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[Return to the Table
of Contents.](#)

AUGUST 1998

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Vancouver and "Cascadia"

IT was late afternoon when I arrived in Vancouver and checked into a bed-and-breakfast in a residential neighborhood with flame-red hawthorn trees. Traffic islands at each crossing slowed cars. The cost of parking downtown was exorbitant, so I rode the bus. As in Portland and elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest, the nearby glaciers and volcanoes, visible from many an urban street, have led to a preoccupation with conservation, which has in turn generated penalties for automobile use.

The bus heading downtown was clamorous with conversation and filled with well-dressed people -- so different from buses in many parts of the United States, whose riders are mostly silent and poor. (Portland buses, I would discover, are like Vancouver's.) Like the bus, the shiny stone benches on rose-bedecked Robson Street were filled not with the poor and homeless but with well-dressed people, talking. The only cell phone I saw belonged to a man with a New York accent who was telling someone that he would "be home in three days." There were many benches, and also a profusion of cafés, buzzing and crowded, set against buildings made of glass, marble, unusual metals, and polymers. As at the Fashion Island Mall, the trees and flowers that were planted beside new buildings in the 1970s and 1980s, and constant architectural refinements, have made for fine urban landscapes. But unlike the Fashion Island Mall, Vancouver had a true urban life. Even in newspaper-and-candy stores knots of people were talking by the counters.

Many of the faces were Asian. A third of greater Vancouver's 1.81 million people are Asian, with Chinese alone making up nearly 20 percent of the population. Asian immigrants account for much of the population growth of 2.5 percent a year. One local joke had it that "the Japanese want to buy Vancouver, but the Chinese won't sell it." I saw many signs in Punjabi, Hindi, Farsi, Arabic, and Khmer -- but almost none in French, an official Canadian language. In the schools here Mandarin is spoken more

commonly than French. Vancouver, with its glitzy, visually lively high-rise condominiums, is becoming an Asianized city on the Pacific Rim of North America, dedicated to global materialism; a real East-West hybrid culture is emerging here.

Related links:

- [Virtual Tour of Simon Fraser University at Harbour Centre](#)

"Featuring full 360 degree panoramic views."

- [Tidepool: News for the Rainforest Coast](#)

A news service focusing on environmental, economic, and cultural issues that impinge on the Pacific Northwest community.

- ["Nations Worth Fighting For"](#)

An editorial by Ed Hunt, editor of the Tidepool news service, written in response to Robert Kaplan's take in this article on the Pacific Northwest.

The next morning I visited Warren Gill, an urban geographer and the executive director of the Harbour Centre campus of Simon Fraser University, an institution founded in 1965 and named for a nineteenth-century Vermont-born explorer and Northwest fur trader. The campus consisted of a single building with green and blue glass interiors. Finished in 1989, the building conjured for me "the future" -- that is, it made me aware of transition and change. As the Ringstrasse in turn-of-the-century Vienna illustrates, social and economic change, often revealed through architecture, precedes political change. What the architecture here revealed was the abstract and urban character of our collective future, and the emergence of the city-state.

"There, you see it all -- isn't it great?" Gill said. He waved his hand toward his office window, indicating [the panorama of the Burrard Inlet](#), a belt of blue water crowded with seaplanes and set against the snow-capped peaks of the Coast Range, with Vancouver's bustling harbor, heliport, and nexus of railroad tracks in the foreground. "With a dynamic and highly educated population and strategic transport links," Gill said, "this is all you need to be sovereign in the phase of history we are entering. Cities and their environs provide garbage collection, schools, and even your neighborhood -- but they get the least of your taxes. The bulk of your tax money still goes to the state or province and the federal government, and what do they do for you? Isn't it antiquated? But that will change. In the coming decades your tax money will increasingly go to the place you really care about." Gill's tone was enthusiastic and consciously provocative.

"Though I guess we should all pay taxes to that Information Age military you are creating in Washington, D.C. They'll in effect sell us the protection we will need against terrorists and other bad people. You see, we don't need *you* [he meant America], and we certainly don't need Canada. What we need is your military!"

I didn't try to interrupt.

"The miracle is that Canada has lasted as long as it has. It makes no sense. Oh, yes, I'm *fond* of Canada. Canada is something you're fond of, like a drunken old uncle. And I'm proud to be a Canadian. We all are, in the sense that Canada is more aesthetically pleasing than the United States. It's cleaner and less unruly. But the nation-state is

gone in Vancouver."

