DOWNTOWN LIVING: FOR FAMILIES?
The Vancouver, BC Urban Livability Experience and Lessons for Other Cities

by

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ABSTRACT

Across North America, downtowns are experiencing revitalization and population growth, as “urban pioneers” are making their homes in city centers. While downtowns are typically thought of as places for empty nesters and young, single professionals, some North American cities are experiencing recent growth in families moving downtown, despite its tradeoffs, and others are working to attract families with children to their downtowns. With an increasing number of families living in central city neighborhoods, cities are presented with unique opportunities and challenges. Initiatives to make cities more family-friendly for residents of all backgrounds and income levels will help attract and retain families downtown, as well as contribute to healthy, thriving cities overall.

Using Vancouver, BC as a case study, this thesis explores urban livability in general and with specific reference to Vancouver’s family-oriented downtown as one component of livability. Vancouver is consistently ranked as one of the world’s most livable cities and has been a pioneer city in embracing family-friendly urban living, beginning its efforts several decades ago, while many other cities have only recently begun to address issues of livability. This thesis investigates how Vancouver has accommodated families living downtown and what elements have contributed to its world-renowned status as a model city. However, the story of this perceived “urban utopia” is not complete without consideration of the dilemmas that have come hand-in-hand with Vancouver’s success, such as increasing housing prices that are unaffordable to many. These challenges reveal potential implications for other cities hoping to emulate the “Vancouver Model.” Lessons learned consider under what circumstances the elements attributable to Vancouver’s “success” are applicable and realizable in other cities in North America, with a focus on Seattle, WA and Portland, OR. Recommendations are offered for both how Vancouver can improve and other cities can create more family-friendly urban environments, while avoiding the pitfalls that have come with Vancouver’s success. As the case of Vancouver has demonstrated, downtown living is a complex issue and perceived successes can create powerful externalities that may diminish the city’s achievements in the long-term if challenges are not properly addressed.

Thesis Supervisor: Langley Keyes, Ford Professor of City and Regional Planning

Thesis Reader: Peter Roth, Lecturer & President of New Atlantic Development Corporation
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Downtowns are ever-changing places. Their functions, their boundaries and their very characters have been evolving in the postwar period. They are like complicated jigsaw puzzles with players (urban leaders) fitting the pieces together slowly. Just as assemblers first frame a puzzle and then fill in the center, city leaders have provided infrastructure outlines—streets or street improvements, schools, redeveloped river edges, improved open space—and now are adding other parts. Downtown living is one of these (Birch, 2002).

1.1 THESIS STRUCTURE

This introductory chapter begins with definitions of the terms downtown and urban livability (as they are used in this thesis), a brief overview of the emerging central city comeback, the general appeals of urban living, and demographic trends, and concludes with an introduction to family-friendly downtowns with Vancouver, British Columbia (BC) as a case study to set the context for the remaining chapters. The research methodology used to collect data for this thesis is also summarized at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 2 delves into more detail about issues specifically related to family-friendly cities, explaining why cities should focus on families (i.e., the benefits), the needs of families with children living in the city (i.e., how to accommodate them), and the range of issues to consider when promoting urban family living. This chapter (and thesis) is more about the basic planning principles of child-friendly cities, specifically in the Pacific Northwest, rather than an elaboration about child welfare in central cities, poverty-related social problems, social services and welfare reform, international children’s rights agendas (e.g., UNICEF), and other related issues, which are discussed in great detail in many other publications.

The following three chapters tell the story of Vancouver. Chapter 3 provides a background overview of Canada and Vancouver, the city’s planning history and innovations, and the current local housing market, as well as an overview of housing policy and finance in the overall Canadian context. Next, Chapter 4 discusses the internationally known “success”
story of Vancouver as a model for family-friendly urban living, describing the elements that have contributed to its praise for urban livability. Following this narrative of the circumstances and strategies that have built a foundation for Vancouver to excel at ideal urban planning principles, Chapter 5 attempts to tell the other side of the Vancouver story, addressing its challenges, how it may have become a victim of its own success, and areas in need of improvement.

Moving to this case study’s relevance for other cities, Chapter 6 summarizes lessons learned from Vancouver and analyzes under what circumstances the elements attributable to Vancouver’s success are applicable and realizable in other cities in North America (particularly in the Pacific Northwest with a focus on Seattle and Portland as case studies). Chapter 6 also offers recommendations for both how Vancouver can improve and how other cities can create more family-friendly urban environments, while avoiding the pitfalls and mitigating the negative externalities that have come with Vancouver’s success.

Finally, this thesis concludes with a brief summary of the main issues addressed in preceding chapters, larger implications of sustainable urban living, and areas for further research.

1.2 DEFINING DOWNTOWN AND URBAN LIVABILITY

As downtown living is the central subject of this thesis, the terms downtown and urban livability, as they are used here, warrant definition. When referring to downtown in this thesis, substitute terms such as central city, city center, and city core are often used for variety, but they are all intended to be synonymous.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census does not officially define downtown. What constitutes downtown varies from city to city, but it is typically the oldest, most established part of a city (Sohmer & Lang, 2001). Since a standardized definition is unavailable for all cities, the referenced cities and studies in this thesis formulated their demographic numbers for downtown areas based on how city officials for each city individually define the geographic boundaries of their downtowns. Furthermore, Birch (2002) explains:
Although most people think they understand what downtown is, there is no single socioeconomic meaning or geographical definition for the term. While U.S. downtowns share several common characteristics (a central business district at the core, access to substantial transportation networks, a supply of high-density buildings, expensive land), they differ dramatically in their age, size, functions, contents and character. Furthermore, downtowns are in a state of flux as their boundaries and contents are changing. Tracking downtown boundaries over time reveals that in almost all the cities in the sample, the downtowns of today are remarkably different in size (measured in the number of census tracts included) than they were 20 years ago. Downtowns that are incorporating residences are also attracting more community-serving facilities, such as supermarkets or cineplexes that used to be in neighborhoods.

Thus, there is a shifting meaning of downtown unique to each city that depends on its individual characteristics, and many downtowns are expanding with increased density and growth. City officials typically just count the immediate city core in their definition, whereas residents and others may include surrounding central city neighborhoods when referring to downtown. Some downtowns may be delineated by their geographical constraints, while others have flexible boundaries and are more defined by their density, urban form, and uses.

For example, Vancouver’s downtown location on a peninsula make its geographic boundaries relatively clear, yet there are still varying definitions of what actually constitutes downtown Vancouver. Downtown Vancouver is typically defined as the southeastern portion of the peninsula in the north-central part of Vancouver proper (see Figure 1 below). The downtown core is generally considered as geographically bounded by Burrard Inlet to the north, Stanley Park and the West End to the west, False Creek to the south, and the Downtown Eastside to the east. While the City of Vancouver formally defines the West End and Stanley Park as separate neighborhoods from the core, most people consider the full downtown peninsula as downtown Vancouver. In addition to the financial, central business, entertainment, and Granville Mall districts, downtown Vancouver neighborhoods include Yaletown, False Creek North, Coal Harbor, Downtown South, Gastown, Crosstown, Japantown, Koreatown, and Chinatown.
**Figure 1: Vancouver Neighborhood Map Showing Location of Downtown Vancouver**

Source: City of Vancouver Community Web Pages, 2008

**Figure 2: Detailed Downtown Vancouver Map**

Source: Discover Vancouver, 2007
Urban livability is also a complex concept and refers to the variety of characteristics that contribute to an urban community’s overall quality of life. This term has varying definitions based on the unique features – physical, historical, cultural, and social – and objectives of each city. Quality of life generally includes a wide range of elements such as sustainability, vibrancy, safety, affordability, quality housing, cultural vitality, accessibility to opportunities and resources, amenities that enrich residents’ lives, healthiness, cleanliness, a sense of place, human-scale urban design, and a balanced mix of uses, which together determine the desirability and livability of a particular urban community. The American Institute of Architects (2008) outlines its “10 Principles for Livable Communities” as:

1. **Design on a Human Scale**
   Compact, pedestrian-friendly communities allow residents to walk to shops, services, cultural resources, and jobs and can reduce traffic congestion and benefit people’s health.

2. **Provide Choices**
   People want variety in housing, shopping, recreation, transportation, and employment. Variety creates lively neighborhoods and accommodates residents in different stages of their lives.

3. **Encourage Mixed-Use Development**
   Integrating different land uses and varied building types creates vibrant, pedestrian-friendly and diverse communities.

4. **Preserve Urban Centers**
   Restoring, revitalizing, and infilling urban centers takes advantage of existing streets, services and buildings and avoids the need for new infrastructure. This helps to curb sprawl and promote stability for city neighborhoods.

5. **Vary Transportation Options**
   Giving people the option of walking, biking and using public transit, in addition to driving, reduces traffic congestion, protects the environment and encourages physical activity.

6. **Build Vibrant Public Spaces**
   Citizens need welcoming, well-defined public places to stimulate face-to-face interaction, collectively celebrate and mourn, encourage civic participation, admire public art, and gather for public events.

7. **Create a Neighborhood Identity**
   A “sense of place” gives neighborhoods a unique character, enhances the walking environment, and creates pride in the community.
8. **Protect Environmental Resources**  
A well-designed balance of nature and development preserves natural systems, protects waterways from pollution, reduces air pollution, and protects property values.

9. **Conserve Landscapes**  
Open space, farms, and wildlife habitat are essential for environmental, recreational, and cultural reasons.

10. **Design Matters**  
Design excellence is the foundation of successful and healthy communities.

Cities across North America have become increasingly concerned with issues of livability. Many urban leaders and citizens are working to address the quality of life in their communities and how they can preserve or improve it. Full community participation in this decision-making process by all stakeholders and integrated planning will help improve the livability of these cities. Furthermore, “Livability is nurtured by civic effort and...a willingness to work together with a problem solving mentality and the realization that livability is a life’s work. Livability is never completely reached and thus it is a goal every decade to redefine, reposition, and reinvent how to work together to make a community better for all of its citizens” (America's Most Livable Communities, n.d.). This thesis discusses the considerations of urban livability and provides case studies to illustrate how Cascadia region cities are or are not implementing the various elements of urban livability, specifically with respect to family-friendly downtown living, and their effectiveness.

### 1.3 **Recent Downtown Revitalization and Growth Across North America**

Across North America, downtowns are experiencing revitalization and population growth. This resurgence may be the beginning reversal of the decline of central city neighborhoods following World War II. The exodus to the suburbs and urban sprawl during the second half of the twentieth century have re-defined our landscape, commuting patterns, lifestyles, and environmental impacts, leaving many city cores and urban public goods such as parks and schools to decay. Federal government attempts to address ensuing declining downtown areas and curtail flight, such as urban renewal, largely failed. Ironically,
“this movement accelerated in the postwar period as favorable tax and mortgage insurance practices and massive federal investment in the nation’s interstate highway system helped fuel the flight to suburbs” (Birch, 2005). However, this trend is reversing for a variety of reasons and “urban pioneers” are making their homes in city centers. As Sohmer and Lang (2001) put it, downtown is “on the rebound.”

Several trends are influencing the evolution of this new period of growth in downtowns. As baby boomers age, the population of empty nesters continues to grow and their lifestyles without children often favor downtown. Sohmer and Lang (2001) explain this theory: “Besides having more leisure time to dine out and take part in cultural activities (museums, concerts), empty nesters often choose to downsize their housing – trading in the lawn care and upkeep of a large home for the convenience of living in a downtown condominium.” The other main population driving this trend is young professionals who have not yet started families. “This group – often consumers of downtown-friendly amenities such as coffeehouses and nightclubs – are frequently in the market for low-maintenance, urbane housing convenient to work and amenities” (Sohmer & Lang, 2001). The “changing attitudes about what makes hearth and home that arise with each new generation” are significantly impacting their attraction to urban living and changing cities (Blore, 2001). Even some who fit into this generation and are starting families are drawn to the city for all of its vibrancy. As one resident who moved from the city to suburbia after having a child commented, “I felt warehoused in the suburbs” (Blore, 2001). For all of these groups, living downtown offers a lifestyle alternative with easy access to entertainment and other amenities.

