Spaces of transition spaces of tomorrow: Making a sustainable future in Southeast False Creek, Vancouver

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The most recent overhaul of the relationship between nature, society and the economy in Southeast False Creek began in the Fall of 1990 when the Vancouver Task Force on Atmospheric Change presented a report entitled Clouds of Change to City Council. The report laid out a set of 35 recommendations designed to set a new course for socionatural transformation in the city by implementing a more comprehensive approach to environmental planning and policy. Among the initiatives outlined in Clouds of Change was a call for the development of a planning and design process aimed at creating a sustainable community on the shore of Southeast False Creek. The subsequent and on-going evolution of the plans to create this “sustainable community” will be used to examine how the vision of Clouds of Change has been forced to interact and react with other concomitant visions of the Vancouver of Tomorrow to produce a new space and a new nature on the city’s waterfront. I will show how various phases of the now decade-old debate over the meaning of “sustainability” in the context of SEFC have exposed the often obscured connections between transformations in the socionatural function of urban space and the process of maintaining and renegotiating the relationship between nature and urban-centered regimes of accumulation.

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Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Vancouver’s popularity as an object of scholarly inquiry has grown significantly. This is due, with little doubt and in large part, to the many changes that have occurred over this period in the city’s built environment, planning structures, demographics, and relationship to surrounding spaces. Not surprisingly, in a city which has been described as “a vast display case for the aesthetic consumption of nature” (Berelowitz, 2005), much of this change has occurred on the water’s edge, where views of the Coast Mountains and English Bay are the least obstructed, property values are the highest and consumers are the most eager to consume. Accordingly, it is in these waterfront spaces where some of the most dramatic transformations of the relationships between society, nature and the economy have been experienced. One such shoreline space, Southeast False Creek (SEFC), will be the focus of this study.

The story of SEFC, an 80 acre brownfield on the shore of False Creek, an inlet of English Bay that acts as a de facto border between downtown...
Vancouver and the rest of the city, began in the Fall of 1990 when the Vancouver Task Force on Atmospheric Change presented a report entitled *Clouds of Change* (City of Vancouver, 1990) to Vancouver City Council. The report laid out a set of 35 recommendations designed to set a new course for socionatural transformation in the city by implementing a more comprehensive approach to environmental planning and policy (Punter, 2003, p. 152). Among the initiatives outlined in *Clouds of Change* was the first, and seemingly innocuous, call for the development of a planning and design process aimed at creating a sustainable community on the shore of Southeast False Creek (see Figure 1a–c). In what follows, the subsequent and on-going evolution of the plans to create this “sustainable community” will be used to examine how the vision of *Clouds of Change* has been forced to fuse and interact with other concomitant visions of the Vancouver of tomorrow to produce a new space and a new nature on the city’s waterfront. More specifically, I will show how various phases of the now decade-old debate over the meaning of “sustainability” in the context of SEFC have exposed the often obscured connections between transformations in the socionatural function of urban space and the process of maintaining and renegotiating the relationship between nature and urban-centered regimes of accumulation.

The manufacture of synergies between produced socionatures and accumulation regimes, despite the economism that the existence of such a relationship implies, is shown by the story of SEFC to be far more than a deterministic process. What the example of SEFC demonstrates is that the harmonization of socionature with accumulation, like other forms of social and economic transition, is a never-quite-finished, trial-and-error process of searching for new fixes for the social, economic and ecological crisis tendencies of locally dominant accumulation regimes. This “search,” in the case of SEFC, has taken the form of an often confrontational political struggle between different interest groups, actors and networks of actors. Among the forces shaping this struggle, and the networks which entangle it, has been the pull of the market to rebuild and reimagine the everyday function of the waterfront in a way that is in sync with the “highest” and “best” uses of that space in the post-industrial city. In dialectical fashion, this market force has been met by the reciprocal action of those agents and actors, unassisted by the law of

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**Figure 1** (a) Vancouver and region. (b) The urban core. (c) Southeast False Creek background.

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value, to protect themselves from such market-lead imagineering of space with calls for greater attention to the “extra-economic.”

Consequently, the dispute over the future of SEFC, though couched in the language of sustainability, has served as a sort of discursive proxy battle to define the “proper” and foreclose “alternative” fixes for the fissures which Vancouver’s transition to a knowledge-based economy has opened in the city’s neighborhoods, social networks and landscapes. Thus, on the surface, the dispute can be read as benign and parochial, focused on creating a community which balances the so-called three pillars of sustainability: the social, the economic, and the environmental; however, the subtext of the dispute tells many nested and overlapping stories about the rearticulation of the relationships between the economic and the extra-economic, use value and exchange value, the local state, capital and civil society, et cetera. In other words, sustainability has come to function as what Spivak (1988) calls a “screen allegory,” both obscuring and legitimating the socionatural “fixing” of space.