Gill called Vancouver "a beautiful setting in search of a city." He said, "Did you know that after L.A., Vancouver has one of the biggest entertainment industries in North America -- seven hundred million dollars a year in revenue. Hollywood makes *The X-Files* here. The Canadian dollar is cheap, and we're in the same time zone as Los Angeles, so Hollywood finds us useful, especially since Vancouver looks like anywhere: it's a generic, modern-postmodern global place. But it's still not a real city in the sense of true creativity and economic dynamism -- yet. It's not L.A. or New York."

Vancouver, as Gill and others told me, began as a real-estate venture in the 1880s once the Canadian Pacific Railway was in place, and it is still very much a boom-and-bust town, floating now on a real-estate bubble created by the Hong Kong Chinese, who in the 1980s and 1990s bought \$2 billion worth of local real estate. In addition to real estate and the money that immigration brings -- on average, each Asian immigrant will, over a lifetime, pay \$30,000 more in taxes than he or she will use in the form of social services -- there are the Hollywood-run movie industry, a cruise-ship industry, and North America's closest air and sea links to Asia. Vancouver is one of the largest bulk-shipping ports on the continent, shipping out coal, sulfur, potash, natural gas, wheat, and timber products. But this economy, powered by real estate and natural resources, lacks the self-sustaining entrepreneurial and creative spirit of Seattle or Portland, San Francisco or Los Angeles. There are relatively few software and multimedia companies here, for instance. Most are scared away by the high taxes necessary to support the social-welfare system.

The frontier, though, has always produced more commerce and trade than books and art. "The distinctive element of the West Coast, from Alaska to Baja, is newness," Gill told me. "Many of these places have been built not to last. There are streets in my neighborhood that have been three different things in my lifetime. At the moment the element of newness has to do with race. Interracialness is walking down the street, arm in arm. Without the Asians we'd be a narrow-minded English town. In Portland they look to Vancouver to see the outer, Pacific world -- not to California or even to Seattle." Asians "are in the process of re-WASPIng us," Gill explained. "Through their driven work ethic they are allowing us to rediscover our Calvinistic WASP roots. In the twenty-first century hundreds of millions of Chinese and other Asians will become middle-class, tying themselves closer to North

America. That will change Vancouver and the Pacific Northwest more than any development in North America itself."

GORDON Price, a member of the Vancouver City Council, picked up on that idea when we met in his apartment, in Vancouver's West End. "The Asian-British -- that is to say, Asian-WASP -- cultural mix," he told me, "is the most potent in the history of capitalism," notwithstanding the current Asian economic turmoil that has followed decades of economic growth. "Hong Kong and Singapore have represented the combination of British engineering, accounting, honest bureaucracy, and meritocratic government with Asian economic aggression. And it will work its magic here." Here we may be seeing something else, too: the erotization of race. As one Vancouverite told me, a walk down the street to see who's holding hands will show that whites find Asians, particularly Asian women, highly desirable.

Related link:

- [Vancouver City Library.](#)

A virtual tour of the Moshe Safdie-designed building.

Price took me to the city library, a multi-story maze of concrete and glass designed by the world-renowned Israeli-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie. From nearby designer shops and espresso cafés one can look into the library and see people studying. Many of them are Asian. "Vancouver is attracting the young of the world's most dynamic middlemen minorities," Price told me. "If this happens across North America, the continent will rule the world's economy. Look at these Asian kids -- many of them are sent here to study by their families. For them, Vancouver must be like Paris in the twenties -- an earlier, modern capitalist culture, compared with the overnight glitz of the rest of the Pacific Rim."

What struck me was the urbanity, the roar of many conversations, and the crowded cafés and walkways. Safdie's glass-wall design, which encourages people to look at one another, contributes to this, but the library seems to celebrate what is apparent everywhere in the city. Vancouver is a rebuke to Orange County, downtown St. Louis, and most other places in the United States, where the automobile rules and often the only people on sidewalk benches are homeless. The sea and the mountains and the international border prevent sprawl, and the Canadian social-welfare system prevents widespread poverty. The other part of the explanation for Vancouver's urbanity is a unified elite of investors and urban planners.