Cities are also capitalizing on the historic character of their downtowns and initiating revitalization strategies to attract people and businesses. A key strategy has been residential development, particularly in areas that were historically used for other uses (i.e., commercial and industrial), initiated by both the public and private sectors to draw residents and create vibrant, mixed-use, 24-hour downtowns (Birch, 2005; Fulton, 2004). In turn, the increase in population growth will help inject “life into struggling main streets and business districts” (Birch, 2005) and form a built-in market to attract more business and retail into the central city to support these new residents, thus increasing the tax base and rejuvenating downtown neighborhoods. A cyclical effect ensues whereby “the occupation of vacant, centrally located buildings, the increased presence of people on formerly empty streets, and
investment in supportive commercial activities and amenities help bring market confidence to worn-out-downtowns. New residents then follow, creating a virtuous cycle of economic growth and development to the city as a whole” (Birch, 2005). Moreover, “downtown housing provides visible and tangible evidence or urban vitality that has important psychological and economic impacts” (Birch, 2005). The central location, bustling environment, diversity, cultural activities, variety of architecturally interesting buildings, diverse mix of retail and services, and proximity to public transit, employment, and urban amenities of most downtowns combine to make them a desirable place for those with matching lifestyle preferences to live, as well as work and visit.

While these assets and lifestyle may appeal to many, there are tradeoffs involved with urban living, such as typically more expensive housing costs with less living space per dollar than in the suburbs, less privacy and personal space, school quality, noise, and concerns about safety. However, reduced (or eliminated) vehicle dependency allows urban residents to offset some of the additional housing costs through lower expenses associated with private auto ownership, particularly rising fuel costs, and decrease their commuting time. Using alternative modes of transportation and shortening or eliminating commuting helps benefit the environment and improve quality of life through better air quality and reduced traffic congestion. In addition, urban living reduces sprawl, and “conserves the earth’s resources – energy, materials, land, habitat – and reduces pollution and global warming. Urban development saves taxpayers money by using already existing water, sewage, energy, and road infrastructure” (Sierra Club, 2007). Less residential interior space is offset by having the city as the residents’ extended backyard, where many amenities, entertainment, and recreation facilities are conveniently only a walk away. Safety concerns may be real or perceived, but urban environments afford an opportunity for many neighbors to watch out for each other – the “eyes on the street” phenomenon. These various factors of urban life provide potential for continued population growth.
1.4 Demographic Data

The growth of downtown residents and housing is clear, but still quite modest relative to metropolitan area growth (Birch, 2005). Sohmer and Lang’s (2000) study, “Downtown Rebound,” revealed that while percentages may be high, “the actual numbers of downtown growth are relatively small. The trend of downtown living is still more of a trickle than a rush.” Moreover, downtown residential development is “not likely to counteract the ongoing march to suburbia,” as millions of housing units are still being built in outlying areas (Fulton, 2004). “Far from being a place where everybody goes, downtowns are becoming a niche market where a few people live” (Fulton, 2004). However, any growth in the number of people moving downtown is still important because it helps predict future projected growth, potential spillover effects in surrounding neighborhoods, and the considerations and challenges that urban leaders face in accommodating growth and advancing revitalization objectives.

Birch’s (2005) “Who Lives Downtown” analysis of 44 American cities found that downtown populations grew by 10% during the 1990s, “a marked resurgence following 20 years of overall decline.” She cites additional evidence indicating the continuing and broadening upswing trend of downtown residential living since 2000. Birch (2005) acknowledges that while her analysis indicates that downtown residential development is increasing overall, it is important to consider the significant differences in demographic, market, and social trends in each specific city so that urban leaders “can make investment decisions that best capitalize on their unique assets…to ensure that downtowns reach their potential to become vibrant, healthy places to live and work.”

A preliminary survey, “A Rise in Downtown Living,” conducted by The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy and the Fannie Mae Foundation (1998), also looked at 24 cities across American and found that all of them project their downtown populations to grow by 2010. Some cities particularly stand out: Houston expects its downtown population to quadruple, Cleveland projects a change of 228%, Denver expects a 166% change, and Seattle anticipates over twice as many downtown residents by 2010 (The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy & the Fannie Mae Foundation [The Brookings Institution], 1998). Again, it is important to keep in mind relative versus absolute numbers when reviewing these studies. For example,
Houston’s downtown population was 2,374 in 1998 with a 2010 projection of 9,574, which equals a large 303 percentage change for the relatively small total downtown population, while a larger central city such as Chicago can add over 5 times this absolute change amount (115,341 downtown population in 1998 with a projected downtown population of 152,295 in 2010), yet only have a change of 32% (The Brookings Institution, 1998).

Birch’s (2005) study further finds that the number of downtown households increased 13% in the 1990s. This greater household growth relative to population growth indicates a shift in household composition, with a “proliferation of smaller households of singles, unrelated individuals living together, and childless married couples” (Birch, 2005).

### 1.5 Families Living Downtown

Downtowns are typically thought of as places for empty nesters and young, single professionals, and have historically been dominated by non-family households. Birch’s study confirms this theory and states that between 1970 and 2000, the number of families living downtown decreased 18% and families with children saw an even greater decrease of 27% overall (2005). These shifts resulted in families with children making up only 10% of all downtown households, compared to the predicted higher figures of approximately 30% for cities and 36% for suburbs, as seen in Figure 3 below (Birch, 2005).

However, there is considerable variability in household composition and growth patterns from place to place. In contrast to this overall American city trend of a decline in family households downtown, some North American cities are experiencing recent growth in families moving downtown and others are working to attract families with children to their downtowns. Moreover, services and resources are emerging that specifically cater to urban families such as the websites UrbanBaby and GoCityKids, which offer guides to city activities, parenting advice, and community forums.

This thesis focuses on cities in the Pacific Northwest that are not as traditionally known for downtown living as such bigger cities as New York or San Francisco. In fact, “What we are seeing now, throughout the Puget Sound region, is the beginning of a significant movement that will extend into the next several decades, as more and more people discover the convenience and delights of living downtown” (Hinshaw, 2002).
Furthermore, thousands of families continue to thrive in older American cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago, where urban neighborhoods are common. Perhaps even more common outside of the United States, “People have been raising kids in cities for centuries, and people all over the world live in tiny apartments – there is no ‘right’ location for good parenting. It comes down to living a life true to our own values – and it turns out kids are pretty flexible” (Hinshaw, 2007a).

**Figure 3: Household Composition of Downtowns, Cities, and Suburbs (2000)**

![Figure 1. Household Composition of Downtowns, Cities, and Suburbs, 2000](image)

Source: Analysis of U.S. Census data

Source: Birch, 2005

With an increasing number of families living in downtown neighborhoods, cities are presented with unique opportunities and challenges. Cities that recognize the benefits that families with children bring to their central cores will lead the way toward sustainable urban living. This thesis argues that families represent a key component of successful, healthy, thriving downtowns and quality urban livability, while also posing associated dilemmas. Furthermore, initiatives to make cities more family-friendly for residents of all income levels
and backgrounds will help attract and retain families downtown, as well as strengthen and revitalize cities overall.

1.6 **FAMILY-FRIENDLY URBAN LIVING IN VANCOUVER, BC**

Using Vancouver, BC as a case study, this thesis explores urban livability in general and with specific reference to the city’s family-oriented downtown. With its cosmopolitan feel; beautiful, natural setting; and progressive planning initiatives, it is no wonder why people find Vancouver so appealing and consistently rank it as one of the world’s most livable cities. Baker (2007b) describes the city as Canada’s version of San Francisco. Vancouver has been a pioneer city in embracing family-friendly urban living, beginning its efforts over a few decades ago, while many other cities have only recently begun to address issues of livability. In fact, “while cities in the United States struggle to lure as many as 5 percent of their residents into downtown living – and some are glad to have 2 or 3 percent – Vancouver is at nearly 20 percent and gaining” (Peralta, 2006).

This thesis investigates how Vancouver has accommodated families living downtown and what elements have contributed to its world-renowned status as a model city. To discover why and how Vancouver “works,” several interrelated factors are examined such as strong leadership, political will, vision, stakeholder collaboration, innovative policies and planning, historical and cultural context, economic and market context, and quality urban design. However, the story of this perceived “urban utopia” is not complete without consideration of the dilemmas that have come hand-in-hand with Vancouver’s success. Chapters 5 and 6 address these issues and paradoxes to reveal the costs of the city’s success; the extent to which these externalities may diminish the achieved planning objectives, associated beneficial impacts, and desirable qualities of the city; and potential implications for other cities hoping to emulate the “Vancouver Model.”
1.7 Thesis Methodology

The research methodology to collect data for this thesis included a literature review, interviews, and firsthand observation of the urban environment. The literature review utilized various sources including books, scholarly articles, professional reports, newspaper and magazine articles, government documents (e.g., plans, policy memos, and regulatory codes), websites, demographic and other statistical data, conference presentations and panel discussions, video documentaries, and radio shows. The interview process engaged urban leaders, local government officials, planners, professors, for-profit and not-for-profit developers, marketing agents, community center staff, and residents, as listed below in Table 1. These interviewees were identified and contacted from literature, academic, and
professional references. For those who did not give permission to use their identity information, confidentiality and/or anonymity is assured in this thesis. In January 2008, I had the opportunity to visit Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland to conduct these interviews and observe the cities and downtown living firsthand.

Table 1: Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title/Department</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Interview Date and Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Resident and parent</td>
<td>Concord Pacific Place</td>
<td>January 9, 2008 Vancouver, BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Social Planner</td>
<td>City of Vancouver</td>
<td>January 10, 2008 Vancouver, BC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Larry Beasley</td>
<td>a) Founding Principal</td>
<td>a) Beasley &amp; Associates, Planning Inc.</td>
<td>January 9, 2008 Vancouver, BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Distinguished Practice Professor</td>
<td>b) University of British Columbia</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) former Co-Director of Planning</td>
<td>c) City of Vancouver</td>
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<tr>
<td>Troy Doss</td>
<td>Senior Planner</td>
<td>City of Portland</td>
<td>January 4, 2008 Portland, OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Gates</td>
<td>Architectural Fellow</td>
<td>Central City Concern</td>
<td>January 16, 2008 Portland, OR</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gary Johnson</td>
<td>City Center Coordinator</td>
<td>City of Seattle</td>
<td>January 14, 2008 Seattle, WA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ann McAfee</td>
<td>a) Principal</td>
<td>a) City Choices Consulting</td>
<td>January 11, 2008 Vancouver, BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Adjunct Professor</td>
<td>b) University of British Columbia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c) former Co-Director of Planning</td>
<td>c) City of Vancouver</td>
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<tr>
<td>Susan Miller</td>
<td>Vice President of Project Development</td>
<td>Hoyt Street Properties</td>
<td>January 16, 2008 Portland, OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon Price</td>
<td>a) Director</td>
<td>a) City Program at Simon Fraser University</td>
<td>January 8, 2008 Vancouver, BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Adjunct Professor</td>
<td>b) University of British Columbia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c) former City Councillor</td>
<td>c) City of Vancouver</td>
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<tr>
<td>Several staff members</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Concord Pacific Presentation Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Several staff members</td>
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<td>January 14, 2008 Seattle, WA</td>
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<td>Several staff members</td>
<td>Recreation Services</td>
<td>Roundhouse Community Arts &amp; Recreation Centre</td>
<td>January 9, 2008 Vancouver, BC</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 2: FAMILY-FRIENDLY CITIES

2.1 DEFINING FAMILY AND FAMILY-FRIENDLY

It is important to define how the terms *family* and *family-friendly* are used in this thesis. One of the key factors that makes desirable cities vibrant is the great diversity of people living there, along with the associated mix of cultures and cultural influence. Therefore, recognizing and embracing all forms of family composition and lifestyles, including single-headed households, are vital to sustaining and developing dynamic cities.

This thesis will concentrate on *family* meaning the inclusion of children of all ages, whether raised in “traditional” households (heterosexual, two-parent-headed) or “non-traditional” households (all other forms). The type of household bears little impact on the benefits of youth presence in central cities, though it may affect the associated challenges (e.g., need for additional services). Furthermore, while not discussed in length here, it is argued that diversity of household type enhances the vitality of cities and urban living. Household composition also varies over time, creating challenges as families evolve and have changing needs (e.g., economic, spatial, educational, and recreational). Recognizing and addressing these changing dynamics are key to keeping families downtown throughout their various life stages.