In order to bring this public narrative of sustainable city building together with the broader storyline of finessing a socionatural “spatial fix,” I trace the changes that have occurred in the role played by the City of Vancouver’s Property Endowment Fund (PEF) in enabling and disabling various iterations of the SEFC project. I start with a brief sketch of the theoretical framework that will guide my narrative of SEFC and the PEF. In making this sketch, I rely heavily on David Harvey’s model of the circuits of capital and the difficulties, political or otherwise, often encountered by those seeking to rechannel flows of investment from one circuit to another. This spatially informed model of the urban process under capitalism is an attractive one to apply to Vancouver’s experiences in SEFC because it avoids both (i) over-hyping Vancouver’s planning and environmental achievements, and/or (ii) rehearsing and reifying “common sense” (classical economic) accounts of urban change.

Remaking the socionatural function of urban space

The challenge for those seeking to remake the socionatural function of urban space while at the same time aiding accumulation and/or expanding the local tax base is to identify the conditions and the means to transform the way socionature is lived, conceived and perceived in a manner “that either directly or indirectly expands the basis for the production of surplus value” (Harvey, 1989). This is a specific instance of a broader challenge of identifying “opportunities for direct and indirect productive investment in the secondary and tertiary circuits of capital” (Harvey, 1989, p. 69). Such investments in the built environment (secondary circuit), science and technology, healthcare, education (tertiary circuit), or socionature (secondary and tertiary) are often difficult to evaluate because they are hard to quantify, and so decisions must be made in the absence of clear profit signals (Harvey, 1989). Consequently, the switching of capital flows from the primary circuit into the production of a new socionature can be contentious, often requiring state intervention (e.g. SEFC) and therefore subject to political contestation. Such conflict opens the possibility that, though the production of a new socionature may be intended to abate crisis, the required rechanneling of capital flows from the primary circuit may itself trigger a form of legitima-

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3 Here, I use the term “extra-economic,” in manner consistent with Jessop’s (2002) use of the term to refer to all those factors required to reproduce the social conditions necessary for continued accumulation, but which the market alone cannot incent the production of.

4 Mitchell (2004, p. 182) was the first to recognize the use of sustainability as a screen allegory in the context of Vancouver.

5 Some good work relating sustainability and environmental change to Harvey’s notion of the spatial fix has been done by White et al. (2004), Whitehead (2003) and Keil and Kipfer (2002).
tion crisis. Thus, the remaking of socionature, both materially and symbolically, must occur in such a way as to justify the switching of capital flows to those who might challenge the value of such investments, or question the trajectory of transformation those investments intend. As the following sections will show, in Vancouver the notion of sustainability has played an important role in contesting and justifying both the switching of capital flows and the trajectory of socionatural change.

Contextualizing the redevelopment of SEFC

Occasionally a city decides to take its wealth and to invest it in something that goes beyond just making money. It wants to do something more, in this case the city wants to model a kind of development which is different than what we’ve been able to see elsewhere. We want to test new things. We want to be the first to set the pace, so that others can then take those things up, and they can become more integral to the way that we do business. If you take the short-term perspective then, yes, it means that we suggest the PEF, council suggests the PEF, put more into that development than economically makes sense. If you take a long-term perspective – almost an even fuller than full-cost accounting perspective – then we can instigate practices that are helpful – we make up a lot of that money over time.

Larry Beasley,
Former Co-director of Planning,
City of Vancouver, Interview, 29/09/2005

When a city decides “to do something more” the first three questions one should ask are: more than what, why and for whom? While the desire to do “something more” in SEFC may merely be a manifestation of an urban entrepreneurial impulse, that is a desire to do something more than the competition, “something more” likely also refers to the string of other megaprojects which have taken shape on Vancouver’s waterfront over the past decade and a half. The transformations of North False Creek and Coal Harbour, along with a host of other brownfield spaces near the city’s waterfront, have, in addition to transforming Vancouver’s skyline, engendered a wide spectrum of often vociferous public reaction. According to Punter (2003, p. 224), “the Vancouver public remains unconvinced that the megaprojects offer a quality of life and a quality of neighbourhood that is appropriate for the future of the city at large…”

