

## Save the city by developing near arterials

By Patrick Condon

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North American cities built in the first half of the 20th century, like Vancouver, are all the same.

They are streetcar cities.

Neighbourhoods that we now might think of as urban were then called suburbs. Dunbar, Marpole, the Drive, Sunrise, all streetcar suburbs. As with modern suburbs, transportation was crucial. Without a way to get home, suburbs can't exist. In those days, "suburban" residents got to and from work on the streetcar. Streetcars were never more than an eight-minute walk from home. Land that was farther away than this simply wasn't developed. Streetcar access was so fundamental that developers most often built streetcar systems with their own funds prior to subdividing new parcels for housing.

Transportation and land use go hand in hand. The pattern of Vancouver is explained by the intimate connection between the streetcar system and the destinations it helped access. The most important lines in this original city were the streetcar arterials: routes like Hastings Street, 4th Avenue, Main Street, Commercial Drive, Victoria Drive, and Kingsway. Scores of often underappreciated streets were then the centre of civic life, experienced from the window of frequent and packed streetcars.

Originally, developers expected parcels fronting these arterials to be occupied by four-storey walkup buildings, mostly with stores on the first floor and either offices or apartments above. At certain key corners this occurred, leaving us a legacy of historic and graceful corner buildings. But early-20th-century real-estate economics was simply not robust enough to support more than 200 arterial kilometres of this kind of building. Consequently, developers put most of these parcels into what they considered a temporary use: one-storey commercial buildings built without basements. These cheap structures were a way to gain some return on investment while the market matured to where larger buildings could economically replace them.

But the market never matured. Instead, an entirely different market emerged: one for car-oriented suburbs beyond the reach of the streetcar.

Or it never matured until now.

Since 1980, scores of new four-storey buildings have replaced single-storey commercial buildings on these streetcar arterials. This renaissance is provoked by many factors, not the least of them a renewed appreciation for urban living by potential condo purchasers, a gradual erosion of the formerly strong suburban advantage in cost and convenience, and a strong walk-in and bus-in market for gradually expanding commercial services fronting arterial streets.

With all of this in mind, researchers at the Design Centre for Sustainability at UBC got to wondering about how many people you could house if this original vision of the streetcar city were ever realized. Amazingly, if only the first parcels fronting our arterials (from the street to the lane only) were built out to the originally imagined four storeys, you could almost double the population of the city while not changing the amount and nature of the commercial services on the first floor. This would affect only a small percentage of all land in the city; in most cases, the zoning is already in place for this.

Finishing the streetcar city is already under way, although at a painfully slow pace and without the media attention devoted to the more glamorous but less extensive downtown high-rise projects. New condominiums along the arterials are now significantly more affordable than either single family homes or downtown high-rises. Yet the market is robust enough in many parts of the city to make developing this building type and its required subsurface parking profitable. Maximizing the supply of this easy-to-provide housing type must certainly exert some downward pressure on housing-price inflation. Dramatically increasing the production of this type would therefore seem to be a potent affordable-housing strategy.

COMPLETING THE streetcar-city concept could help protect us from the looming demographic tsunami. By 2050, more than half of our region's citizens will be over 60. The amazing preponderance of this so-called empty-nester group will likely change the housing market at least as much as did the suburb-propelling baby boom. Most market research suggests that price, convenience, and ability to stay close to children and friends are major motivators for this group. The strength of the empty-nester demographic, when combined with the "never-nester" demographic (couples and singles who do not intend to have children) presents us with an unprecedented condition: we may already have enough single-family homes in the region to accommodate all future families with children. By 2050, we will need close to a half-million homes suitable to these empty- and never-nesters. Trends suggest that new housing in conformance with this original streetcar-city idea, along the region's hundreds of kilometres of arterial roads, can accommodate this growth.

One might question this strategy on various grounds, but to suggest that it would make traffic in the city worse is not one of them. In downtown Vancouver, between 1990 and 2005, the population more than doubled. Car trips into and out of the centre between 1990 and 1994 actually decreased, while transit use increased dramatically and walk trips to work increased 50 percent. Developing the arterials to the streetcar-city vision would likely have the same result: people close to transit and services equals fewer car trips, more walk trips, and more use of transit for longer trips.

THIS ARGUMENT has one obvious problem, however: where are the streetcars? The relationship between these neighbourhoods and the way to get to them was broken in the 1950s when Vancouver, unlike Toronto, opted to rip out the tracks. Electric buses partly replaced them, but not really. "Rapid" bus has helped on a few corridors but doesn't really function the way streetcars once did. And anyone over 55 knows that most buses are challenging to ride compared to steel-on-steel modes. And any developer will tell you that a bus outside the door doesn't add value to a project but steel-on-steel systems do.

The redevelopment of streetcar streets is held back by something so obvious: no streetcars. Anyone who doubts this need only visit Portland, where modern streetcars were recently introduced. This US\$60-million investment provoked more than a billion dollars' worth of new condominium construction in the Pearl District through which it passed. The City of Vancouver has a modest proposal for reintroducing streetcars downtown, a proposal overwhelmed by the bloated RAV proposal. I pray that this project

sees the light of day. It would be a crucial step in making Vancouver what it was always meant to be