*Family-friendly* refers to all of the things that support and enhance the lives and well-being of families with children living downtown. These assets and the presence of youth also provide broader benefits for all residents. Family-friendly components range from individual dwelling unit features to accessible, affordable opportunities for urban recreation and education to necessary infrastructure and services. In a presentation discussing the results of the recent “Planning Family Friendly Communities Survey” at the American Planning Association National Planning Conference, Israel and Warner (2008) describe family-friendly communities as “communities where families enjoy:
- Housing at affordable prices
- Child care
- Parks to play in
- Pedestrian pathways
- Quality public schools
- Safe neighborhoods
- And other features that promote family well-being.”

### 2.2 Why Focus on Families in the City?

The literature about this topic provides a variety of reasons for focusing on attracting and retaining families downtown, ranging from economic considerations to urban form. Specifically, the reasons include: economic growth and an important source of tax revenue (which may outweigh additional associated expenditures); increased urban diversity and vitality; increased neighborhood stability, civic involvement, and meaningful connected relationships; reduced urban sprawl and private automobile dependency, as well as other associated negative environmental impacts; child exposure to increased learning opportunities and activities; and family engagement with the urban environment (CEOs for Cities, 2007; City of Seattle Department of Planning and Development [DPD], 2006).

In addition, more consideration has been given to children’s well-being worldwide since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 established the special rights of children and a need for their protection. The convention’s far-reaching 54 articles spell out standards to meet children’s basic needs and expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. Moreover, “In the wake of the 1996 United Nations Habitat II conference, which declared that the well-being of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, actions have been undertaken to improve the quality of life in cities for young people around the world” (Groc, 2007b). In planning family-friendly cities, these rights should be given special consideration, as “they have particular relevance for those responsible for the environments in which children live their lives” (Gleeson & Sipe, 2006).
2.3 **How Families Benefit Cities**

Families have the potential to benefit cities in several ways; the following sections lay out the best case scenarios in which they might do so.

2.3.1 **Economic Growth**

Central cities are typically thought of as places for young, single professionals and empty nesters to live. Many downtown areas have been increasingly attracting talented, young professionals, as downtowns offer a built-in market for employment, business, and entertainment. As described by Kotkin (2007):

For much of the past decade, business recruiters, cities and urban developers have focused on the “young and restless,” the “creative class,” and the so-called “yuspie” – the young urban single professional. Cities, they’ve said, should capture this so-called “dream demographic” if they wish to inhabit the top tiers of the economic food chain and enjoy the fastest and most sustained growth.

While much of the focus has been on attracting the young professional population to up the “cool factor” of cities, Kotkin (2007) goes on to state that this strategy has been less successful in reality than advertised in terms of economic and demographic growth. Migration data has instead indicated that the strongest job growth since 2000 has actually been occurring in regions with the “largest net in-migration of young, educated families ranging from their mid-20s to mid-40s” (Kotkin, 2007). Large cities with entertainment features catering to young urbanites may attract single, educated professionals in the short-term, but they often do not contribute to sustained economic growth.

As a result, several pioneering cities are also realizing the benefits of accommodating families and are taking steps to make downtown neighborhoods more livable and attractive to families. In terms of growth, “Married people with children tend to be both successful and motivated, precisely the people who make economies go. They are twice as likely to be in the top 20% of income earners, according to the Census” (Kotkin, 2007). Accordingly, luring skilled workers to the city for the long-term is facilitated where there are economic opportunities, affordable housing, and family-friendly communities. As Kotkin (2007) further explains, “Family-friendly metropolitan regions have seen the biggest net gains of
professionals, largely because they not only attract workers, but they also retain them through their 30s and 40s.”

However, as couples living in urban neighborhoods begin to have children, many also leave to raise their families in the suburbs, especially once the children reach school age (CEOs for Cities, 2007). Retaining these families is crucial to curb middle class flight and the loss of highly educated parents who are often in the prime of their careers. When these families leave, they take their tax dollars with them, thus contributing to significant economic impacts and lost potential for increased services and amenities for other families who do stay. In addition, families, as a valuable consumer population, significantly contribute to the local economy through the thousands of dollars spent raising children, which also feed back into the system as a source of tax revenue. Youth are also an economic development investment and there is a need to attract and keep educated, skilled, young adults (Warner, 2008).

To sustain stable economic growth in central cities, cities must take steps to not only attract new families, but also accommodate existing families so they do not flee to the suburbs, as is common for couples once they reach their mid-30s and/or start having children. Young, single professionals and empty nesters are not enough to keep downtown economies thriving in the long-term.

2.3.2 Vibrant, Diverse Communities

Families and children contribute to sustainable, healthy, vibrant, diverse communities. They help balance the typical population composition found in most downtowns (see Figure 3 in Chapter 1). Everyone benefits from the features that make spaces child-friendly, as many of these are also desirable to the greater public. All citizens can enjoy such child-friendly assets as quality urban design; lively pedestrian streets and sidewalks; accessible transit; and clean, safe, inviting public spaces (DPD, 2006). The public overall benefits from the diversity of young residents.

Children add a significant dimension to cities’ vibrancy, which is a highly valued quality for families and professionals alike when considering whether to remain in or relocate to downtown neighborhoods. Expressed well by Gavin Newsom, San Francisco’s mayor, in a recent report, “There’s a quality of imagination that’s very important for the spirit and the soul of the city to maintain. Children bring that to a city. A city without children has no
future” (CEOs for Cities, 2007). Children add value to the quality and spirit of life for all residents and visitors. To benefit from the dynamism that couples with kids bring, cities need to make their downtown neighborhoods more family-friendly to attract these residents.

2.3.3 Neighborhood Stability and Civic Engagement

Although difficult concepts to measure, families contribute to neighborhood stability, community life, and civic involvement. The nature of family households makes them less likely to be mobile than single professionals (for example), and thus they contribute to tight-knit, stable social environments and networks. “Communities that retain families throughout their various life phases experience less turnover and are more cohesive as a result” (DPD, 2006). With this stake in their communities, families are more likely to be involved in civic matters. This increased political influence can be used to put pressure on city officials for improved services for families that also benefit the larger community, such as schools, parks, and public safety (CEOs for Cities, 2007). Following their parents’ lead, young adults also have many opportunities to engage in their urban communities and civic life.

2.3.4 Sustainability and Reduced Negative Environmental Impacts

From a broad perspective, encouraging people to live downtown reduces the impact on the regional environment. Parents can set an example for their kids by choosing this lifestyle instead of following the more familiar path to suburbia after deciding to raise a family (Blore, 2001), where single-family houses consume incredible amounts of land in a highly unsustainable manner. Reductions in sprawl, commuting, and use of resources – particularly the large amount of material goods consumed by suburban families (by virtue of this lifestyle) – contribute to a more sustainable future. Pedestrian- and transit-oriented, mixed-use, urban communities provide an alternative lifestyle to suburbia that can have far-reaching benefits for residents, the larger region, and the environment.
2.4 HOW CITIES BENEFIT FAMILIES

2.4.1 Urban Amenities, Opportunities, and Vibrancy

Many urban neighborhoods provide vast opportunities for increased physical, educational, and cultural activities for families. Libraries, museums, recreational facilities, theatres, and other institutions and cultural venues downtown encourage urban exploration beyond what is available in most suburbs. One urban parent affirms, “My son is never sitting around the house, there’s just so much to do. If we’re not going to one of the museums to see the latest exhibit, then it’s the aquarium or planetarium or something else” (CEOs for Cities, 2007). Another family with two young kids living downtown “enjoyed what they found within walking distance: several parks, a cultural center with a kid-friendly science museum and an indoor butterfly garden, a large public library, a permanent amusement park, and a lively public market with street musicians and clowns” (Hinshaw, 2007b). These amenities and the diversity of life in the city facilitate learning beyond the classroom and tend to make children more well-rounded (and thus ideally better contributors to civil society as adults) in terms of their exposure to diverse situations and cultures. Youth are often able to easily access these activities and destinations within their immediate neighborhood by walking or biking, which limits vehicular travel and encourages exercise.

“The element of spontaneity, surprise and fun in a city is wonderful for children,’ said Ms. Clague, a Y.M.C.A. program coordinator. It’s a giant cross section of society” (Baker, 2005). Children benefit from being exposed to a greater variety of lifestyles and people from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds than might be found in more homogeneous suburban neighborhoods. While “many Americans are convinced that children must be raised in a single-family detached house on its own large lot” and have “forgotten about our long-standing heritage of solid urban neighborhoods, where kids grew up healthy and happy, playing in parks, back lots, and on sidewalks,” cities have many amenities to offer families that cannot be found in the suburbs (Hinshaw, 2007b). Downtown residents are attracted to the mixed-use, walkable, diverse, vibrant neighborhoods that offer a sense of place often difficult to find in the suburbs.
2.4.2 Convenience and Additional Time

With most urban amenities in walking distance, living in cities affords families a convenient lifestyle. In addition, for parents who both live and work in the city center, commuting time and automobile dependency are limited by the ability to easily utilize alternative forms of transportation (e.g., walking, bicycling, and public transit), thus increasing convenience and time available to spend with their families. “The appeal of living downtown is the combination of residential, retail and office – it’s the live, work, play…If any of those three fails, all will suffer” (Minnick, 1997). With increasing attention focused on revitalizing city cores, families can benefit from the convenience, choice, and richness that dense, diverse cities offer.

2.5 What do Families with Children Need?

If cities want to attract and retain families to reap the above benefits, urban leaders must consider the needs of families with children in all aspects of planning and decision-making, and make appropriate accommodations to make their cities more family-friendly.

2.5.1 Prior Research

Several reports, articles, presentations, and city initiatives have recently brought this topic to the forefront of urban policy and development, and initiated discussion around related issues in various cities. Cities must understand the needs of families with children, provide essential neighborhood family amenities, accommodate mixed incomes, cultivate diversity, design for families and children, promote strong communities, and advance society toward sustainability (Callender, Dennehy, & Doss, 2007). A range of possibilities and challenges at both the policy and project levels exists to enhance and/or create urban spaces that embrace families.

Overall, creating a good environment can start with the findings from the UNESCO-MOST “Growing Up in Cities Project,” which include the following positive indicators as contributing to the success of cities from a child’s perspective: “social integration, variety of interesting settings, safety and freedom of movement, peer meeting places, cohesive community identity, and green areas” (Gleeson & Sipe, 2006).
As adapted by the City of Portland Bureau of Planning (2007a), Cooper and Sarkissian (1986) also describe some of the basic needs of children as follows:

1. Children need safe, uninhibited outdoor play for their physiological and mental health.

2. Parents need to be able to allow their children outside without constant, close supervision.

3. The environment around children’s homes needs to be safe from traffic, pollution, and unnecessary physical and social hazards.

4. Children should be able to experience the pleasures of finding bugs, picking leaves, smelling flowers, collecting things and so on without their parents or the management harassing them. Through such contact with nature they may develop, among other things, an understanding of basic ecological principles.

5. Children need easy, casual access to other children without a formal invitation to play.

6. Children need places in the communal environment that are undeniably their territories (for example, tree houses, forts, or clubhouses) on wild or un-maintained ground away from public view.

7. Children need to be able to move around their home neighborhoods safely and to take little trips farther and farther from home to gain a sense of independence.

One recent report and continuing study in progress, CEOs for Cities’ “Kids in Cities,” aims to help urban leasers understand, support, and scale the behaviors of pioneering urban families. CEOs for Cities, a bi-partisan, non-profit alliance of U.S. mayors, corporate executives, university presidents, and non-profit civic leaders, works toward a new urban agenda to embrace the role of strengthening cities and urban innovations. Insights from their research will lead to actionable strategies aimed at retaining existing families and attracting new ones. The “Kids in Cities” report identifies the primary concerns of parents about urban living as space, safety, and schools. Experts say that cities have to start with these three vital issues in the planning process, as further described below (CEOs for Cities, 2007). Interviews with parents and urban leaders in several cities across the United States show how each of these concerns have been addressed in various ways.