The megaprojects of the 1980s and 1990s are perhaps the most visual expressions of the long-term process of post-industrialization, which since the early 1970s has reshaped Vancouver’s landscape, labour markets, and social structure (Ley, 1996; Olds, 2001; Hutton, 2004). According to Olds (2001, p. 97; also see Ley, 1996), this restructuring has led to the “‘embourgeoisement’ of Vancouver’s inner city,” making it “increasingly an economic, social, political and ideological space dominated by the new middle class, and by planning policies that favor the new middle class” (see Ley, 1996). The aesthetic and social fallout of these megaprojects, coeval with the broader process of urban restructuring, has been the creation of what, at times “resemble[s] a high-density version of The Truman Show” (Punter, 2003, p. 226); a post-industrial landscape crafted to fit an “image of ecology, leisure, and ‘liveability’ [which] feeds off the consumption preferences of professionals in a service economy” (Zukin, 1991, p. 7); a waterfront which exists in a “highly constrained, ideologically controlled and economically commodified reality” (Berelowitz, 1998 cited in Punter, 2003).

These criticisms, and the problems of social exclusion, gentrification and housing affordability to which they respond, along with a host of other concerns which Richard Florida might label “the externalities of the creative age” (Florida, 2005, p. 171), can be well described as the collateral damage of building a “consumer city.” The significance of Vancouver’s consumer city status may not be immediately obvious; after all, cities have always been sites for consumption. Notwithstanding this fact, the recent popularity of the idea that urban fortunes depend on a city’s capacity to attract, retain and cater to the tastes of a semi-nomadic class of “‘creatives’” (Peck, 2005), “knowledge workers” or, more generally, those well endowed with “human capital,” has highlighted “cities’ role as centers for consumption” (Glaeser et al., 2001).

The storyline implied by this understanding of urban economies is, at its most skeletal, a simple one: high amenity cities will thrive and those which fail to offer attractive consumption opportunities for desirable classes will not. The statistical hallmark of this city-centred amenity-based variant of social Darwinism is the existence of an urban amenity premium, that is, an economy in which rents and housing prices exceed those expected based on local levels of productivity and income alone (Glaeser et al., 2001).9

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6 Harvey refers to such crises and “switching crises” (see Harvey, 1999 and 1989 for more on switching crises).
7 Every year Mercer Human Resource Consulting publishes the world’s most widely cited urban quality-of-life ranking; since 1999 Vancouver has placed no lower than third.
8 Zukin made this statement in reference to “the ‘postindustrial landscape’ in modern Vancouver or Silicon Valley…”
As Figure 3 shows, since the mid-1980s Vancouver's core, despite the additions to the housing supply represented by the megaprojects, has experienced inflation in the cost of housing which cannot be accounted for on the basis of local increases in productivity or income. This apparently exogenously induced “urban amenity premium” has been widely attributed to the globalization of Vancouver’s property markets (see Mitchell, 2004; Olds, 2001). The flow of global capital into Vancouver, and especially the city’s integration with the economies of the Pacific Rim, has played a seismic role in the reshaping of the city’s built environment.

The development of Concord Pacific Place on the North shore of False Creek by Li Ka-shing, “Hong Kong’s richest, most powerful, and well connected property tycoon” (Olds, 2001, p. 113), is likely the most dramatic “physical manifestation of Chinese capitalism integrating with Vancouver’s property market” (ibid). The ensuing controversies surrounding the involvement of foreign corporations in the redevelopment of Vancouver’s waterfront has only served to foment existing and still budding criticisms of the megaprojects.

The sale of the North False Creek Lands to Li Ka-shing contributed to a sense among the public that “the right to participate in the production of the landscape and its associated symbolic meanings” (Mitchell, 2004, p. 157) had been outsourced. In City of Glass, cultural commentator and native Vancouverite, Douglas Coupland captures this sentiment well with his description of the high-rise megacomplexes of Pacific Place as “contingency crash pads for wealthier Hong Kong citizens,” signifiers of “the power of global history to affect our lives, and the average citizen’s alienation from the civic political process – they are glass totems that say ‘F-you’ to us” (Coupland, 2000).

This is the historical context in which the redevelopment of SEFC must be understood. Thus the 1991 Council decision to build a sustainable community in SEFC should be seen as more than simply a response to a recommendation made by the Task Force on Atmospheric Change, or as an extrapolation of a precedential trend line in good planning practice, or as a local response to the global “ecological crisis.” It should also be appreciated as a tactful gesture from an elected body to an electorate alienated from local politics; preoccupied with issues of housing affordability and neighbourhood quality (Punter, 2003); watching its city be transformed by market and “global forces, which are beyond [their] control” (Kwok, 1990). In other words, sustainability, in the context of SEFC, has come to operate as the central theme of a screen allegory in which the broader, more contentious storyline of reshaping the built environment to a form more attractive to desirable classes and amenable to accumulation, has been occluded and displaced by a more parochial narrative about sustainable city building.

