



Healthy By Design

By Steve Berg, *Star Tribune*, July 31, 2005



Any busy downtown sidewalk will reveal the mystery of why Vancouverites are an uncommonly vigorous and healthy bunch and why their city is so widely admired. Stand on Robson Street for five minutes on a weekday afternoon. Count the people walking past: 346. Note the number who are obviously overweight: 2. Estimate the number wearing backpacks: 100. Now take another five minutes to count the cars moving steadily and easily past: 74 (plus two trucks and three buses). Reach for your calculator: 4.5 pedestrians for every car. There you have it. Not exactly scientific proof, but an insight into Vancouver's formula for healthy residents and urban vitality: more walking, less driving.

More than any North American city, Vancouver has intentionally merged public health with city planning. The goal is not just to promote recreation (there are plenty of bike trails and tennis courts), but to design physical activity into the daily routine, to build a city so compelling that people will leave their cars at home, strap on a backpack and take up walking as their primary mode of travel. The result is a cityscape that's breathtaking in its beauty and impressive in its retail vitality. Thick layers of trees and flowers have invaded the downtown district. Strips of freshly trimmed green grass line many downtown sidewalks. Hundreds of small shops and restaurants have sprouted among the ever-expanding supply of townhouses and high-rise condos. You can take a beautiful and pleasant walk to fetch almost anything you need, so why drive?

Indeed, driving has become the backup mode of downtown travel. Growth in auto traffic has lagged far behind growth in resident population, which has doubled to 80,000 in the last 15 years. Auto traffic actually declined by 13 percent between 1994 and 1999, according to a city government study, while pedestrian traffic rose 55 percent. Last year, vehicle registrations declined for the first time in memory as new residents began eschewing second cars. Transit ridership, meanwhile, rose 20 percent over three years. Air quality improved. And the Vancouver region led Canada in many health categories, including life expectancy. "They built it and they live it," said Lawrence Frank, a planning professor at the University of British Columbia and a leading expert on the link between urban design and public health.

Both here, and earlier at Georgia Tech, Frank has been at the forefront of research that ties obesity, hypertension, coronary disease, diabetes and other health problems to the sprawling development and auto dependence that dominates most cities. His and other research continues to show that substituting even a modest amount of walking for driving as part of the daily routine reduces the likelihood of obesity and related diseases. The greatest inducement to physical activity is living within walking distance of shops, transit stops and other destinations, studies show. In other words, urban form can induce a healthier lifestyle. "Vancouver is the clearest example of that," Frank said. Critics suggest that self-selection may have tilted his results – people who choose to live in active cities tend already to be trim, fit and quite literally "walking the talk." Frank acknowledges the point, but insists that the policy

implications remain valid. People will have a better chance at a healthy life if cities build physical activity into the urban form.

Vancouver owes its health-conscious design to a list of advantages that most cities, including Minneapolis, don't have: a moderate climate, a geography hemmed in by water and mountains, the relative racial harmony among Vancouver's white and Asian ethnic groups, tax policies favorable to renters and small business, a huge flow of Chinese investment since the mid-1990s, and a contrarian strain of politics that engulfed the city in the early '70s and continues to pay dividends. "Those were the hippie-dippy days," recalls Gordon Price, an urban planning consultant and former city councilor who says Vancouver succeeds mostly because environmentalists kept freeways out of the city's center. As a result, traditional neighborhoods stayed intact; local streets stayed vibrant and busy; crime was held in check; public schools and small business remained strong. The city swallowed hard and accepted high-density redevelopment as a way to preserve the wider region's lush environment.

It was, in short, an early version of "smart growth" that ran contrary to the trends of the day and to human nature. It would have been easier just to acquiesce to sprawl, big-box stores and the auto lifestyle, Price said. Vancouver isn't without problems. Vagrants and drug addicts occupy downtown's derelict eastern edge. Housing prices in the tinier West End are leaving the middle class behind. Meanwhile, the outer ring is suffering traffic woes common in most suburbs. But what most impresses a visitor is central Vancouver's extraordinary care for public spaces. While drivers tend not to notice, walkers are drawn to beautiful spaces. They see their city close up. They won't tolerate crumbling, weed-infested sidewalks or shabby neighborhood businesses. The more walkers a city has, the more pleasant, safe and vital it becomes. Every great city is a great walking city – not only through parks or along waterfronts, but along ordinary streets that link homes and destinations.

For Vancouverites, the values of healthy physical activity, public beauty and retail/residential success seem to have converged in a perfect synapse. How? A greenways program invests \$1 million a year to build attractive pedestrian and bicycle links between homes and destinations, sometimes along "ordinary" city streets. In addition, the park system maintains 130,000 street trees as part of its impressive \$80 million (U.S.) annual budget, and the zoning ordinance requires private developers to devote 1 percent of construction budgets to public art, thus embedding scores of sculptures, fountains and other artistic features into the walking environment.

Moreover, city planners routinely negotiate generous landscaping commitments from private developers. "They are expected to match the high standard that the city has set with its landscape investments," said Sandra James, the city's chief greenways planner. The central idea in creating a healthy city, she said, is to make sure that natural beauty isn't confined to parks and the waterfront but that it invades every block. Quoting the preamble to Vancouver's greenways policy book, she said: "It's time to stop thinking of our cities as one place and nature as someplace else."