Table 2 below displays a summary of some of the issues associated with space, safety, and schools in cities, as discovered through CEOs for Cities’ research.
### Table 2: Summary of Parents’ Primary Concerns About Urban Living

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pain point</th>
<th>Workaround</th>
<th>Opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPACE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families in the city have a lack of open private space</td>
<td>Families use multi-purpose general areas</td>
<td>Look for solutions that provide a middle ground between living rooms and parks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most city apartments don’t have the room for children to play inside all day</td>
<td>City parents take their children out of the house to engage in activities.</td>
<td>Children are active and parents are involved in the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City apartments are less able to accommodate large group meetings and parties</td>
<td>Utilize public spaces such as parks, schools and bar/restaurants.</td>
<td>Cities could work to help provide parents with access to public space for meetings and get togethers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited spaces in homes cause clutter and claustrophobia</td>
<td>Parents use kitchen or office as a place for children to play</td>
<td>House could be built with an innovative layout to accommodate kids in a small space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking can be difficult or expensive</td>
<td>Use public transportation/park extra car in “off site” area/Zip car</td>
<td>Transportation that is more family friendly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAFETY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The city has a higher crime rate than the suburbs.</td>
<td>Rely on neighborhood network to help watch children</td>
<td>Cities should help create and strengthen ties within neighborhoods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks are not safe enough for children to go to alone</td>
<td>Hire nanny or establish relationship with other parents to trade off watching children</td>
<td>Create system to provide supervision for children at park.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SCHOOLS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents must actively search and seek out educational options for children</td>
<td>Parents spend more time searching the internet and talking with SMEs.</td>
<td>Necessary information could be collected and a system devised to present its most user-centric way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is difficult for parents to find and comprehend information about school options</td>
<td>Parents rely on word-of-mouth. Contact friends in positions of power. Create ad hoc data bases</td>
<td>Information about schools could be made easier to find and understand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CEOs for Cities, 2007
“Pain points” are areas that cannot be avoided with current configurations or designs. “Workarounds” are options to work with these areas of “pain” within the current context and constraints by mitigating problems and shortcomings of cities. “Opportunities” offer solutions for improving cities beyond what is already available (CEOs for Cities, 2007). Next, the following sections will address these three concerns in more detail, as emphasized by CEOs for Cities, as well as describe additional needs for families in cities. Recommendations to improve these issues are provided in Chapter 6.

2.5.2 Safety

Safety is a concern for all residents in all locations inside and outside the home, but particularly for parents who are trying to protect their children from harm. Many perceive cities as unsafe places. Yet, while “crime rates were much higher in big cities than in suburbs and small towns” for several decades, “crime rates of nearly all sorts have dropped in the cities and increased in the suburbs” in the last decade (Hinshaw, 2007b). In addition, there are varying definitions of safety and risk tolerance, and cities appeal to parents who might be considered “urban pioneers” – “die-hard city lovers…who steadfastly raise their children in the city despite its problems and shortcomings…in order to expose their children to the diversity, vibrancy and culture of the city” (CEOs for Cities, 2007). For urban residents, there is more reliance on the density of neighbors and “eyes on the street” phenomenon to help protect their children, if the urban form is actually conducive to this theory (e.g., high-rise buildings do not necessarily facilitate this interaction). As one urban mother says, “Everybody in our neighborhood knows [my kids]. The store owners, people on the street. I have no problem sending them out on their own because there is always somebody watching them” (CEOs for Cities, 2007).

However, there is also a concern that urban environments provide the opposite effect by making people more individualistic and less aware of those around due to the constant chaos of the city, which may have a numbing effect on people and could hinder the community approach to raising children. A strong, tight-knit community would have to be present to be able to trust that others are watching out for the safety of children in the neighborhood. Parents can also teach children to be more street-smart so they understand how to interact with others and travel around in the city safely. In fact, living in the city may provide children with “a heightened sense of awareness that [adds] to their safety and better
[acclimates] them to the world at an earlier age than their suburban counterparts” (CEOs for Cities, 2007).

2.5.3 Space: Private and Public

Perhaps the most significant difference between living in the city and in the suburbs is the amount of space available per person/household and the associated price per square foot for housing. Most urban housing is in the form of apartments and condos, as well as some townhouses. These types of housing generally offer much less space for residents at higher prices than what is available in the suburbs. Inside, urban residents have to be more creative with housing space configurations, work with fewer and smaller bedrooms and play areas for children, share more space among household members than might be common in suburban homes, and limit storage space needs. Also, there is often no or limited access to private outdoor space, which minimally takes the form of private decks. Yet, at the same time, children living in the city can take advantage of the city as their backyard, extending play areas into nearby public spaces such as parks, neighborhood streets, recreational facilities, and cultural venues. They can spend more time outdoors and in common play areas inside residential buildings that have been designed with families in mind. One of the significant advantages of utilizing common play areas is the opportunity to interact with other children and parents, thus weaving the fabric for tighter communities and social networks.

Family-oriented housing must be affordable to various income levels and be uniquely designed with children in mind. In most large North American cities, demand for high-quality affordable housing generally far exceeds supply, but cities can work toward improving this balance, particularly in strong market periods when resources are abundant. Families also require larger units with at least two bedrooms, more than one bathroom, common areas to congregate inside the unit and within the building, layouts designed for families, and adequate storage space. Market research involving surveys of families interested in living in Portland’s Central City indicates that while the second most important feature (with the first being space) for families is vehicle parking at an ideal ratio of 1.75 spaces per unit, other unit features such as quality of finishes and access to parks are preferred, but “were found to be less important than the basic need for a home large enough to accommodate a family at an affordable price” (Ferrarini & Associates, Inc., 2006). The
combination of providing larger than standard apartments at affordable prices in the city is indeed the challenge facing developers and residents. This dilemma and potential recommendations are described in further detail in Chapter 6.

2.5.4 Schools

For parents with school-age children, schools are generally one of the largest driving considerations in housing location decisions. Parents want to live in neighborhoods with access to quality schools for their children, which can be a challenge when residing downtown. Many cities often have no or poor quality public schools located in central areas. The public schools that may exist may be over-capacity, run-down, and have limited resources to improve their physical building aspects, teaching quality, and educational facilities. As the destination where children spend the majority of their time outside of the home, it is also vital for urban schools to be located close to housing and public amenities in order to successfully attract families. For parents who want their children to attend public schools outside of their neighborhood, they may have to confront problems with the enrollment process, in addition to the transportation challenges of getting there.

The only alternative for urban families may be private schools, which many indeed prefer. However, only some can readily afford the associated tuition and fees, while many others must invest a significant portion of their income or take out loans to afford the cost of private school – not an easy option for lower-income households. The number of charter schools is also increasing in several cities, and these and other non-traditional schools may provide another option for education.

2.5.5 Access to Public Amenities, Cultural Institutions, and Services for All Ages

As previously mentioned and one of the driving factors in deciding whether to remain in or relocate to an urban neighborhood, families value access to nearby public amenities and cultural venues that cater to all ages. Along with schools, residents need parks, pedestrian- and bicycle-oriented pathways, community centers, child care, recreation facilities and services, libraries, museums, performing arts centers, theatres, and other learning and cultural institutions. Access to cultural institutions is one of the primary incentives for living in a downtown environment.
Retail and services that cater to diverse families are also vital. Families need access to childcare providers in the neighborhood, public transit and flex car facilities, medical and health care facilities, social service offices, full service grocery stores/markets with a variety of fresh and healthy food, restaurants, cafés, convenience stores, public restrooms, places of worship, fitness centers, drugstores, pharmacies, dry cleaners, clothing stores, shopping atriums to provide cover from the elements, and other retail facilities.

In addition, having places to accommodate kids of all ages is important to retain families downtown as their children grow older and have changing needs. In particular, while some cities have implemented child-friendly amenities that cater to young children, spaces also need to be explicitly planned for teenagers that are different from those available for younger children. “Young men and women need ‘third places’ as much as adults do – places that are away from both home and school” (Hinshaw, 2007b). While “suburban teenagers often complain that they have no place to go, …denser parts of cities, especially city centers, offer teenagers an abundance of places to spend time” such as “movie theatres, libraries, coffee houses, shopping streets, parks, plazas, all-ages music clubs, and just plain old sidewalks that are in the middle of the action” (Hinshaw, 2007b).

2.5.6 Appropriate Quality Design

In all of the spaces and strategies addressed here, appropriate quality design with families in mind is key. Both public and private, and interior and exterior spaces can add significant value for families and all residents living downtown when well thought out and designed. Families need places of privacy both inside and outside of the home, as well as social environments to foster a sense of community and general well-being (City of Portland Bureau of Planning, 2007a). Family-friendly design encompasses a range of forms and scales, from small details to entire neighborhoods, to add and enhance spaces for families to play, learn, and be safe while taking advantage of the vast amenities of urban living (DPD, 2006).
2.6 CHALLENGES

While the preceding text in this chapter describes many of the benefits of retaining existing families and attracting new families to live in downtown neighborhoods, as well as what families consider when making this decision, several associated challenges remain such as housing affordability for multiple income levels, conducive zoning codes, school and child care availability and quality, funding for public amenities, competition for funding sources, effective transportation, and contextual development to maintain neighborhood character. Meeting all of these challenges and others in a sustainable manner will require strong leadership, collaboration among stakeholders, sufficient resources, and time. Considerations about how to deal with these issues are discussed in greater detail in the recommendations section (6.3) of Chapter 6.

This chapter has focused on family-friendly cities in general – why to promote them and how to make them attractive to families through an understanding of the needs of families. Cities aiming to attract more families to their urban neighborhoods are at different stages of the process. This thesis highlights one city that has been recognized as an international model for family-friendly downtown livability for a number of years: Vancouver, BC. The following chapters delve into greater detail of Vancouver, and this city is used to provide a case study and lessons learned for other cities desiring to increase the attractiveness of their downtown neighborhoods.
CHAPTER 3: THE STORY OF VANCOUVER, BC WITHIN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

3.1 CANADA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Occupying most of North America, Canada shares its land borders with the United States and is the second largest country in the world after Russia. Canada was founded in 1867 as a union of British colonies and gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1982. With Queen Elizabeth II as its head of state, Canada is a federal constitutional monarchy with parliamentary democracy and is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations. Consisting of ten provinces and three territories, Canada is multicultural and bilingual, with both English and French as official languages. The nation has developed economically and technologically in parallel with the United States, and resembles the United States in its level of industrialization, market-oriented economic system, and largely affluent living standards. Canada is rich in natural resources and has the eighth largest economy in the world. The country’s total population is about 33 million with approximately 90% of the population concentrated along the southern part of the country within 100 miles of the United States border, primarily in Canada’s major metropolitan areas of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. Immigration is the primary driver of population growth, although the rate of population growth is slowing (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008; Infoplease.com, 2008).

3.2 BRIEF HISTORY OF VANCOUVER AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Vancouver, first significantly settled in the 1860s by immigrants, is a relatively young coastal city. The Fraser Canyon Gold Rush drew many of these immigrants, particularly from the United States. With the arrival of the transcontinental railway and growth of the Port of Vancouver, Vancouver rapidly developed into a large metropolitan center after its incorporation in 1886.
Vancouver’s population today of approximately 600,000 (more than 2 million in the greater metropolitan area) makes it the largest city in British Columbia and the third largest in Canada (BC Stats, 2007). Figure 5 below shows the population growth of the City of Vancouver and metropolitan area over time.

*Figure 5: Population Growth of Vancouver (1891 – 2007)*

While people of British origin historically made up the largest ethnic group in the city, Vancouver is now also home to a significant Asian population, with Chinese making up the largest visible ethnic group (BC Stats, 2007). An influx of immigrants from Hong Kong in the 1990s and increasing immigrants from mainland China combine to create one of the largest concentrations of Chinese residents in North America. Visible minorities\(^1\) account for 37% of Greater Vancouver’s population, while the remaining 63% includes Whites and Aboriginals, who account for about 2% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2005). Figure 6 displays the visible minority composition of Vancouver.