**Contextualizing the redevelopment of SEFC: the planning context**

Despite Council’s 1991 machinations about exploring the possibility of developing SEFC as a “sustainable community,” the City did little, symbolic or otherwise, to demonstrate its commitment to building such a community for nearly five years. Notwithstanding this silence on sustainability, several changes in the City’s planning context did occur in the early 1990s which have directly and indirectly impacted the planning process for SEFC. First among

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10 The core is composed of all census tracts (CTs) in the downtown peninsula and those CTs contiguous with SEFC’s CT.
these changes was Council’s approval in December 1991 of a new Central Area Plan. The Central Area Plan aimed, through the demarcation of 35 sub areas, to diversify the core’s landscape, urban form, economy and demographics. To this end, the sub area of SEFC was targeted for mixed-use residential development specifically intended to attract families with children to the empty-nester-dominated core. The Central Area Plan’s family-friendly goals for SEFC were an extension of the emphasis the Planning Department had been placing on residential development, or “Living First,” in the core since the late 1980s. Since the inception of this “Living First” strategy, “downtown residential” has been, in the words of former Co-Director of Planning, Larry Beasley, Vancouver’s “mantra for urban vitality in the new century” (Beasley, 2000). Much of this figurative chanting associated with the “Living First” strategy has been directed toward the urban periphery and the “ultimate target... [of] the suburban family with children” (Beasley, cited in Dietrich, 2003). This targeting of suburban populations has been justified through faith that “if they come back [to the core], everything comes with them” (Beasley, cited in Dietrich, 2003). To this end the Planning Department has attempted to splice the values of suburbia into a high-density urban milieu with the intention of making the inner city appear more attractive and safe to those living in the periphery of the city (Grodzynski, June 30th, 2006). Though sustainability and suburbia more often connote contrast than complementarity, it is not hard to see, when viewed through the lenses of the Central Area Plan and the “Living First” strategy, the hypothetical attraction, for planners, marketers and utopians alike, of crossing suburban appeal with sustainability in SEFC. It is the mythic promise of suburbia to successfully marry the virtues of the country with those of the town, renewed on the waterfront – where the prodigal town will be reunited with nature.

A second, less direct, source of influence on the planning and political dynamics of SEFC’s redevelopment was the preparation of a citywide planning strategy, dubbed CityPlan. While the motivations behind Council’s June 1992 decision to begin the three year process of developing CityPlan were numerous and varied, many hoped CityPlan would help inoculate the city against the popular straw man of NIMBYism. As UBC planning professors Michael Seelig and Alan Artibise declared in their 1990, developer sponsored (Mitchell, 2004; Punter, 2003), Vancouver Sun news serial, “Future Growth: Future Shock,” “A growing number of planners, developers and politicians [were] saying that popular sovereignty [had] become a euphemism for abandoning responsible, representative government” (Artibise and Seelig, Nov. 13th, 1990). Such wide-ranging anxiety over “popular sovereignty” in some cases translated into a general resentment of the public’s participation in the planning process. This resentment was well captured by former Chairman of the Vancouver Parks Board, Art Cowie, when he lamented that “the citizen participation process [had] begun to turn into the ‘tyranny of a few,’ who look after their own interests at the expense of the wider community” (Artibise and Seelig, Nov. 13th, 1990).

CityPlan’s response to what Mitchell has cynically described as “the increasing power of ‘chaotic’ citizens’ movements and the declining control of urban land by the ‘responsible’ forces of city government and the marketplace” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 481) was to, in the words of the CityPlan mandate, “inform citizens about the issues facing the City and present Council policies, and create, from their advice, a shared sense of direction for the City and its place in the Region” (City of Vancouver, 1995). The hope implicit in this ostensible redistribution of power to the public was that it would foster a greater sense of collective proprietary responsibility for planning decisions, and therefore, make otherwise recalcitrant citizens more willing to accept the inevitable trade offs associated with crafting policy (Punter, 2003).

CityPlan’s public participation process included, among other things, 250 idea-sharing “kitchen tables” composed of 3000 individuals, a three day “ideas fair” visited by 10,000 people, a 6000-person mailing list, a “making choices” exhibition with 15,000 attendees, as well as a plebiscite. Regardless of whether CityPlan was more an example of realpolitik or an earnest attempt to democratize the planning process, it set a new high-water mark for public participation in Vancouver to which all future developments could be compared.