Related link:

- [City Plan](#)

The City of Vancouver's city planning program,

Paraphrasing Jane Jacobs, the classic writer on urbanism, Price told me, "People have confused overcrowding with high density. High density is actually desirable, because it means lively, safe, convenient, and interesting places in which to live." From 1956 to 1972 Price's West End

which addresses transportation, arts, housing, and community services.

neighborhood, for example, which had been overcrowded, transformed itself into a high-density area. Its population increased by about half, and the number of apartments quintupled: spacious one-bedroom apartments replaced teeming tenements. The West End now has the liveliness and sophisticated feel of Manhattan's Upper West Side. The ostensible reason for the neighborhood's success is that big businessmen took risks and built apartment blocks, while small tradesmen opened shops. Hong Kong Chinese culture, comfortable with high density, helped too. But business and culture operated within a framework of deliberate planning choices. In the United States in 1956, the same year that the West End was rezoned for taller apartment buildings, President Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, which created the interstates. Consultants from Los Angeles advised Vancouver to build a freeway-and-tunnel system through the city. Vancouver citizens rejected that advice. The nineteenth-century grid pattern of narrow streets laid down by British engineers remained intact, and parks and benches, a profusion of cafés, and an explosion of tall residential buildings all followed.

"The automobile is the perfect metaphor for pure democracy," Warren Gill told me, "and pure individual freedom just does not work in an urban setting. The more urban the environment, the more controls you will need to make it work. Imagine how much more vibrant and crime-free Washington, D.C., would be with more planning but without the Beltway. Imagine how if Washington had prohibited a beltway, it would have had to build a whole new layer of public transport within the city, keeping many more people on the streets at all hours."

Vancouver, of course, is not perfect. More and more affluence on display means more iron bars, break-ins, and private security. "You're in a gated community right now, though it doesn't look like one," Price told me, referring to the electronic entry system of his West End apartment block. "Much of North America, metaphorically speaking, is becoming a privatized, gated community where the only urban reality that many well-off kids see is through the sensationalism of local TV news."

Still, Vancouver has something special -- a cohesiveness evinced by the never-empty streets and the interracial couples. People would fight for this, I thought. No one would fight for Orange County. Put another way, an America of Orange Counties might for a time be a thriving continental archipelago of rising real-estate values, but without the spirit of patriotism that grows out of communal affection.

ALAN F.J. Artibise is the founder of the Cascadia Planning Group, an organization that assumes, without proclaiming it, the eventual breakup of Canada. Artibise, who is from Canada's heartland province of Manitoba, is a former president of the Association for Canadian Studies and a planning professor at the University of British Columbia. He has served on numerous planning commissions. His short gray hair is receding, and his voice is soft. His expensively furnished office overlooks the harbor. There is nothing radical or even vaguely counterestablishment about him.

For years "Cascadia," formerly a geographic term for the Cascade Mountain region stretching from central Oregon to British Columbia, has been a trendy political concept in the Pacific Northwest. A 1975 novel, *Ecotopia*, by Ernest Callenbach, envisioned an independent nation in the Pacific Northwest; it has sold 650,000 copies. Cascadia is united by its wet, rather drowsy climate, which may account in part for the profusion of coffee bars and bookstores, and its unique ecology -- a temperate rain forest boasting some of the world's largest firs, cedars, spruces, and hemlocks. Temperate rain forests are found only in slivers of coastal terrain in Japan, Chile, Scandinavia, New Zealand, and a few other places. In 1989 sixty legislators from both sides of the border formed the Pacific Northwest Economic Region; business leaders from both sides formed a group called Pacific Corridor Enterprise. More organizations, including Artibise's, followed.

What has emerged is nothing less than a strategic alliance of the business elite from Portland to Vancouver along "Portcouver," an urban corridor linked by the "I-5 Main Street" (Interstate 5 and Highway 99) and eventually to be connected by high-speed rail. (Passenger trains between Eugene, Oregon, and Vancouver already operate at 90 percent of capacity.) Cascadia would constitute a giant high-tech trading bloc, with major bulk-shipping ports in Portland and Vancouver and a container-shipping port in the Seattle-Tacoma area. Artibise said, "Cascadia is more talked about in Oregon and Washington than it is here. Because of the fragility of the Canadian federation, people are more sensitive on this side of the border -- they know how possible Cascadia really is. If Quebec goes, all it would take is one skilled politician to take us out of the federation. It could happen very quickly. Though they rarely admit it, many British Columbians would probably be relieved if Quebec seceded." An unnerving one in three Canadians favors the use of force to seize Quebec's English and Native areas should the province leave. "All my

students have been to Seattle and Portland, but never to Toronto," Artibise told me. "However, more sovereignty for British Columbia is not the answer. The province does even less for Vancouver than Ottawa does."

Portland: Orange County North?

PORTLAND has perhaps the most architecturally pleasing and meticulously planned downtown of any major city in the United States. The city has been lionized by liberal national magazines, while its Metro 2040 Plan -- designed to extend a vital city center and prevent sprawl -- has been attacked by conservative free-marketeers. In three visits to Portland I realized that although the view of liberal urban planners is the wiser one here, the conservative vision of unlimited growth is likely to triumph almost everywhere else on the continent. Beyond mere good design, culture and geography have made the cities of the Pacific Northwest more exceptional than local planners admit.

