



Image from the proposal by Larry Beasley, Jim Green, Norm Hotson and Margot Long to transform the viaduct area of East Vancouver.

A plan to behead Vancouver's urban serpent: The Georgia Viaduct

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“Just look at all this wasted space,” says Larry Beasley, as he drives underneath the Georgia Viaduct near Quebec Street on a sunny February afternoon.

“Think of what we could do here – more green space, housing...”

“Yes and the new park could replace some of these eight lanes,” chimes in Jim Green, “who needs eight lanes?”

No, this is not the fragment of some strange planners reverie. This is an impromptu tour of the Vancouver neighbourhoods traversed by the Georgia Viaduct. Lead by Mr. Beasley, the city's former head of planning and Mr. Green, a former councillor, mayoral candidate and long time community activist, the pair aim to show how eliminating the viaduct could not only create more space for housing and parks, but could weave disparate neighbourhoods into a whole new community.

Currently the viaduct snakes through the city's core, isolating key urban clusters – like the Jim Cheng tower above Costco, and the City Gate development East of Science World – and cutting off historic areas from the waterfront. Increasingly it is perceived as the serpent in what could be an urbanist's Eden.

In a city where housing pressures and lack of available land have pushed new developments eastwards out of the peninsular core, the idea of transforming or eliminating the viaduct – built in 1974 after community opposition thwarted larger plans for a freeway – is gaining ground.

After the closure of the viaduct during the 2010 Olympics, councillor Geoff Meggs spearheaded a planning review of the Georgia and Dunsmuir Viaducts to look at opportunities for public space and parks on the north side of False Creek. This was extended last year to include False Creek Flats – the last significant area of undeveloped land in the city core.

Mr. Beasley and Mr. Green teamed up with architect Norm Hotson and landscape architect Margot Long and entered the city's design competition that welcomed all proposals from re-purposing to total elimination. They applied for funding from Concord Pacific to do a comprehensive proposal and recently won the jury and people's choice award for their plan.

Touring with these two veterans of the civic scene, one has the impression that their plan for opening up the area would literally unlock the very heart of the city – and connect key arterial neighbourhoods that would otherwise remain isolated.

“Now look at these Citygate buildings,” says Mr. Beasley, “they have nice entranceways, greenery, there's a sense that we're in a real residential neighbourhood, but it's cut off from the water by Quebec Street and a huge parking lot.”

Their plan involves extending access to False Creek as well as doubling the size of the proposed Creekside Park, and connecting historic neighbourhoods through greenways. They propose to get rid of the viaduct, except for a residual piece adjacent to Rogers Arena that will allow for pedestrian access while creating an elevated green space along the lines of New York City's celebrated Highline Park, constructed from the remains of an old elevated transit line.

By replacing the viaducts with a pathway of parks, they hope to link historic neighbourhoods in the downtown eastside to the water, and to new mixed-use developments.

The plan also proposes a merger of Pacific and Expo boulevards to create one grand boulevard that extends East into Prior and connects to Georgia via a new street that slopes down to the waterfront.

This new grand boulevard spine, as well as mixed use and mixed income housing, they say, “will link up all the separate neighbourhoods in the area into one coherent community.”

Crossing Main Street and the city's historic railway station, an area that Mr. Beasley predicts could become the new eastern edge of a re-oriented downtown, he turns left towards the viaduct's Union Street off ramp. Here you can see evidence of recent neighbourhood renewal, sparked primarily by the 10,000 new residents that have arrived here in the past decade, lured by projects like Citygate, and more recently by the Olympic Village.

On the southeast corner of Main and Prior, the old Bank of Montreal building has become a hip new space called the Denim Gallery Café. On its northern flank, the shrine to Jimi Hendrix speaks of the area's history, and the sad fate of Hogan's Alley, bulldozed for the new viaduct. Despite community opposition at the time, it was destroyed while Strathcona was narrowly saved from demolition by a robust residents association. “We

really have to thank those people as city-building heroes,” says Mr. Green. “Just imagine what this place would be like if they hadn’t fought it.”

Now Union Street is alive with new shops, cafes, businesses and housing. The month-old David Nicolay-designed Union Bar is doing a brisk business.

“If the viaduct area opens up,” says Mr. Nicolay, “it would be a great boon to the neighbourhood and would link the surrounding areas that now function as little islands.”

The new viaduct precinct plan is beyond the concept of the “other side of the tracks”, says Mr. Beasley, “it’s about removing the tracks altogether. People in the downtown eastside will have beautiful park systems and a huge infrastructure of amenities that were previously denied to them.”

Turning West on to East Georgia, we drive past a parking lot at the edge of a lane that will soon be a 28-unit, nine-storey residential building. It was designed by Inge Roecker and Birmingham & Wood Architects to fit the 25-foot lot typical of the area and to engage with its lane culture. Project architect Sandra Moore hopes that, “the lanes of Chinatown will once again provide primary access to retail, businesses and dwelling units as they have in the past.”

She notes that the south end of the lane flanking the site that meets the viaduct, “has huge potential to become a pedestrian/bike corridor connecting the viaduct precinct to Pender Street – the heart of Chinatown.”

Next, Mr. Beasley drives us down that very street, past Peking Lounge, a furniture and interiors boutique, and Bob Rennie’s new art gallery, making a left at International Village, a mixed use, 15-year-old development.

“You see how Abbot is such a great urban street,” says Mr. Beasley, “with shops, housing, theatres, cafes. And then suddenly – there’s the viaduct. It just stops everything abruptly with no consideration for the nature of the neighbourhood.”

To our immediate east, urban streetscape dissolves into empty parking lots.

“If people have the courage to come together and implement this plan...” says Mr. Beasley, “...It could be the crowning glory of the city,” interjects Mr. Green, finishing Mr. Beasley’s sentence.

“This could be Vancouver’s defining moment.”

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