Among the messages that the citizens of Vancouver sent to the Planning Department and developers were calls for greater attention to the promotion of sustainable forms of development (broadly defined); more control over building heights to protect view corridors; and increased attention to fitting development into the context of its surroundings. CityPlan also made clear that Vancouverites wanted to see a greater mix of leisure and residential land uses as well as more integration of non-market with market housing. By conspicuously articulating the public’s concerns, CityPlan became, as the story of SEFC will show, an elephant in the boardrooms of both the City and local developers.

Shaping socionatural transformation: Southeast False Creek and the Property Endowment Fund

Sustainability and the PEF

The plane took off and there was an agenda to do, quote, sustainability because it was the flavor of the month.

Anonymous, representative of SEFC private landowner, Interview, 20/09/2005
In the summer of 1996, not long after the “visioning” phase of CityPlan had come to an end, the repercussions of Council’s commitment to “sustainability” in SEFC began to materialize. That July, the City’s Real Estate Services Division retained Stanley Kwok, the principle protagonist behind the redevelopment of North False Creek, to serve as a development consultant for SEFC. Kwok was charged with (i) identifying “appropriate and economically feasible” development options for SEFC, and (ii) advising the board of the PEF (see Figure 2 for PEF background) based on his findings (Kwok, 1997). Though Kwok’s terms of reference were limited to performing and reporting a preliminary “pro-forma analysis,” Kwok produced a full design concept plan for a new neighbourhood renamed “Creekside Landing” (Alexander, 2001). Kwok justified expanding his terms of reference by explaining that “development concepts are abstract thoughts which needed to be captured into physical form for them to be felt and understood” (Kwok, 1997, p. 11). Despite the importance Kwok placed on fleshing out abstract concepts, the solicitation and incorporation of the public’s input was deemed an inessential component of this process. The consultation that did occur was limited to a one day “private workshop” (Kwok, 1997) attended by a “group of respected guests in the development industry” (Kwok, 1997, p. 22). This narrow range of voices, in addition to being in conspicuous contrast with the precedent set by CityPlan, led to a “very constrained interpretation of urban sustainability” (Alexander, 2001, p. 10).

In his report to the PEF board, Kwok explained that “sustainable development is hard to define” and that despite consultations carried out in the creation of the Creekside concept “no meaningful definition was agreed upon” (Kwok, 1997, p. 24). Notwithstanding this lack of a formal definition, Kwok’s report concluded that “Creekside Landing’s vision embody[d] the goals of sustainable urban development” (Kwok, 1997, p. 24). This assessment was based largely on the fact that: (i) the plan provided a generous supply of green space, (ii) the separation of sanitary and storm sewers would improve water quality in False Creek, (iii) the high densities planned would make efficient use of land and be walkable, (iv) the development’s proximity to the core would reduce commuting, and (v) redevelopment would force the remediation of contaminated soils (Alexander, 2001). Regardless of whether these features were sufficient to make Creekside a “sustainable” community, according to then Director of Central-Area planning, Larry Beasley, “the results were not popular; the results when we took them out to the public – people were screaming about them – they did not like what they were seeing” (Interview, 29/09/05).

Given the historical, geographic, planning and political contexts into which Creekside was introduced, the adverse reaction from the general public, environmentalists, affordable housing advocates and a variety of other stakeholders, should have come as no surprise. First, as a result of playing such an instrumental role in the redevelopment of North False Creek, Kwok came to SEFC with baggage. For many in the city, Kwok and Pacific Place were synonymous; together they represented a particular brand of market-lead development concerned more with profit maximization than with environmental and social impacts. Second, Creekside bore a strong resemblance to North False Creek. Creekside’s high density along with its high-rise and medium-rise apartments gave it a look akin to a glassy “sustainable” version of Le Corbusier’s “tower in a park.” The perception that Creekside was the sequel to Pacific Place heightened extant concerns about the homogenization of the core and the waterfront, both in terms of built form and in regard to the exclusion of marginal groups. Also, perhaps contributing to the traction of these concerns over built form and homogenization, was Creekside’s deviation from the urban design principals the Planning Department outlined in the 1988 False Creek Policy Broadsheets. The Broadsheets endorsed a “carefully conceived mixture of short and tall buildings” in deference to mountain views and a concern that tall buildings “could reduce the apparent width of the water basin” (City of Vancouver, 1988, p. 16). Third, and arguably most detrimental to Creekside, was its skeptical interpretation of sustainability, and more specifically, its deviation from the now taken-for-granted understanding of sustainability as a metaphorical piece of furniture “structurally” dependant on its social, ecological and economic “legs” being given equal measure.

