

THE VANCOUVERISM FALLACY

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Using a post-structuralism approach, how has the imagined geography of the City of Vancouver evolved through extensive urbanization within the last 50 years?

Vancouverism is a term that describes a model of urban planning, applied through creative architectural design. This global phenomenon is characterized by a high density population, living in both tall and low-rise aesthetic and functional buildings, with close proximity to nature and views, public parks and vibrant street life, and increased walkability coinciding with shared modes of sustainable transportation (City of Vancouver, 2013). The model has been actualized through the development of zoning districts, and development regulations and policies aiming to focus on increasing livability in Vancouver (City of Vancouver, 2013).

In Vancouver, these principles of Vancouverism are idealized and are deeply ingrained into it's imagined geography and shared identity of it's citizens. Vancouverites who place value on these ideals, collectively aspire, invest, and progress towards actualizing these ideals. Thus, these ideals continue to evolve as accepted systems of knowledge. This ongoing reproduction of knowledge simultaneously reproduces systems of power, creating social and spatial networks of power and knowledge relationships. (Rouse, 2005, p. 11)

By first identifying Vancouverism ideals as the accepted systems of knowledge at work, I will be applying Michael Foucault's post-structuralism framework of power and knowledge network relationships on the construct of the Vancouverism phenomenon, to trace the operation of accepted knowledge systems as they exert power through reproduction. By doing this I hope to deconstruct this belief, which holds Vancouverism as progressive and universally beneficial ideal to all stakeholders.

THEORY AND METHODS

In particular, I seek to demonstrate how these accepted ideals are successfully enshrined through different elements of city planning. I argue that the success of these city planning elements can be attributed to the acceptance of Vancouver ideals, as a system of knowledge by Vancouverites. I attempt to achieve this by specifically drawing upon the urban development of Abu-Dhabi as well as another city in China, demonstrating the intricacies of Vancouverism ideals as they operate outside the realm of Vancouver. Finally, I will present the livable city paradox of Vancouver deconstructing Vancouver's "liveability" ideal alluding to a situation where a system of knowledge is not accepted. In doing this, I seek to demonstrate how the reproduction of this knowledge system continues to operate despite not being accepted.

Vancouverism is a system of knowledge that is reproduced through the implementation of urban planning policies and zoning laws based on innovative spatial urban design. These policies aim to achieve 5 fundamental ideals: urban density, proximity to nature and urban life, functional and aesthetic design principles and views, public spaces and parks, and favoring private transportation in favour of more sustainable and shared modes of transport. Valverde (2008) emphasizes the understanding of individuals as a product of their surrounding social space. She quotes Hastings who speaks in regard to transference of immorality from the slum environment to the slum inhabitants stating, "This deviant environment naturally produces deviant people: criminals and moral lepers are born in the atmosphere of physical and moral rottenness pervading the slums of large cities". Similarly, Vancouverites identify with these ideals because their lives are spatially shaped within a city where Vancouverism ideals have been actualized. For example, the City of Vancouver's "General Policy for Higher Buildings" official development plan establishes specific building height regulations in downtown to preserve views of nature and city skyline, as well as achieving greater urban density. (City of Vancouver, 1997) The downtown area is then spatially categorized into different zones of building heights. Thus, Vancouverites who spatially interact with these buildings will be shaped by the underlying principles of Vancouverism; which are enshrined in the building's design. This effect is not simply limited to users of the buildings or areas in downtown, is also inclusive of those who benefit from the views it preserves. Ultimately, the normalization of Vancouverism ideals within vehicles such as building regulations urges the reproduction of Vancouverism as system of knowledge within the society.

The relationship between power and knowledge networks is further strengthened as more individuals identify with a shared, collective identity. This normalization of ideals is exemplified by Joseph Rouse's critical response to Michel Foucault's theories on the relationship between power and knowledge networks; Stating that "normalizing judgement" allows the construction of norms as possible knowledge, achieved by creating greater degrees of inclusiveness in the classification of personal identity (Rouse, 2005, p. 5). Specifically, Vancouverites who identify with the shared collective identity are more likely to identify with the same knowledge system and ideals. Power regimes will exist as long as individuals continue to reproduce the system of knowledge associated with it.

Within the sphere of Vancouver, Vancouverism ideals prove successful as they are deeply interwoven into the city's heritage and spatially constructed collective identities, continually evolving within existing systems of power and relationships in the city.

Vancouverism, has spread as a global phenomenon that has been implemented in cities around the world. However, when Vancouverism ideals are carbon copied directly onto another geographic location without considering that location's existing knowledge systems, a dissonance may occur. Beasley recalls, "There is a town in China that has Vancouver in it. It looks like it, smells like it, tastes like it, but no one likes it because there's nothing Chinese people would like." (Exporting Vancouverism, 2013, p. 9). In this case Vancouverism ideals are not reproduced as they are not accepted and thus the cycle of knowledge reproduction is halted. I will introduce the case study of Abu Dhabi where the fundamental ideals and principles of Vancouverism have been applied. I seek to demonstrate the importance of the reproduction of knowledges in order for concurring power regimes to thrive.