\(^1\) Visible minority is a term used primarily in Canada to describe persons who are not of the majority race in a given population. According to Statistics Canada (2005), visible minority, as defined under criteria established by the Employment Equity Act, refers to “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.”
3.3 **Planning History and Innovation**

Similar to other North American cities, initial planning efforts in Vancouver during the beginning of the 20th century focused on life-safety issues such as fire and sanitation, as well as civic amenities. Comprehensive building regulations were implemented in 1909. In 1888, Stanley Park was created in coordination with the Vancouver City Park Board. Vancouver’s formal, comprehensive approach to planning was initiated through the establishment of the Vancouver Town Planning Commission in 1926. By 1928, the commission had developed and published a comprehensive plan for the city that took into consideration city growth, zoning, street design, transportation, civic amenities, and recreation. There was also a focus on regional planning during this time and the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board (LMRPB) was created in 1949 to manage regional level planning. With the rapid growth of Vancouver after World War II, planning initiatives were formalized through the creation of a planning department in 1951 (Oberlander, 1997).
In 1967, the LMRPB was replaced by regional districts with planning and coordination responsibilities for groups of municipalities. The Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) was established and today includes 18 municipalities and 2 electoral areas (Oberlander, 1997). The GVRD’s purpose is to preserve the quality of life through coordinated long-range planning in a region with rapidly increasing demand and growth. Regional coordination and consensus have contributed to Vancouver’s planning success by getting several stakeholders to consider all of the pressing issues and make decisions together. “Above all other thresholds Vancouver has crossed to remain livable has been the democratization of politics at every level, which sometimes involves just getting the various orders of government to sit down together” (Harcourt & Cameron, 2007).

Community participation and neighborhood planning were emphasized beginning in the 1970s with the creation of citizen’s planning committees to guide planning for individual neighborhoods. Social issues important to communities such as affordable housing, neighborhood services, and cultural life are also addressed today through the City’s Social Planning Department (Oberlander, 1997).

Over time, Greater Vancouver has established itself as an internationally recognized model city with several innovative planning initiatives. Such initiatives include the creation of regional town centers with high-density, transit-oriented, mixed-use neighborhoods to accommodate urban growth and decentralize employment opportunities within the region; the rejection of extensive freeway systems cutting through the city; the redevelopment of former industrial lands on the south shore of False Creek into residential neighborhoods in the 1970s; the redevelopment of False Creek North into a family-friendly downtown community; policies to protect natural views; and extensive networks of public parks and other open space. The City’s urban planning principles, as they pertain to downtown livability, are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Part of Vancouver’s planning success is owed to a healthy economy and the desirability of the West Coast lifestyle, which have influenced rapid population growth, urban design, and the general prosperity of Vancouver’s neighborhoods. Strong planning initiatives have also been necessitated by the development and economic challenges presented from limited land availability due to the geographic constraints of the surrounding mountains, sea, and United States border (Oberlander, 1997). With these challenges,
Vancouver needed to re-frame the focus of the city and the future rested in repopulating its inner city.

3.3.1 Redevelopment of False Creek South

The redevelopment of the formerly industrial False Creek South area has been instrumental in shaping Vancouver’s urban area. In the 1960s, the city gained control and ownership of most of False Creek’s south shore and began implementing renewal plans for this area and Granville Island. Planners and consultants recommended that the False Creek area be cleaned up from its former industrial uses for it to become an urban mix of housing and public space.

The area was transformed in the 1970s into a diverse, dense (for Vancouver) neighborhood consisting mostly of low-rise row houses affordable to several income levels, as well as ample open space. After completion in 1977, the development later won awards for the “most original water-oriented, inner city development of its time” (Harcourt & Cameron, 2007). As Harcourt and Cameron (2007) put it, “If there was any single project that announced that Vancouver had a leading-edge planning culture and the architects to build highly livable mixed-market and non-market housing, False Creek South was it.” Despite success in other aspects of the development and an attempt to build public transit to service the neighborhood, this plan never fully materialized and the mostly narrow or exclusively pedestrian/bicycle streets and pathways in False Creek South make it difficult for cars to access the area. Limiting automobile access is generally considered a good planning principle, but neighborhoods need to be properly complemented with accessible and reliable transit to ensure successful transit-oriented development.

Meanwhile, during the development of the south shore, plans were in place for the north shore of False Creek and its former rail yards to become the site of the Expo ’86 World’s Fair. After Expo ’86 was over, all of the temporary buildings used during the fair were dismantled and the site was ripe for permanent development. The development of this site is described in detail at the end of Chapter 4 through a development profile of Concord Pacific Place, which was the initial project in downtown Vancouver to emphasize family-friendly urban livability.
3.4 **Evolution of Housing Policy in Canada and its Impacts on Affordability**

In addition to discussing the evolution of planning overall in Vancouver, the sub-area of housing has emerged as a vital issue, as it is the main focus of livability strategies. This section provides an overview of housing policy and finance in Canada to set a framework for understanding housing issues specific to Vancouver, particularly affordability for a range of income levels, as this is one of the largest challenges – if not the primary challenge – facing the city today. The shifting roles of government and devolution of responsibility for providing affordable housing in Canada impact the types of housing built and which families can be accommodated downtown, as rising prices make it increasingly difficult for lower-income families to afford market-rate housing and live in the city, thus negatively impacting the diversity of people who can benefit from experiencing Vancouver’s achievements in livability.

“Today, Canada has the most private-sector dominated, market-based housing system of any Western nation (including the United States) and the smallest social housing sector of any major Western nation (except for the United States)” (Hulchanski, 2002). The major emphasis of financial housing policy has been to facilitate smooth functioning and growth of the private market through an effective mortgage finance system. Therefore, Canada’s housing system and federal role in housing have largely privileged ownership and 95% of households obtain their housing from the private market (Hulchanski, 2002).

Established in 1946, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) is Canada’s national housing agency. While CMHC was initially introduced as a government-owned corporation to address Canada’s post-war housing shortage, the agency has grown to become Canada’s leading provider of mortgage loan insurance, mortgage backed securities, housing policy and programs, and housing research.

In 1949, Canada became one of the last countries in the Western world to establish a social housing program, and now has the second smallest social housing sector of any Western country, after the United States. Approximately 5% of Canada’s households currently live in social housing, which consists of non-market housing that is owned and

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2 “Non-market housing provides housing mainly for those who cannot afford to pay market rents. It is housing owned by government, a non-profit or co-operative society. Rents are determined not by the market but by the residents’ ability to pay. Non-market housing is designed for independent living. This is in contrast
managed by government, non-profits, or non-equity cooperatives (Hulchanski, 2002). In contrast, 40% of households in the Netherlands, 22% in the United Kingdom, and 15% in France and Germany live in social housing, compared to only 2% in the United States – the leader of private-market dominated housing (Hulchanski, 2002). Prior to 1949, the government was marginally involved in social housing. Even up until 1964, the government did not have significant involvement in helping low-income Canadians obtain adequate housing. Through the mid-1960s until 1984, the government played a larger role in (now controversial) urban renewal and provision of housing for those whose needs could not be met in the private market, as part of a broader social safety net strategy. Housing construction was also used as a way to stimulate the economy. Several federal housing programs, many in partnership with the provinces and the third sector of non-profit and cooperative housing groups, evolved from 1945 to 1993 to provide support for affordable market rental and homeownership units, social housing, rehabilitation and retrofitting, community/infrastructure development, and housing research. The programs resulted in a portfolio of about 660,000 affordable units funded by the federal and provincial governments (Carter, 1997).

Canadian housing policy has diverged from that in the United States mainly since the development of large-scale public housing projects ended in the 1970s in both countries. At this time, the third sector began creating a permanent stock of high quality, affordable social housing. The most well-known innovative form of social housing in Canada is the non-profit, non-equity cooperative housing program, where members own on a cooperative basis and democratically self-manage their housing communities. This type of housing facilitates security of tenure and an alternative for those who are unable to access conventional homeownership, and targets a broader mix of incomes than previous government provided housing. Unlike much of the subsidized housing in the United States, the land and housing units in Canada’s social housing programs are permanently removed from the real estate market, thus remaining permanently affordable to residents.

While the government was the main provider of affordable housing until about the 1980s, the federal government and most of the provinces have since divested their

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to special needs residential facilities. These provide not only shelter, but also supervision, support or care for the residents. Some projects include both non-market housing and special needs units” (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2008c).
responsibility for directly providing new affordable units. Housing policy began to change in the 1980s with the election of the Mulroney Conservative government, which followed the approach of Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Reagan in the United States. Since 1984, several federal spending restraint measures on housing programs were introduced, culminating in 1993, when the federal budget essentially withdrew all funding for new affordable housing. From 1994 onward, all new social housing commitments from the federal government were eliminated and provinces began funding non-market housing projects without federal assistance (Hulchanski, 2002). In 2001, in response to harsh criticism for not providing any new housing assistance, the federal budget included a nominal allocation for housing (C$680 million spread over 5 years – C$136 million per year distributed throughout the entire country); however, this amount is hardly sufficient to help the many Canadians in need and there has been no real change in federal housing policy since funding was cut in 1993 (Hulchanski, 2002). Current affordable housing is now provided on a partnership basis with community groups or third sector (non-profit) organizations playing the primary role.

With the shifting roles of each government level, Vancouver’s role in contributing to social housing has evolved. The City began leasing land for non-market housing in 1971, which allowed the City to “retain ownership of the sites, ensuring they are available for civic purposes at the end of the lease term, and, since leased land is worth less than freehold land, [leasing] allows non-market housing to be built at lower cost” (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2008c). While the City was initially making land available that it had acquired in the distant past, Vancouver began to purchase and hold land for the specific purpose of leasing it to non-profit developers in 1981. In the same year, the City established the Affordable Housing Fund to provide grants for development projects. In addition, the City has also required private developers to set aside a percentage of units in their large projects for non-market housing. The sites for these units are then purchased by the City and leased to non-market sponsors (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2008c).

Canada has shifted away from social housing provision toward market approaches to housing with little concern for distributional issues, and diminishing government resources are available for an increasing number of households in need of adequate, appropriate, and affordable housing. The devolution of responsibilities from the federal government to
provincial and municipal levels of government has considerably changed the course of Canadian housing policy and finance.

In addition, a dual and regressive housing system exists in Canada, whereby the status of tenure – owning versus renting – has significant implications for income, wealth, and housing policy advantages. Although employment growth and income levels have been rising, there is an increasing disparity between those at the top and bottom ends of the income scale, as well as between owners and renters. As shown in Figure 7, owners, on average, are increasingly better off than renters, making twice the income of renters and gaining from several advantages of homeownership including tax benefits and wealth accumulation (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation [CMHC], 2006; Hulchanski, 2002). While homeowners cannot receive tax relief on mortgage interest or principal repayments (unlike in the United States), principal residences are exempt from capital gains taxes, which disproportionately benefits those who are wealthier (International Union for Housing Finance [IUHF], 2005). With significant declines in rental housing construction, increasingly fewer options are available for those who cannot afford ownership (DeJong, 2000). As several authors discuss, “there is a pervasive and cultural bias against renting in Canada, as there is in the United States” (Hulchanski, 2002). Few institutions and resources are available to promote and protect the interests of renters, and policies have also largely failed to respond to this need. There is also disparity between the housing and economic conditions of Aboriginal households and non-Aboriginal households. National homeownership rates have steadily increased over the last several decades to the current rate of about 67%; however, only 45% of Aboriginal households own their own homes (CMHC, 2006).

The supply of affordable housing is becoming an increasing challenge, particularly as Canada becomes more urbanized and more people are migrating to the cities, where housing is more expensive. Although middle- and upper-income households have a broad range of housing choices, low- and moderate-income households face much greater challenges and have limited choices and ability to meet their housing needs. Approximately 15.8% (1.7 million) of all Canadian households lack adequate or affordable housing (Carter & Polevychok, 2004).
While housing affordability is a problem for many, this issue is not always apparent on the surface, as the majority of Canadians have comparatively better housing conditions than those in other nations, and housing conditions have significantly improved in the last 50 years. With over 80% of all housing stock built since 1945, most of the stock is newer than in other countries (Wolfe, 1998). Even for Canada’s poor and working-class households who live in social housing, 87% of public housing units are less than 34 years old (Dreier, 1993). In addition, the quality of life for lower income households is comparatively better in Canada than in some other Western countries (such as the United States) because of the differences in several welfare state policies and programs that contribute to better housing such as universal health insurance, better unemployment insurance, and family support programs. Nevertheless, many households are still in need of quality affordable housing.

