed experiments, such as the garden cities of Ebenezer Howard, and the culturally damaging urban renewal projects of North America. The brief for this essay was to address the question "How can architecture be transformative", the answer to that is evident in the destroyed and disconnected neighborhoods of minority populations across Canada such as Vancouver's Hogan's alley or Nova Scotia's Africville. I can't help but think of what Jane Jacob's reaction would be to architects' and planners' continued attempts at top-down, transformative, quick-fix designs. The more appropriate question, I believe, is how can Architecture be supportive?

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In a review of Mathew Soules new book *Icebergs, Zombies, and the Ultra-Thin*, Adele Weder writes for *Canadian Architect*; "the bracing reality is that finance capitalism determines the shape of our built environment far more than any red-blooded architect would care to admit". While this is generally viewed as an inescapable obstacle for architects, it's about time an understanding of economics be seen as an opportunity, or another tool in the architect's arsenal, as much as the pencil, T-square, or latest Revit plugin. In academia I've found economics are seldom addressed, and if it is, only as an afterthought, asking; "who will pay for this project", rather than "how can the design leverage a local economy to better the projects users", or "how can economic interests of developers and stakeholders be tied to community needs"? Academic and built projects alike, instead rely upon the old assumption "build it and they will come."



Fig. 1 New-yorkers protesting charges against Jane Jacobs and the proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway, 1968

During my graduate studies at Dalhousie University, I worked on a project titled “Saltwater City”, a name used by early Chinese immigrants for the city of Vancouver. The project interrogated the good intentions of a development plan for the north side of False Creek in Downtown Vancouver. The site has long been identifiable by the two viaducts built in 1972, that cut through two of the city’s thriving BIPOC neighbourhoods: Hogan’s Alley and Chinatown. This infrastructure development resulted in the loss of Hogan’s Alley, Vancouver’s only Black community, and the severing of Chinatown from Vancouver’s Waterfront.

The well-researched development plan, which includes the removal of the viaducts, gave me hope for the direction architecture and urban planning is taking in addressing their roles in urban inequality. The plan laid out many fantastic policies, some of which were evidently addressed by the architecture, while others seemed to be ignored. One such policy was to “Establish strong gateways on the Carrall and Quebec connections as ‘cultural fingers’ that reconnect Chinatown with the waterfront, and that support economic development in Chinatown by leveraging the activity and energy of the Events and Entertainment District and waterfront”. Architecturally, this policy was addressed only with crosswalks and a pedestrian bridge, the architectural manifestations of “build it and they will come.” The idea that physical access alone would support economic development (for whom by the way) of Chinatown is vastly naïve. The other policy worth mentioning is to “Encourage food as a key component of public life through culturally relevant food assets such as food businesses, community kitchens and public markets.” This policy, however, seemed to not be addressed at all, despite a Chinatown market closing in 2018 in protest of the cities mismanagement of the ever-gentrifying historic neighborhood. If architecture is to connect or reconnect different areas, groups, or individuals, it needs to do so culturally, and economically. What incentive do residents on the waterfront have to divert their path to Chinatown to spend their money?



Fig. 2 North False Creek, Vancouver, the site of the soon to be demolished viaducts and proposed development.