Vision 2030 is the Abu Dhabi urban development plan that seeks to implement Vancouverism ideals, but also aims to “protect and enhance Emirati and Arab culture and traditions embracing contemporary living and respecting the diverse cultures of all who reside in and visit Abu Dhabi” (Abu Dhabi, 2011, p. 75) This syncretic approach attempts to blend Abu Dhabi’s culture and heritage with Vancouverism principles. The plan replicates much of Vancouverism principles, but recognizes the region’s specific geographic and cultural needs. Mirroring Vancouverism’s liveability ideals, Vision 2030 emphasizes liveability as a “crucial element in the overall success” of the city (Abu Dhabi, 2011, p. 80). Vancouverism ideals of livability include public and open spaces, community, sustainable transport, beauty of surroundings, and urban design (City of Vancouver, 2012). Emulating these ideals, page 80 of Vision 2030’s considerations of liveability proposes similar “open spaces”, “community facilities”, “transportation”, and design infrastructures to create “attractive surroundings” as vehicles to achieving Abu Dhabi liveability. However, the vision plan calls for these elements to be achieved in a manner that respects Abu Dhabi’s “traditional way of life with the latest 21st century choices”, proving the attempt to blend both Vancouverism ideals and Arab values. Foiling the China example, this plan does not carbon copy Vancouverism ideals; rather it acknowledges and develops an approach that meets the geographic and cultural needs of the region. Thus, the existing systems of knowledge become assimilated with Vancouverism ideals, encouraging citizens to adapt, participate, and reproduce new knowledges.

Livability is an idealized goal that Vancouverism urban planning models aspire to achieve. In Peter Evans’ (2002) book “Livable Cities”, the term “livability” is described to have two main features: Livelihood, and ecological sustainability. Vancouverism inspired urban planning models

seek to achieve livability to improve the quality of life for citizens by improving accessibility to services, living wages, housing, and a healthy environment (City of Vancouver, 2012). “To be livable, a city must put both sides of the coin together, providing livelihoods for it’s citizens, ordinary as well as affluent, in ways that preserve the quality of environment.” (Evans, 2002, p. 2).

The Livable City Paradox, is a term described by Serena Kataoka that describes the regressive effects of the actualization of this ideal that is often presented as progressive (Kataoka, 2009, p. 42). Livability and Vancouverism ideals are often marketed concurrently with ideals that shape Vancouver’s geospatial identity. “Education has long been the primary means of inculcating a demand for urban planning in Vancouver” (Kataoka, 2009, p. 51). Education, established from seemingly objective systems of knowledge was used as a means to market and normalize a shared geospatial identity – in Vancouver’s case, it was called “live/work/play” (Kataoka, 2009, p. 46). The “community is constructed in advance on a shared private interest in an affluent lifestyle” (Kataoka, 2009, p. 46). The normalization of this identity allowed “almost anyone” (Kataoka, 2009, p. 45) to become a member of this community with shared ideals. With the acceptance of these ideals and knowledges, generated demand and investment for it’s implementation. However, although “many people invested in Concord Pacific developments, few actually bought into Vancouver as a place to ‘live/work/play’” (Kataoka, 2009, p. 51). The marketing of ‘live/work/play’ shared identity, subsequently created a community who shared a lifestyle identity with a certain level of affluence. In effect, this inclusive collective identity worked to exclude the non-affluent.

If certain groups were excluded from this shared identity that embodied Vancouverism ideals, then it follows that not everyone agrees that Vancouverism is ideal. The exclusion of the non-affluent, resulted in the gentrification of Vancouver. Vancouverism initiatives were economically fuelled because only the affluent were able to fully participate in Vancouverism. Resultantly, these ideals were only accepted by certain groups. In fact, Vancouverism faces plenty of opposition and resistance in the wake of the housing affordability crisis (Garr, 2015). In terms of housing, a key feature of livability, the actualization of Vancouver has negatively impacted the livelihood of those who have been subsequently marginalized by the promotion of a shared identity. The result, is the spatial movement of lower income groups further away from the city center to areas with more affordable housing. This exemplifies that in areas where Vancouverism has been actualized, people continue to be spatially impacted by it. Through the realization of achieving livability, Vancouver has become unlivable to many.

Systems of knowledge may hold power over populations even when opposing views exist. The prosperity of knowledge and power systems depend on the existence of opposing views, because a dispute encourages people to participate and reproduce the knowledge system. Conflict drives continuing development and reorganization of knowledge (Rouse, 2005, p. 14). A successful knowledge system will resolve conflicting claims, by enforcing laws (Rouse, 2005, p. 7), and destroying illegitimate claims. Vancouverism succeeds as a knowledge and power system as it focuses on enforcing its ideals through implemented design-focused policies. Opposing views exist against Vancouverism because not everyone accepts Vancouverism as an ideal. These factors, create more power as long as knowledge continues to be reproduced and negate differing views. As the housing affordability crisis and increasing number of vacant housing

creates more outcry in the city, the City of Vancouver works to mitigate, through implementation of design focused policy making (CBC News, 2016). One approach taken was to increase the supply of available housing, building larger units to accommodate families, and subsidizing development of housing. A focus on density, a Vancouverism ideal, is implemented through the creation of more apartment buildings and laneways. Laneways permit landowners to transform parking space into residential space (City of Vancouver, 2015). Through the implementation of policy inspired by creative design, laneways achieve Vancouverism ideals of greater urban density, livability, and sustainability. As a result, knowledge systems are constantly evolving, adapting, and reproducing without changing its fundamental ideals and principles.

By using Michel Foucault's post-structuralism framework of power and knowledge network relationships, I identified Vancouverism as an accepted system of knowledge, to deconstruct the belief that Vancouverism is universally viewed as ideal by all stakeholders. In fact, the existence of opposing views on Vancouverism continues to entrench it as an established power and knowledge system. Identifying the mechanisms at work to create power and knowledge systems within Vancouver is important to recognizing Vancouverism geospatial's effects on it's citizens.

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