Related to housing affordability, “the most extreme manifestation of the housing and income inequity problem in Canada is homelessness” (Hulchanski, 2002). In the past, the housing system basically housed everyone, but homelessness has become a serious issue and
challenge since the 1980s, when the federal government began reducing budgets and focusing a greater reliance on the private market to supply formerly public goods and services. Low-income households are spending greater percentages of their incomes to meet their housing needs in the private market, ultimately resulting in many losing their housing altogether. Homelessness also has discriminatory implications, as up to 25% of the homeless people in some Canadian cities are Aboriginal (Hulchanski, 2002). Race, family status, and bias against those receiving social assistance create barriers to equal treatment in the housing market. Government budget cuts have contributed to this decline in assisting those most in need and fighting discrimination.

While Canada boasts comparatively better housing conditions than those found in most other countries for the majority of its residents, a large number of people still have a range of housing problems. The increasing housing and income disparities between homeowners and renters and lack of affordable housing represent societal and moral consequences that ultimately affect all Canadians. As the history of housing policy demonstrates, meeting Canada’s housing challenges and ensuring that all Canadians have access to affordable, adequate, and appropriate housing will require more than just additional resources. It will also require partnership between all sectors at all levels, creativity, flexibility, a holistic approach, and the ability to look forward and anticipate emerging challenges and opportunities in order to respond effectively to provide a fair, balanced, and sustainable housing system for all. Recommendations for improving housing policy and affordability are discussed in section 6.3 of Chapter 6.

The shifts in Canadian housing policies impact the City’s ability to provide and/or negotiate a sufficient supply of affordable housing for families of all income levels to live in downtown Vancouver’s increasingly expensive market. Without adequate support and resources from the higher levels of government, downtown Vancouver cannot accommodate a diverse mix of households, and families who want to live there but cannot afford to do so are pushed into outlying areas, where they cannot experience the positive urban livability features that Vancouver has to offer.
3.5 Current Housing Market in Vancouver

CHMC produces several publications with housing and market data for all of Canada, including annual and monthly reports summarizing new housing activity within the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area (CMA). In 2006, just over 18,000 new\(^3\) housing units were completed in the Vancouver CMA (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b). Approximately 26% of these units were completed in the city (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b). Typical of recent development trends and increasing urban density, over 70% of the units completed in the city were apartments and 13% of these were rental units (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b). Single-family, row, and duplex units account for most (29%) of the remaining units in the city (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b). Units completed on the downtown peninsula of the city account for 39% of total new units, the largest amount in any sub-area of the city, further indicating increasing urbanization and densification (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b). In comparison to the city, apartments account for 42% of total completions in the rest of the CMA (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b). See Figures 8 and 9 below for unit type breakdowns in the city and CMA. By February 2008, housing starts in the Vancouver CMA surged, reaching double the level recorded for the same month in 2007, with close to 90% of all housing starts as multifamily units (CMHC, 2008).

Overall changes in unit mix over the long-term have shown a steady decline in new single-family dwelling units and an increase in apartment completions in the CMA. Over the last two decades, there have been significant changes in apartment condo completions in the city, as well as major increases in both non-market and market rental apartment completions over the last five years. Estimated data for 2007, based on units under construction at the end of 2006, indicate that unit completions continued to increase in the CMA by approximately 12% more than in 2006. Apartment condo construction accounts for the large majority of this increase and a record number of condos were expected to be completed on the downtown peninsula of Vancouver in 2007 (see Figure 10 below for downtown residential completions and projections), similar to recent development trends

\(^3\)CMHC monitors units created through new construction activity – their figures exclude units created through the conversion of existing buildings, units lost through demolition or conversion of residential buildings, and units that are not self-contained. New projects are monitored to establish, at each month-end, the number of units starting construction, the total number of units under construction, and the number of units completed” (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b).
and possibly reaching a peak in the current development cycle (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b).

**Figure 8: New Housing Completions in Vancouver City by Type (2006)**

Source: City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b

**Figure 9: New Housing Completions in Vancouver CMA by Type (2006)**

Source: City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007b
In February 2008, average home prices in the Vancouver CMA reached C$920,643 for single detached units, C$512,730 for attached units, and C$424,839 for apartments, reflecting changes from the same month in the previous year of 23.87%, 10.94%, and 15.57%, respectively (CMHC, 2008). The average monthly rent for two-bedroom apartments was approximately C$1,100 in February 2008 (CMHC, 2008).

Although the housing market has significantly slowed in the United States, home prices in Vancouver have reached record highs this year and continue to rise. There is still strong housing demand, particularly for less expensive multifamily homes, which developers are increasingly, and almost exclusively, building (CMHC, 2008). A thriving economy, job growth, appeal to the region, and thus population growth through migration have sustained homebuyer demand, which is expected to continue for new and resale housing. As a more affordable option, rental apartments also maintain strong demand in the metropolitan area, as indicated by vacancy rates of less than 1% (CMHC, 2008).
With respect to the non-market inventory of affordable housing, 22,361 total units (contained in 399 projects) in the city are completed or under construction, accounting for 8.5% of the city’s total housing stock (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2008b). Most non-market projects are multiple dwellings and thus located in more densely zoned areas of the city, with over 30% located downtown. The Vancouver metropolitan region continues to be Canada’s most expensive housing market for both owners and renters and, as such, affordability remains a pressing concern.

### 3.6 “THE WORLD’S MOST LIVABLE CITY”?

Today, several sources consistently rank Vancouver as one of the most livable cities in the world, along with other cities in Canada, Australia, Austria, and Switzerland ranking in the top ten most ideal destinations. With its beautiful natural setting, high-density core areas, clean environment, range of housing choices, recreation opportunities, diverse population, “low crime, little threat from instability or terrorism and a highly developed transport and communications infrastructure…Vancouver is the most attractive destination,” according to The Economist Intelligence Unit’s livability survey (Economist.com, 2007). The Economist report has placed Vancouver as the most livable city in the world for several years in a row. Vancouver has received several international awards for its great city life qualities. Conde Nast Traveler magazine named Vancouver “best city in the Americas” at its annual Reader’s Choice Awards for several consecutive years. Ken Cameron, who has served in senior planning and management positions with the GVRD, believes that the residents of Greater Vancouver have a strong attachment to and pride in “the paradise in which they have the good fortune to live. The air is like a caress, the water is like fine wine, the landscape is drop-dead gorgeous, the design of public and private spaces is outstanding, and the people are building a tolerant, compassionate society like nowhere else on Earth” (Harcourt & Cameron, 2007).

While Vancouver has achieved an international reputation for successful planning and livability, it is still a work in progress with several challenges remaining and the city requires a sustainable approach to continue achieving in the long-term. Vancouver can attribute much of its success to the recent 40 years of good planning that have built a solid
foundation for the region. “The short term looks great. We’re in a golden age from 1986 to, minimally, 2020. Some of it is fortuitous, but you have to give some credit to the leadership,” says Gordon Price (Harcourt & Cameron, 2007). Harcourt and Cameron (2007) argue that “regional leadership is critical if Greater Vancouver is to continue to enjoy its reputation as one of the world’s most livable cities.” Stakeholders have to continue working together to address the range of issues facing the region – beyond physical planning – including social, environmental, economic, and cultural matters. There must be increasing emphasis on adequate affordable housing in coordination with the current residential development boom, sustainability (particularly with urgent attention given to the development associated with the upcoming Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2010), environmental management, commitment to remaining economically competitive in a global context, connection between regional growth management and transportation plans, transit-oriented urban living, public school availability, reducing homelessness and drug problems, decreasing property crime, and reconciliation with the region’s First Nations communities.
CHAPTER 4: VANCOUVER AS A MODEL FOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY URBAN LIVING

4.1 DOWNTOWN VANCOUVER POPULATION ON THE RISE

As described in Chapter 1, many cities are experiencing an “urban housing renaissance” as residents return to the city for a more exciting, convenient, and sustainable lifestyle not satisfied in suburbia. Downtown populations are on the rise in desirable cities and Vancouver is embracing this trend with its “living first” mantra, which is a comprehensive planning strategy that embraces dense, urban livability through carefully managed downtown growth. With one of the fastest-growing downtown populations in North America, Vancouver increasingly attracts more residents and its population has more than doubled over the last two decades. The residential population continues to grow in Vancouver’s downtown, adding 17,943 more residents (25.6% increase) and 9,889 more dwellings (19.4% increase) between 2001 and 2006 (Baker, 2007a). In 2007 alone, 47 residential buildings were under construction in the central core (Baker, 2007a). In 2006, the total downtown population was 87,973 and there were 60,801 total dwellings in the 2-square-mile area (City of Vancouver Planning Department, 2007). By 2021, the projected downtown population will reach 120,000 (Beasley, 2007). Increasing numbers of immigrants, young professionals, couples with and without children, alternative households, and senior empty nesters with little interest in the suburban lifestyle have fueled this growth and contributed to a strong market for downtown living. This growing population has resulted in increasing high-density development and associated amenities to support growth, as the central area is constrained by its site geography, bounded largely by bodies of water and open space, and has limited vehicular access.

4 The geographical boundaries of downtown Vancouver are depicted in section 1.2 of Chapter 1.
4.2 **DOWNTOWN LIVABILITY: VANCOURVER’S APPROACH**

As previously mentioned, Vancouver has been repeatedly praised for its emphasis on urban livability (as defined in section 1.2 of Chapter 1), particularly with respect to its success with attracting and retaining families in the downtown core. Residential development of the West End in the 1960s and False Creek South in the 1970s set a precedent for urban living on and adjacent to the downtown peninsula. Since the 1980s, Vancouver has embraced density and managed its downtown growth through a strategy focused on livability (coined “living first”). Major planning initiatives and rezonings ensued, converting over 8,000,000 square feet of excess commercial space and old rail yards to facilitate urban residential development (Beasley, 2007). Vancouver is now known as the “City of Glass” for its numerous modern downtown skyscrapers (Kuiper, 2006).

In addition to political and planning emphasis on residential development and a strong market, Vancouver’s leaders have aggressively pursued a model founded on basic organizing principles for downtown housing. This model encompasses a “comprehensive integrated strategy: pushing for housing intensity; insisting on housing diversity; structuring for coherent, identifiable, and supportive neighborhoods; and fostering suitably domestic urban design and architecture” (Beasley, 2000). As described in the below sections and further in Chapter 6, a variety of factors have converged and reinforced each other to set the stage for Vancouver’s achievements in urban livability to come together.

With his foresight and innovative ideas, Larry Beasley, former co-director of planning for the City of Vancouver, is largely credited with the transformation of Vancouver’s downtown core into a livable urban community. Ray Spaxman and Ann McAfee are also the City’s former directors of planning and key leaders responsible for devising the planning principles behind Vancouver’s urban livability strategy and having the initiative to implement them. As key author and continuing spokesman of the “living first” policy, Beasley tells the “success story” of Vancouver based upon the several basic principles of this strategy. Most of the written work about Vancouver is positive and praises the City’s achievements in urban planning excellence, establishing the city as a model for other cities to emulate. In fact, Beasley’s entire career and international reputation is based on the seeming success of the “living first” policy. The description that follows explains the general principles behind Vancouver’s successes, as expanded upon from Beasley’s (2000) manifesto.
article “‘Living First’ in Downtown Vancouver,” and the next section (4.3) describes additional elements specific to its family-friendly urban environment, while Chapter 5 tells the other side of the story – Vancouver’s ensuing dilemmas of success.

4.2.1 Collaborative Process

Vancouver has embraced a collaborative, comprehensive approach to realizing the city’s vision for urban livability. At the same time, specific roles are clarified upfront in order to avoid confusion in the decision-making process (e.g., the City Council makes final decisions after advisement from all other stakeholders). Vancouver’s desirable environment, strong political commitment, and public buy-in have largely influenced its success with the “living first” strategy and urban lifestyle that more and more people are embracing. This foundation has initiated innovative planning to manage high-density neighborhoods and growth, leveraging of public goods to support growth, and a flood of private investment.