The inability of Kwok and associates to distance Creekside from previous waterfront megaprojects as well as their failure to meet heightened standards for public consultation, or to approach the remaking of SEFC with a financial or symbolic rationale compatible with the three-pronged approach of mainstream sustainability discourse, helped trigger a public reaction against Creekside. The expansion of market-lead development around False Creek was met by a “more ecologically and socially conscious” (Alexander, 2001) countermovement, the early stages of which, found its clearest expression in a workshop held in April 1997 just before Kwok was scheduled to deliver his report to Council. The workshop sponsored by the Vancouver Planning

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11 Among the participants in the workshop were a number of City of Vancouver planners and other City staff.

12 The False Creek Policy Broadsheets was also the first document to suggest that SEFC was an “excellent location for residential [development]” (City of Vancouver, 1988).
Commission and Simon Fraser University, according to Alexander (2001, p. 11), “helped to cement consensus amongst design professionals and activists around the necessity and desirability of making SEFC a model [sustainable] community.”

Over half of Council and close to 300 delegates attended the workshop entitled “Cents and Sustainability,” helping ensure that when Kwok delivered his report to Council he would face an organized resistance. After Kwok presented his report, Council heard from 32 speakers largely drawn from a group of professionals, students and social activists calling themselves the SEFC Working Group. This counter-movement represented by the Workshop and Working Group proved effective in forestalling the plans for Creekside. In the end, Council resolved to accept Kwok’s report for “information purposes only,” citing concerns about the assumptions on which the report’s findings were based and a lack of sufficient attention to issues of sustainability (Alexander, 2001). After seven years, Council “recognized that their sustainability objectives from the Clouds of Change commitment had been derailed” (Punter, 2003, p. 230).

Choices and directions for the PEF and the socio-natural transformation of SEFC

...cost implications from sustainable development have not been considered in the economic analysis, as this concept remains undefined.

Ken Dobell, City Manager, City of Vancouver, 1997

The fact that in April 1997, seven years after Clouds of Change, the city had still not produced a formal definition of sustainability, suggests that Council’s initial commitment to “sustainability” in SEFC was at best naïve, and at worst based on the term’s “flavor of the month” status and public relations potential in the wake of the 1987 Brundtland Report. In either case, though Kwok’s report revealed a project on the margins of profitability, requiring quick action to minimize medium-term financial losses, the city shelved it. Clearly the version of sustainability which Creekside embodied was insufficient to legitimate the switching of capital flows. In response to the failure of Creekside, Council went back to the drawing board. Between 1997 and 2004, the city engaged in one of its most involved public participation campaigns. This consultant supported, institutionally mediated dreaming and visioning produced a whole new set of sustainability principles, goals and practices aimed at operationalizing a politically viable definition of sustainability. This process was fairly open and occasionally adversarial, incorporating input from a wide variety interest groups including businesses, private landowners, residents from adjacent communities and other interested parties. The list of policy documents, consultants’ reports and proposals published during this period is long including, everything from a 700-name petition, to have the entire site turned into a park to an urban agriculture study, to various policy statements, energy options studies, charrettes and even poems.

As the financial implications of implementing Vancouver’s dreams of a sustainable SEFC became clearer, the power dynamics which had lain latent during the years of visioning began to resurface. In July 2004, the central issue in the redevelopment began to shift from the operationalization of a politically legitimate definition of sustainability to a debate over the proper role of the PEF in meeting city objectives. On July 14th, 2004, the SEFC Steering Committee, in response to a series of new ideas raised by both the public and Councillors regarding the level of public amenity warranted by SEFC, made a series of recommendations, and presented a series of choices to Council. The report was a request to Council to revise the existing draft of the Official Development Plan to include an enhanced public amenity package and alterations to the neighborhood’s built form. These changes consisted of:

- A low to mid-rise built form instead of a “podium and tower” configuration.
- A change from the city megaproject standard of an 80–20% split between market and low-income housing to 1/3rd market, 1/3rd middle-income, and 1/3rd low-income.
- An increase in the number of childcare facilities from 3 to 5; and
- Also, the addition of sustainability indicators and targets to the Oicial Development Plan, “and that ‘place making’ (creating legible memorable spaces)” be given further emphasis.