From the archives:

- ["How Portland Does It," by Philip Langdon \(November, 1992\)](#)

A city that protects its thriving, civil core.

Related links:

- [Portland: A Brief History](#)

Posted by the Portland, Oregon Visitors Association.

- ["Portland Metropolitan Area Core Values"](#)

"Successful regions will be those best able to merge people, prosperity, and place into an interlinked strategy for stewardship and development." A 1996 essay by Ethan Seltzer.

With its neat trolley lanes, geometric parks, rustic flowerpots beside polymer-and-glass buildings, crowded sidewalk benches, and cafés with modish awnings that hang from sandblasted stone and marble façades, Portland exudes a stagy perfection. "View corridors" regulated by municipal ordinances keep new construction from blocking the vistas from downtown of the Cascades and, in particular, Mount Hood. People speak in clipped accents similar to those in British Columbia. I even saw them wait in single file to cross the street at red lights. Eighty-nine percent of the population in the metro area is white: the percentage of minorities is less than half the national average, though the percentage of Asians is more than 1.5 times the national average. Portland -- like Minneapolis, to which it is often compared -- has the political and cultural atmosphere of a Scandinavian country, where almost everyone shares a background and values, and trusts the centralizing and controlling force of local government to preserve these things.

Not only was Portland, with its Florentine and Gothic façades, built before the car, unlike most of Los Angeles, but it was built even before the arrival of the transcontinental railroad. Abutting the city on three sides, the natural environment of mountains and rivers is ever-present in Portland and essential to its economy. Maintaining this pristine landscape is politically acceptable. Carl Abbott, an urban-affairs expert, described the city's liberal environmental politics as "status quo conservatism," because it seeks to preserve the past rather than create a future.

- **Welcome to Metro**

The Web site of the Portland regional government.

- **The Portland Growth Management Services Department**

"The Growth Management Services Department provides planning services and land-use information to local governments, policy makers and citizens of the region so that we can maintain our livability while planning for the next 50 years of growth."

Ethan Seltzer, the director of the [Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies](#), told me, "The whole point of our development plan is not to screw up our pastoral landscape, which is central to local history and culture. We seek a mythic, Native adaptation to place. The Natives burned the fields in the Willamette Valley once a year to keep the forest from encroaching; we must do something analogous to keep the suburbs from encroaching any more on the natural environment. And the only way to preserve the Cascade landscape while making economic use of it is to shift the economy further from agriculture and logging to high tech."

The Cascade landscape keeps Portland's new high-tech economy competitive, by providing cheap Columbia River water power for washing silicon, and the natural beauty attracts people with university degrees. High-tech products have already surpassed timber as Oregon's chief export. Twenty percent of Portland's economy is based on foreign trade, and that figure, along with high-tech production and the population of the metropolitan area, is expected to rise dramatically. By 2010 the four-county region that includes Portland and a portion of Washington just over the Columbia River will have some 1.9 million inhabitants, whereas last year it had 1.6 million.

The policy mechanism by which this rapid population growth can be accommodated is the "urban growth boundary," which delineates a belt around the metropolitan area and ultimately forces developers inside it to build higher-density neighborhoods, as in Vancouver's West End. Such a plan requires a regional government. "To preserve the environment," Seltzer told me, "we are making a transition away from city hall toward the urban region. In any case, very few urbanites in North America live their lives in one jurisdiction anymore. They live in one municipality and work in another; it's especially true with two-career couples."

From the archives:

- **"Downsizing Cities," by Witold Rybczynsky (October, 1995)**

To make cities work better, make them smaller.

This is another reason why, although the urban federation may be the future, traditional cities are fading. Manhattan, the twentieth century's premier urban location, has in recent years generated relatively few new businesses despite an impressive drop in crime and a popular Republican mayor, Rudolph Giuliani. Corporations appear to prefer post-urban pods like western Omaha. It is unclear whether Manhattan has made an authentic comeback as a twenty-first-century global meeting place or, in the words of one historian, is experiencing a beautiful Venetian sunset.

Related link:

- **Worker Travel**

But the fading of the traditional city is not necessarily a social disaster, since all it may mean eventually is that

Patterns

"The increasing mobility of workers in the west coast has changed the relationship of rural residents to the land, forged new types of linkages between rural and urban areas, and altered the way we view regional economies."