Regulatory and planning processes have evolved to manage significant downtown change with new tools and techniques to address the scale and complexity of development projects. Through a cooperative planning approach and public-private partnerships, politicians, public sector staff, developers, and citizens come together to build consensus regarding the future of the city and its residents, which requires continuous learning and innovation. The regulatory framework that has emerged is highly discretionary and emphasizes guidelines and incentives over strict regulations. Regulations focus on high levels of quality to foster design excellence. Planning includes attention to both large-scale and specific development issues, with public consultation at all stages. Through consensus, issues are discussed and resolved as early as possible. As a result of this collaborative process between the public sector, private sector, and citizens, city decisions are final and appeals are very rare, even for the largest urban development projects. In their final stage, projects are generally supported by most stakeholders with satisfactory public approval (Beasley, 2000).

4.2.2 Extension of Existing Patterns of Development

Emphasis is focused on maintaining the feel of Vancouver by extending the “fabric, patterns, and character of the existing city rather than see the new areas developed in ways
that make them distinctly different” (Beasley, 2000). For example, existing road grids, open space networks, and building materials are extended with new development.

4.2.3 Mixed Uses and Incomes

In line with new urbanism principles, developing complete neighborhood units at a pedestrian scale is a priority. Mixed uses, associated infrastructure and amenities, local commercial services, retail areas, community gathering spaces, and phasing (to ensure ancillary amenities are available as needed when residents move into the area) are all necessary characteristics of successful, livable neighborhoods. These features are strived for in Vancouver, as exemplified by such developments as Concord Pacific Place, which is described in detail at the end of this chapter. Vancouver’s policies aim to locate housing, employment, and services in close proximity through both mixed-use buildings and adjacencies among building types to facilitate true live/work communities and limit commuting (Beasley, 2000).

In addition, mixed-income housing in a variety of housing types is vital to maximize choice, diversity, integration, and security of tenure for all income levels. Housing in Vancouver is targeted to all potential consumers including units for family households, non-family households, market-rate, non-market-rate, special needs, and unique choices such as lofts for artists (Beasley, 2000).

4.2.4 Limited Vehicular Commuter Access

Vancouver does not have a freeway system connecting its urban core to the suburbs. By limiting vehicular access into downtown and creating congestion for those who do commute, residents have an incentive to live downtown or nearby. Planning has prioritized the alternative transportation modes of public transit, walking, and bicycling over single-occupancy vehicles, and as a result, these modes are more efficient and pleasant. Additional benefits of the pedestrian-friendly environment include its contributions to more dynamic street life and sustainability.
4.2.5 Open Space and Civic Amenities

The beauty and amenity values of each neighborhood, as well as citywide values, are enhanced through open space, green linkages, and special attention to the public realm. Since the 1990s, over 65 acres of new parks have been added to the downtown peninsula, in addition to extensive existing open space such as the internationally-recognized Stanley Park, which is adjacent to downtown and the largest park in Vancouver at about 1,000 acres. In coordination with development projects, the waterfront must be fully developed for public recreational use, a zoning requirement that has already transformed over 20 kilometers along the water’s edge (Beasley, 2000). Linkages tie public spaces together through walkway and bikeway systems.

Public art and street treatment contribute to community life and identity. Through such initiatives as sidewalk beautification, street art, and unique styles of lighting and signage, “sidewalks must become the effective living rooms of the neighborhoods” (Beasley, 2000).

4.2.6 Developer and Beneficiary Community Responsibility for Costs and Externalities

The City requires that the costs for public utilities and facilities be borne primarily by the developments that will be served as the main beneficiaries of these services. This is necessary to avoid burdening existing taxpayers with the costs of new growth. A growth financing strategy ensues, whereby services are provided concurrently as new development occurs. Specific impact fees per square foot of new development are negotiated and developers contribute this money to a City fund for provision of services that are not already directly provided by the developer (Beasley, 2000).

Developers must also be responsive to the needs of urban residents and limit potential negative externalities. Creating well-designed, humane building forms for high-density housing is challenging. Steps are taken to limit noise, over-viewing, and invasion of privacy, while ensuring safety, preservation of views, and sensitivity to the needs of diverse residents such as children to maintain the attractiveness of urban living (Beasley, 2000).
### 4.2.7 Environmental Sustainability

As with many other innovative cities, Vancouver is maximizing its environmental stewardship and increasingly exemplifying a model for urban green development as new knowledge and tools are gained in this area. All new developments incorporate elements of sustainability and technical high performance features (Beasley, 2000).

As a whole, the City embraces environmental benefits beyond the level of individual developments. In June 2006, Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan launched the EcoDensity Initiative, which “promotes high-quality densification as a way to reduce the city’s ecological footprint” (Groc, 2007a). Some of the largest components of the ecological footprint relate to personal transportation and the energy and materials used for constructing, maintaining, and operating buildings. In fact, William Rees, a professor at the University of British Columbia and the inventor of the ecological footprint, conducted a study comparing various forms of housing to determine how each affects personal transportation requirements, capacity for public transit, and the energy required to build and maintain a household (Groc, 2007a). His findings concluded that “moving from single-family to either three-story walk-up or high-rise resulted in a 40 percent reduction in that part of the ecological footprint of the household that was related to housing and transportation” (Groc, 2007a). With residential density, energy and transportation impacts are significantly reduced. Geographic constraints such as a farmland reserves and forests also limit areas available for suburban development, thus further curbing sprawl (Beasley, 2000). Mayor Sullivan hopes to increase density throughout the city, not just downtown.

### 4.2.8 Urban Design

In addition to all of the above general principles, several details contribute to good, functional urban design in a dense, complex environment such as Vancouver’s. Vancouver’s focus on design improves livability and raises property values. For high-density development to be successful and attractive, traditional relationships between streets, sidewalks, building walls, and among buildings are considered in approval of development plans, as well as quality materials, on-site amenities, and neighborhood infrastructure. Vancouver’s specific zoning requirements establish ambitious design guidelines, resulting in consistency among buildings and a particular feel to the city.
One of Vancouver’s primary guidelines emphasizes human-scale relationships to high-density buildings through slender point-block towers with small floor plates of approximately no more than 8,500 square feet and tower bases hidden behind scaled, minimum three-story street walls, as depicted in Figure 11. The lower-rise buildings along the street often take the form of row houses and townhouses, providing urban homes suitable for families. The effect at street level results in the large towers almost disappearing from immediate perception. Another large priority is to carefully manage views from inside the buildings to take advantage of Vancouver’s beautiful setting (Beasley, 2000). Staggering the residential towers and keeping them a minimum distance of 80 feet apart from each other allow a greater degree of privacy, management of sunlight and shadows for more light inside buildings and on the streets below, and optimal view corridors (Price, 2005).

**Figure 11: Human-Scale Relationship to High-Density Residential Buildings in Downtown Vancouver**

Source: S. Loewus, personal photo, January 9, 2008
Source: S. Loewus, personal photos, January 9, 2008
Housing at the sidewalk level is separated from retail and other non-residential on-street uses to manage noise and create a livable environment in the city. Street walls are activated through details at the sidewalk eye level by incorporating such features as doors, porches, stoops, windows, and terraces, which also facilitate designs that encourage “eyes on the street.” Green public spaces and features such as double rows of street trees and grass boulevards lining wide neighborhood sidewalks with benches counter urban concrete and encourage vibrant street life. In addition, above- or below-ground walkways are not allowed since they prevent active street life and people from coming together on public sidewalks. Private courtyards for residents are also encouraged for quiet privacy away from public streets, space for gardens, and safe environments for children to play (Beasley, 2000).

Surface parking is very limited in Vancouver except for traditional, short-term parking along local street curbs. Most parking is located underground. Alternative modes of transportation are encouraged to limit vehicular traffic and negative environmental effects (Beasley, 2000).

For a comprehensive strategy to be achieved, planners also look beyond the design of each individual project to facilitate context-specific and overall development patterns for each area of the downtown peninsula. However, rather than having district-wide zoning regulations, Vancouver establishes zoning requirements on a street-by-street basis. Specific view corridors and building heights are considered within the context of their immediate distinct environment. Sidewalk and street liveliness, facilitated through activated ground-floor mixed uses, is prioritized over too much focus on total building heights, as towers meet the ground at a human scale (Langston, 2005). In addition, the mix of low-, medium-, and high-rise towers add variety and scale (Price, 2005).

For all large comprehensive redevelopment projects, the following set of integrated neighborhood design principles guide development:

- Each project extends the fabric and character of the city.
- Each neighbourhood has a full range of services and amenities from a local “high street” through to the essential “third place” between home and work of community centre, café, or park.
- Each neighbourhood has a diverse mix of housing types and costs.
- Cars are stored underground, servicing is discreet or from back lanes, and streets are designed for slow traffic and pedestrian amenity.
- A continuous seawall dedicated to public use is linked to a series of lookouts, art installations, and new waterfront parks.
The street is carefully landscaped and furnished and decorated to express community identity and each neighbourhood has its own distinctive park.

- A land-use mix or proximity of residence, workplace, leisure, and community services is sought.
- A “humane domestic building form” for high density housing is sought (adapted from Beasley, 1997) (Punter, 2003).

4.2.9 Bringing it All Together

Overall, these strategies and guidelines contribute to Vancouver’s ability to set a model for effective downtown livability. As Beasley (2000) nicely expresses:

The underlying theme in Vancouver’s strategy is to bring out the competitive advantages of the urban lifestyle in preference to a suburban lifestyle. To truly make the residential city a reality, the city must succeed at the intuitive level of lifestyle choice. Part of this strategy is obvious: to try to create an attractive surrogate for the single-family dwelling in the single-family suburb.

The row houses fronting streets at the bases of high-rise apartment towers are a key component to this strategy and add to the mix of downtown housing available for diverse households. In particular, this housing option provides a strong incentive and opportunity for families with children to live downtown while accommodating their preferences by retaining some of the appealing qualities of suburban living such as lower building heights, private front doors, private garages, basement storage, and outdoor play space. At the same time, the objective is to promote a lifestyle experience superior to that offered in the suburbs, while providing an equally safe and secure environment (Beasley, 2000). Urban living provides easy access to entertainment, retail, services, pedestrian- and bicycle-oriented travel, and connection with various kinds of people. For many, living downtown facilitates a more exciting and convenient lifestyle that, when well-planned and maintained, increasingly attracts more residents of various backgrounds.
4.3 **Attracting and Retaining Families Downtown: Vancouver’s Key Elements**

The qualities that make Vancouver’s downtown livable for all residents, as described above, attract many families to live there. In an interactive, reinforcing cycle, the presence of family-oriented housing and children downtown are some of the components that contribute to Vancouver’s status as one of the most livable cities in the world. The preceding text describes the strategies aimed at attracting residents of all backgrounds to downtown living, but what additional elements specifically target families? Why and how does Vancouver “work” as a family-friendly urban environment?

Early on, beginning in the 1970s, Vancouver decided to make families and children a priority in its central area planning decisions. As described in the following sections, a variety of factors and characteristics – many unique to Vancouver – have combined and set the stage for Vancouver to establish itself as an internationally recognized model for family-oriented urban living. The growth of Vancouver’s child population has been influenced by the city’s historical precedent, cultural context and immigration, land availability, economic and market environment, political and development context, family-oriented planning and design initiatives, and leveraged public amenities from private developers. While this chapter focuses on Vancouver’s successes, remaining challenges and areas in need of improvement are discussed in Chapter 5.

4.3.1 **Child Presence**

Just as the overall downtown population in Vancouver continues to significantly increase, the total number of children living downtown is also rising. In 2001, there were a total of 4,435 residents under the age of 18 living downtown (Langston, 2005), a figure that is triple that of 1990 (Gragg, 2005). Today, there are over 7,000 children downtown (Beasley, 2007). Inner city birth rates are about 50 to 90 per month (Gragg, 2005). The growth rate of families with children downtown has even outpaced that of suburban neighborhoods in Vancouver (McAfee, n.d.). All of these facts point to the desirability of living downtown, which has become an increasingly attractive option as the City’s vision is implemented.
4.3.2 Historical and Cultural Context

Many argue that Vancouver’s status as a historical magnet for immigrants has influenced the growth of families residing downtown because its high percentage of Asian and Eastern European immigrants are accustomed to raising kids in multifamily buildings in dense cities. Raising families in high-rise buildings is common in their home countries. In particular, the huge influx of immigrants who fled Hong Kong in the late 1980s and 1990s to escape its uncertain future brought their families and wealth to Vancouver, where the political and economic environments were considered to be more safe and stable. These immigrants have greatly contributed to Vancouver’s family environment and real estate industry by investing in many of the city’s new downtown condos.
Moreover, there is “a long-standing culture of families living in apartments and condos in downtown’s West End” (Cohen, 2006a). Families lived in the West End in various types of housing long before the vast development of high-rise buildings along False Creek and Burrard Inlet (Kakimoto, 2006). With an established downtown residential neighborhood, Vancouver was able to utilize and extend existing infrastructure and community services to support additional households in new developments, without having to start from scratch.