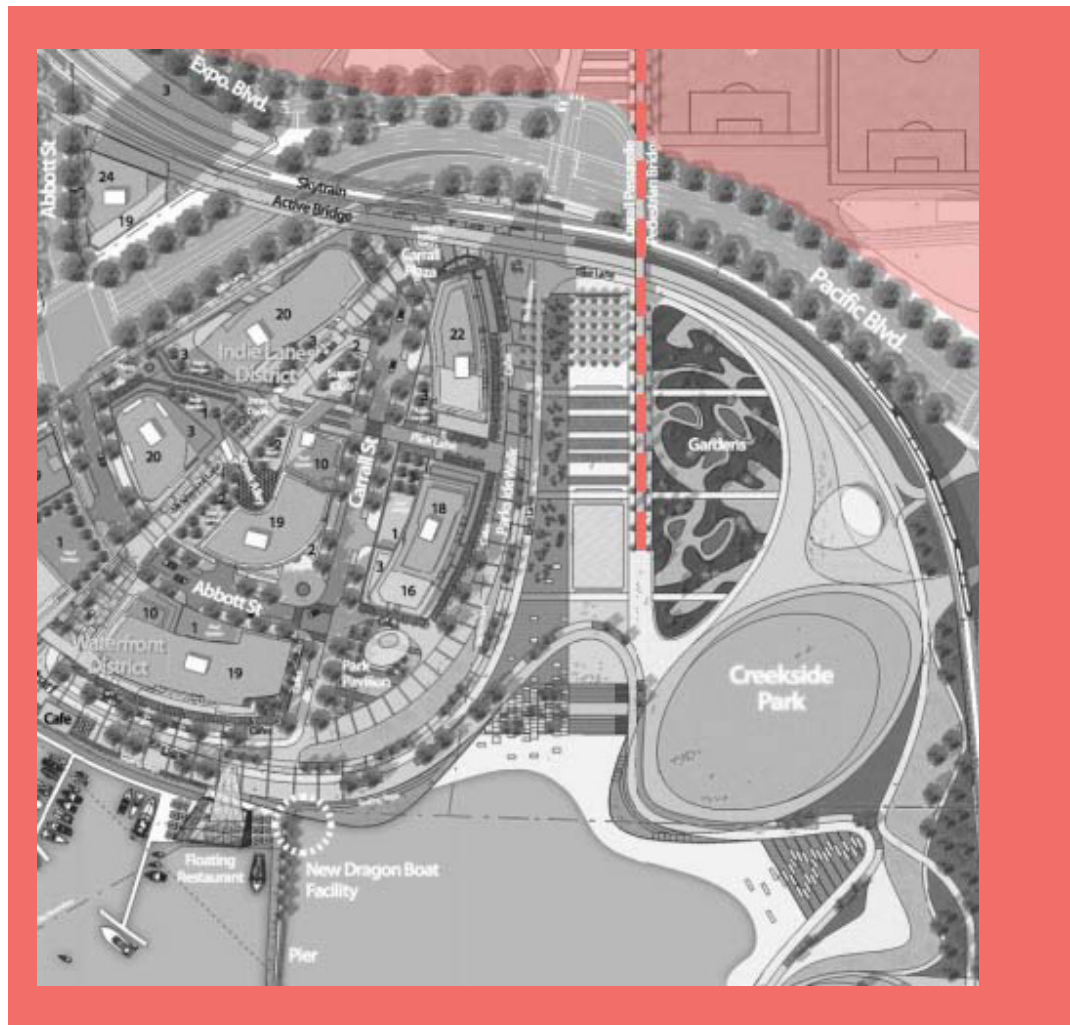
Fig. 3 (right)

Plan view of the City of Vancouver's proposed development which includes an extensive park and pedestrian bridge that crosses the sky train into Chinatown.

Fig. 4 (below)

3D model of proposed waterfront district, park and pedestrian bridge from the city of Vancouver's development plan.

- Chinatown
- Viaducts



My response, Saltwater City, was to replace the public garden portion of the proposed park, with a market at the intersection of a diversity of Vancouver's neighborhoods. The facility would collect food waste from around the city, provide local food growing opportunities, and provide market stalls dedicated to vendors from Chinatown unable to meet rising rents. It would also include stalls dedicated to other BIPOC vendors to regrow some of the cultural-economic ties lost in the destruction of Hogan's alley and severing of Strathcona and the downtown east side. Saltwater City would be transformative, or rather supportive, not by its architectural realization, but by its urban economic relationships. A program such as a market that economically ties residents of Chinatown to the rest of the city would better serve the city's policy to "support economic development in Chinatown by leveraging the activity and energy of the [...] waterfront". This is one example of how "built it and they will come" architectural responses are insufficient in dealing with problems that require cultural and economic incentives. Just as economics is not the study of money but of how people use it, architects cannot be limited to the design of buildings, but should look to design how they are used by people.

While it may seem a matter of semantics, its time for architects to stop looking to be transformative, both in academia and in practice. Instead, they should be asking how their designs can culturally and economically support their communities in the present, and for future generations. The answer to that question, lies not in the creative use of materials or implementation of new technology, but in the development of projects that wield economics to preserve and foster cultural resiliency.



Fig. 4 Axonometric drawing of my proposal, Saltwater City, which acts as a market for vendors from Chinatown, a food waste recycling center that redistributes food waste for sale or composting and urban farm that provides local, sustainable produce.

Bibliography

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