These additions, while responding to public concerns about housing affordability in adjacent neighborhoods (see Figure 4) and other issues, dramatically increased the financial demands of the

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13 The United Nations Brundtland Commission Report, Our Common Future (1987), is widely credited with bringing the term sustainable development into common parlance.

14 The principal consultative contributor during this period was Sheltair Scientific. Sheltair established a set of sustainability targets, goals and objective including a system of “full-cost accounting.”

15 The SEFC Steering Committee was established as an oversight body for the SEFC project. The Committee was composed of the City Manager, Councillor Raymond Louie, Councillor Peter Ladner, as well as the Directors of Current Planning, Real Estate Services, the Housing Centre, and Finance, the General Managers of Engineering, Community Services, and the Park Board, and the Deputy City Manager.

16 The redevelopment of SEFC was commonly portrayed as a once-in-a-urban-lifetime opportunity.
The major financial implication of delivering the enhanced public amenity package was that all of the $50 million in expected return to the PEF would have to be funneled back into the project (i.e. a break from the normal pattern of investment in the primary circuit).

This break-even approach to the renovation of space, while reminiscent of the funding scheme used in the redevelopment of Southwest False Creek in the early 1970s, deviated from the interpretation of the PEF board’s mandate which has been the status quo over the past two decades. The PEF board has perceived its role as the city’s land developer to be investing in “transferable” projects. “The PEF interpreted the goal of ‘transferability’ to mean that in developing its lands, the city should have the same objectives that a private land owner would expect to achieve” (Beasley et al., 2004). Based on this interpretation, the 2004 revisions to the Official Development Plan pitted two of the PEF’s objectives against each other. In one corner was the city’s goal of building a “sustainable” community that attempted to do “something more,” and in the other the goal of transferability and the maximization of the financial return to the PEF.

The Council of the time opted for the former; a decision that was lauded by many in the activist and design communities. However, Council’s approval of the revised Official Development Plan, and the requisite rechanneling of capital flows, quickly became a political battle to determine the “proper” role of the PEF that would play out in the media and in the 2005 municipal election.

The market strikes back

...council is about to abandon the idea of sustainability and demolish the vital economic pillar when they approve the new Southeast False Creek plan... Bob Ransford, The Vancouver Sun, 2005

The detractors of the new plan were quick to point out the dangerous precedent being set by the revised Official Development Plan. As then Councillor Sam Sullivan put it, “the Property Endowment Fund is too tempting a target for social activist councillors looking for new ways to fund their projects” (Sullivan cited in Lee, 2004). Soon the use of the PEF to finance the enhanced amenity package was likened to an attack on the PEF itself and by association to the financial well being of the entire city. As Councillor Peter Ladner explained, the redirection of funds from the PEF was a “signal that [would] be picked up by bond-rating agencies. It’s a signal that somebody’s hand has slipped on the tiller and we’re not sure where this is going to go.” The Vancouver Sun (2004) chimped in with an editorial pointing out that:

The fund is also counted as an asset by credit rating agencies when they assess Vancouver’s status. Last December, Dominion Bond Rating Services dropped Vancouver’s status from triple A to double A high. We were reminded then how a rating downgrade can lead to higher borrowing costs and potentially to the need for higher property taxes.

This political contest to determine both the future of SEFC and the “proper” role of the PEF vacillated between the default poles of altruism and fiscal responsibility for most of 2005. Finally, this binary was formalized in the lead up to the civic election in November of the same year where the two main municipal parties slotted themselves neatly into the well-worn ruts at their respective ends of the political spectrum. Because of: (i) the timing of the changes to the plans for SEFC; and (ii) the ease with which the debate over the PEF and SEFC could be scripted as battle between a “leftist” brand of urban entrepreneurialism based on product differentiation and investing in progressive infrastructures of feeling, and a “rightist” brand of urban governance based on a more traditional city-as-firm model of urban governance, the plans for SEFC became a central issue in the election.

The election created a rare moment where the power-dynamics intrinsic to socionatural transformation were placed blatantly on display and closely paired with the economic imperatives of the local state. Perhaps the best example of this was the opposition Non-Partisan Association’s complimentary campaign promises to both reestablish the city’s triple-A credit rating and “restore the principle of sus-
tainability to the Property Endowment Fund” (Non-partisan Association, 2005). By tacitly relating the viability of the local state to decisions made by an extra-governmental, non-citizen body (i.e. a bond-rating agency) the NPA was able to invert the meaning of the sustainability allegory. No longer was sustainability a screen allegory or trope with which to legitimate the switching of capital flows, but a screen intended to help block their rechanneling. The ease with which the NPA was able to exploit the multivalent character of sustainability, and eventually win the 2005 election, despite a seven year (from 1997 to 2004) effort of visioning intended to operationalize and give closure to the meaning of the term, speaks to both the obfuscatory value and versatility of sustainability in facilitating socionatural fixes at an urban scale.