(Demographic maps posted by Inforain: a Bioregional Information System for the North American Rainforest Coast).

instead of one downtown there will be many within a sprawling urban region, each performing the same socially unifying functions as the old downtowns. Even the Orange County real-estate expert Dennis Macheski said that despite our increasing ability to work at home by means of the computer, most people will want social venues close by. It is our very humanity -- our need for others -- that will help us through these troubling transitions. Denver, for instance, which I recently visited, now has three thriving downtowns -- Cherry Creek, "LoDo," and downtown Denver -- as it transforms itself into an urban confederation.

Seltzer and others told me that even if [Metro 2040](#) succeeds -- even if suburban sprawl in the Willamette Valley, to the south, is contained, and well-educated migrants move into high-density townhouses and "bungarows" -- Portland will change dramatically in other ways. "The early settlers here re-created the New England village," Seltzer explained. "Since then we've been good at space arrangement and streetscapes. Our next challenge is to get along with each other." The white population is aging, and twenty years hence Portland will be like greater L.A. in terms of ethnicity.

The Pacific Northwest is, statistically, one of the last Caucasian bastions in the United States. Even the city of Seattle, which in 1993 elected a black mayor, Norm Rice, for a second term, has a minority population of only 15 percent -- well below the national average of 25 percent. Washington and Oregon have among the lowest percentages of African-Americans in the country (3.1 percent and 1.6 percent of the population, respectively). Racism has a long history in Oregon. The state banned black immigration in 1849, to avoid the slavery question, and real-estate agents redlined the northeastern part of Portland after the Second World War, to keep blacks away from well-off whites. Given the emphasis on high tech, what is likely to happen -- and what people here admit only reluctantly -- is that few blacks will migrate to the Pacific Northwest but many Asians will. In effect, economic factors will enforce racial segregation, nudging Seattle and Portland in Vancouver's direction as they trade more with the Pacific Rim.

But although Portland will become more Asian, its urban layout will come to more closely resemble that of Orange County, as Portland grows because of the semiconductor boom, and decentralized workplaces and production centers increase the role of the car. Moreover, a recent statewide tax revolt may indicate what Metro 2040 can and cannot spend to ensure aesthetic zoning. The revolt also

widened the chasm between a generally conservative state and a liberal urban-area federation in the making. Similarly, the distance between Portland and Washington, D.C., continues to grow, as is made clear by vocal criticism of Department of Housing and Urban Development regulations -- "designed for East Coast cities," in the words of a local expert, and "forced on us."

As I contemplated the future of Cascadia, I recalled once more that during the War of 1812, New England debated seceding from the United States. Future secessions of regions and post-urban pods will be more likely to succeed, because they won't have to be acknowledged. Our subtle new regionalism will be largely invisible. Meanwhile, the two forms of urban confederation under this refined continental imperialism -- the Portland form and the Orange County form -- will compete for ascendancy. Hybrid forms will emerge, perhaps even within Portland and Orange County themselves, but the Orange County model will dominate.

As a number of experts told me, we cannot ultimately control these social and economic forces. The whole New World -- all of the United States, certainly -- has been one big subdivision marketed for most of our history to Europeans. American cities have been built and humanized not by idealists but by tacky carpetbaggers and get-rich-quick guys. The twist has been that in some places, like Portland, this greed has had to conform to existing cultural expectations. In many other places in America the communal culture is too thin for that.

Comparing the United States to Rome, Henry Adams wrote in 1906, "The climax of empire could be seen approaching, year after year, as though Sulla were a President or McKinley a Consul. Nothing annoyed Americans more than to be told this simple and obvious -- in no way unpleasant -- truth." Perhaps Adams was wrong only in his timing; the climax may come sometime in the early twenty-first century, a minor detail in the long span of history. Adams's belief that the end of American empire was "in no way unpleasant" dovetails with the gist of what people told me in my travels, from Rick Reiff, the gregarious journalistic booster of Orange County, to Ethan Seltzer, who wants to preserve the New England qualities of Portland. They all believe that the federal power structure is waning. The massive ministry buildings of Washington, D.C., with their oxen armies of bureaucrats, are the products of the Industrial Age, when American society reached a level of sheer size and complexity that demanded such institutions. This leaden federal colossus must somehow slowly evolve into a new, light-frame

structure of mere imperial oversight -- for the sake of defense, conservation, and the rationing of water and other natural resources. The evolution may allow for a political silver age, though not another golden one.

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Robert D. Kaplan is a contributing editor of *The Atlantic*. His article in this issue will appear, in somewhat different form, in his new book, *An Empire Wilderness: Travels Into America's Future*, to be published by Random House in late summer.

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