One of the first initiatives of the new NPA Council, lead by Mayor Sam Sullivan, was to “restore sustainability to the [Property Endowment] Fund” (Sullivan; cited in Bula, 2006) by instructing city staff to prepare a plan to return “economic sustainability” to the SEFC project by having the PEF recover the land value of the site (i.e. $50 million) (City of Vancouver, 2006). To do so, the new Council resolved on January 20th, 2006, to amend the Official Development Plan once again by: (i) cutting the provision of affordable housing by $20.8 million and (ii) reducing the provision of childcare facilities from five to two” (City of Vancouver, 2006). This amendment has again been met by resistance from those concerned that SEFC will become a “playground for the rich” and afraid “that changing the plans for this diverse and experimental neighbourhood shows a lack of leadership and imagination that will accelerate Vancouver’s evolution into a city for only the very rich and the very poor” (Bula, 2006). Regardless of whether such prognostications turn out to be true, or even whether the concerns that they express are justified, the existence of such fears suggests that the debate over the future of SEFC is no longer a narrow one about sustainable city building, but one which engages with the broader political economy of urban change.

Conclusion

SEFC continues to be a point of friction in the interdependent processes of waterfront and socionatural transformation in Vancouver. The ongoing story of this piece of inner city riparian blight is a testament to the perpetual, never-quite-finished status of all efforts to impose on the dynamics of urban change a telos of equilibrium between nature, society and the economy. No matter how obvious or intrinsic the virtues of balancing these three “pillars” may seem, what the story of SEFC makes clear is that the process of harmonizing socionature with accumulation is far from natural, invariably subjective, dependent on context (historic, geographic, etc.) and always political. Following from this, the term “sustainability,” which has become so tightly linked with processes of socionatural change in advanced capitalist cities, has become a source of semantic dissonance. The semantic and political malleability of sustainability, even in instances where the term’s meaning has been ostensibly formalized through scientific indicators, public meetings and community visioning exercises, is evidence that the term has become a loose signifier easily tied to opposing positions, and used as a screen for special interests.

Though in some cases the semantic plasticity of sustainability may be deliberately exploited toward the furtherance of some political or economic end, it would be a fallacy to assume that the existence of synergies between the notion of sustainability and a particular version of urban change is artefactual; the existence of synergies may also be, at least in part, incidental. In other words, sustainability’s loose signifier status makes it especially susceptible to the historical, geographic and political contexts in which it is mobilized. Thus the meanings of sustainability in Vancouver, or in regard to the redevelopment of SEFC, are dependent on their local geographies. I rehash the old platitude that meaning is contextual because it has important policy implications for those seeking build more equitable and environmentally informed cities. The challenge that lies in the subtext of story of SEFC and the PEF for planners and sustainability advocates living and working in “consumer cities” like Vancouver, is to learn how to build sustainable cities without turning sustainability into a slogan or brand with which to sell the city to tourists, mobile classes and capital. While this may seem like a counterintuitive goal, under a regime of urban change increasingly shaped by inter-urban competition (for government transfers, global capital, tax dollars, “human capital,” etc.); and an entrepreneurial drive to do “something more” – where it seems inevitable, and almost automatic, that the “sustainability” of a city be amenitized and capitalized – efforts must be made to prevent sustainability from being used to exacerbate already existing urban amenity premiums. The inflation of such premiums may benefit property owners and expand the local tax base, but they do little to ameliorate affordable housing shortages, ease social exclusion or mitigate the impacts of gentrification. When the challenge of urban sustainability is framed in such terms, the fact that the story of SEFC evolved from a recommendation from a climate

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17 After public hearings this was increased to three.
18 No other substantial cuts to the “enhanced amenity package” have been proposed. The remaining the $50 million to be recouped will be acquired through unspecified savings over the build-out period.
19 Bula (2006) attributes this concern to “a coalition of community groups… preparing to mount an energetic protest.”
change task force into a debate about social polarization in Vancouver, is less remarkable. Thus, the story of SEFC illustrates the importance of relating sustainable planning practices to the broader political economy of urban change in a manner that goes beyond analogies about furniture; failure to do so leaves sustainability too easily captured by particularist politics.

References


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