4.3.3 Land Availability

One of the significant factors in Vancouver’s favor was access to very large parcels of nearly empty industrial waterfront land available for redevelopment. Most North American cities today do not have the same capacity to essentially develop entire neighborhoods from scratch in their downtown cores. Other cities generally have smaller areas to work with and are only able to do infill development on more of a piecemeal basis.

The 200-acre waterfront of False Creek North provided an ideal opportunity for redevelopment. After the Expo ’86 World’s Fair, the City was able to plan the future of this large piece of land with standards to ensure that all new residential development would be family-friendly. The provincial government subsequently sold the property to a private developer, Concord Pacific, under an agreement with the City that the site would be developed with an array of public amenities, as further described in section 4.4 of this chapter.

4.3.4 Economic and Market Environment

Vancouver’s strong economy and desirable environment have fueled population growth and demand for housing, creating an intense urban housing boom. This economy has allowed the City to impose development fees on new projects to provide funding for affordable housing and services for families. Based on successful precedents (e.g., the development of False Creek South and North) and their enhanced marketability, developers can be comfortable undertaking large projects and the associated required amenities with confidence that all of the units will likely be occupied upon or soon after completion. Therefore, much of the risk is removed, providing City officials with a lot of negotiating
power to advance urban livability strategies through regulations and developer concessions. Once one developer was successful, others have followed suit.

An influx of investment capital, primarily from Hong Kong, over the last few decades has also contributed to the booming residential development downtown. In particular, real estate mogul Li Ka-shing entered the scene early on to finance his company Concord Pacific, Vancouver’s largest developer and primary developer of False Creek North, and “had the deep pockets to meet the city’s upfront demands” (Gragg, 2005).

4.3.5 Political and Development Environment

Consistent political will and leadership since the mid-1970s have initiated the drive toward Vancouver achieving its vision of successful urban livability and a commitment to housing families downtown. Brent Toderian, Vancouver’s new director of planning, describes this leadership: “Vancouver has a willingness to take ownership of the city, to shape it with a collective vision, and to use the tools at its disposal to take a strong position in negotiations about the future of the city” (Chodikoff, 2007). Developers also benefit from this commitment because it is key to public buy-in, so that during the approval process for new projects, the public has confidence in both the City and developer to deliver what is promised.

In addition, leadership goes beyond the specific tools and technical, rational planning procedures of the past to develop a deep understanding of the complexity of cities in order to effectively and innovatively contribute to the city’s evolution, as further discussed by Toderian:

Being a city-building leader is more than just reviewing process or creating plans, it is about stimulating dialogue and awareness across the city…I think that one of the things that has made Vancouver city-building a success has been a spirit of experimentation, risk-taking and working within the grey areas of the law…I think it is important to risk failure in order to achieve innovation (Chodikoff, 2007).

The City encourages innovation through its flexibility and negotiation with developers, yet maintains an expectation for developers to provide quality design and a high level of public benefits. “The city does a good job of articulating what it expects from developers, while remaining flexible if architects or builders come forward with better ideas” (Langston, 2005).
The political approach to property and development rights somewhat differs in Canada, where public regulation is more accepted than in the United States. As Gil Kelley, director of the Portland Bureau of Planning, says, “In Vancouver, they can say, ‘We’re going to regulate, and it will be good for you’” (Gragg, 2005). Despite Vancouver’s planning system that makes significant demands on developers, politicians and city officials appear to have close relationships with developers, and are therefore able to work well together. Patience to support and see the urban vision achieved over time has also been key, as political leaders have prioritized consistent, long-term objectives over shortsighted politics.

### 4.3.6 Comprehensive Strategy

By embracing a comprehensive planning and development strategy (“living first”), Vancouver has contributed to the desirability of its downtown as a place for families to live. The initial step of this strategy was to identify all of the things that existing and potential families need and want when deciding where they want to reside. The idea was to deliver safe, complete neighborhoods with all of the services and amenities possible that would easily attract families to the area. Then, policies were established to address these issues and objectives have been realized through ensuing public-private partnerships. “The experience there also shows it takes a lot more than tall buildings to create diverse downtown neighborhoods that appeal to different age groups, income levels and families” (Langston, 2005). Rather than just narrowly focusing on a housing strategy to encourage development of more residential units (e.g., only increasing height and density limits), the City requires a host of housing features and public amenities to cater to family needs and achieve an overall family-friendly urban environment.

### 4.3.7 Family-Oriented Design Regulations and Guidelines

Zoning regulations require that 25% of new apartments downtown be designed for families with children, a standard that is far ahead of most cities and critical to the implementation of the City’s “living first” vision. These apartments must include multiple bedrooms (at least two), easily accessible outdoor play areas, and common rooms for indoor play, as well as such amenities as new parks, community centers, and daycare facilities to serve families.
As testimony to the early visionaries of the city, Vancouver first adopted the extensive “Housing Families at High Density” guidelines in 1978 to assist developers in designing housing that meets the needs of families with children (McAfee, n.d.). In 1992, the City Council adopted the current version of these comprehensive guidelines, entitled “High-Density Housing for Families with Children Guidelines.” These guidelines specify how housing can be built with families in mind through careful consideration of project planning, project design, and unit design.

Guidelines for project planning deal with issues to be addressed at the beginning of the development process and include factors related to site selection, surrounding land uses, neighborhood compatibility, number of family units, and household mix. Project design guidelines discuss building design issues and consider hierarchy of spaces, common open space, outdoor play areas for children, supervision of children’s play, children’s safety, pedestrian circulation routes, common indoor amenity space, and residents’ parking (City of Vancouver, 1992). Finally, guidelines for unit design address livability concerns specific to individual units and include unit size and interior layout, privacy, private open space, and storage (City of Vancouver, 1992). The guidelines further state that “The applicant is encouraged to consider creative approaches to accomplish the objectives stated for each guideline….quantitative standards…are not necessarily absolute requirements” (City of Vancouver, 1992).

Each specific guideline thoroughly includes three parts: the objective, criteria with specific design standards, and discussion with additional considerations, supporting information, more detailed rationale, examples, and suggested design solutions. For example, the specific guidelines for unit size and interior layout are as follows:

4.1 **Unit Size and Interior Layout**

4.1.1 **Objective:**
The size and layout of units should be appropriate to meet the needs of families with children.

4.1.2 **Criteria:**
Family units require a minimum of two bedrooms. Each bedroom should be large enough to accommodate a single bed, a dresser, a desk or table, and in children's bedrooms, some floor space for playing.
4.1.3 Discussion:
Single family dwellings have a range of spaces which can be used for recreation and study including attic spaces, basements, dens and family rooms. Apartment units, especially non-market ones, do not have the same number or range of spaces as do houses. Therefore, dining, living and bedroom spaces should be designed to accommodate a variety of family activities. For example, children's bedrooms will be used for study and play.

The design of the unit should provide for separation of conflicting uses.

The dining room floor should be washable and waterproof rather than carpeted.

The bathroom should be larger than the minimum size so that a parent and child can be in it together.

Unit sizes for non-market family housing should be consistent with BCHMC program guidelines.

The private outdoor space should be visible from the kitchen.

A generous entry area is highly desirable to permit room for toys and equipment, for dressing children on cold or rainy days, and for drying of wet shoes, boots, and outerwear. The floor surface of the entry should be washable, not carpeted. Consider the layouts of adjacent units to ensure that "sleeping" areas are not affected adversely by proximity to neighbouring "living" areas (City of Vancouver, 1992).

In trying to appease residents who value the desirable qualities found mainly in suburban homes, it is important to find innovative ways to integrate a form of these features into urban homes. When families locate downtown, the amount of living space available per unit is a large tradeoff. One of the primary challenges is providing similar levels of convenience to single-family homes for families that need space for additional storage, work, and/or private garages. The City offers incentives for larger units by exempting some storage space and enclosed outdoor decks from being counted under zoning square footage rules (Gragg, 2005). While accommodating some families in smaller spaces than they may be used to is a challenge, the ability to easily expand play space into the public urban environment and other benefits of the urban lifestyle often outweigh the sacrifice of living in a smaller unit.
4.3.8 Development Fees/Fund for Public Amenities and Affordable Housing

Downtown developers are also required, as a condition of development approval, to fund a range of public amenities to serve downtown neighborhoods through direct contribution or through a fund. Negotiated fees can reach up to $30 per square foot for landowners who benefit from zoning changes that make their property more valuable (Langston, 2005). Some of the amenities include community centers, public art, play areas, school sites, childcare centers, gardens, fountains, landscaped sidewalks, and waterfront promenades, as well as view preservation. Furthermore, large development projects must make 20% of all project units affordable to low-income households or set aside land for affordable housing, with a minimum of 50% of the units developed with at least two bedrooms to accommodate families. With 116 acres of open space (1,081 acres including Stanley Park), 4 community centers, and 3 public elementary schools located downtown (Langston, 2005), Vancouver is far ahead of most North American cities in serving the vital needs of families who live in the city center.

4.4 Development Profile: Concord Pacific Place, False Creek North

Concord Pacific Place is the main development on the north shore of False Creek (southeastern neighborhood on Vancouver’s downtown peninsula, as seen below in Figures 13 and 14) that was formerly the site of the Expo ’86 World’s Fair. Prior to being used for Expo ’86, most of the site was occupied by Canadian Pacific Railway’s freight operations and heavy industry. In 1988, the City Council approved policies for this land and adopted an Official Development Plan in 1990 with several mega project design principles for the area after collaboration between the city, developer, and public (City of Vancouver Planning Department, 2004; Fader, 2002). As the largest master-planned urban community in North America (Concord Pacific, 2007) and fully shaped by the “living first” strategies, this project exemplifies the “Vancouver Model” and family-friendly development.
Unlike the public ownership and development of the south shore of False Creek, as described in Chapter 3, the provincial government offered the entire 83-hectare (204-acre), former Expo ‘86 site to private developers in 1988, giving cause for great controversy. The top bidder for the site was Li Ka-shing, a Hong Kong billionaire, and many thought the deal was done too cheaply with a land acquisition price of C$320 million, too quickly, and under secrecy (Fader, 2002). Although the price was a bargain, the developer was also required to
pay for and construct all required infrastructure and agreed-upon amenities for the project, as well as shoulder all of the risks and uncertainties of development (Fader, 2002).

After several rezonings to permit comprehensive, mixed-use, high-density development and implement new urban design strategies for high-density residential living, Li Ka-shing proceeded to develop the area starting in 1992 through his company, Concord Pacific, in what has resulted in the largest master-planned urban development community in North America (Concord Pacific, 2007). A series of high-rise slender towers, townhouses, commercial and neighborhood retail space, 42 acres of public parks, several acres of additional semi-private open space, two elementary schools (Dorothy Lam and Elsie Roy), three marinas, a 3-kilometre seawall, new streets and walkways/bikeways, parking, linkages to adjacent downtown neighborhoods, public art, four childcare facilities, and a full-service community center have been developed into seven individual “neighborhoods” stretching three kilometers along the waterfront, all comprising the project known as Concord Pacific Place (City of Vancouver, 2003; City of Vancouver Planning Department, 2004; Fader, 2002). Figures 15-19 below illustrate this development and many of its amenities.

The renovated Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre (see Figure 15 below) is housed in the historically significant and restored Roundhouse building that formerly housed and serviced steam locomotives at the western terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway. With parenting and several other community classes for parents and children, a childcare center, a theater, an art gallery, a snack bar, and a gymnasium full of children all day, the Roundhouse provides a great example of Vancouver’s child-friendly downtown planning.

In addition to the Roundhouse, this community houses the new Urban Fare grocery store, Dorothy Lam Children’s Centre (see Figure 16 below), and 8-acre David Lam Park, all bustling with parents and children. One Concord Pacific Place resident and parent commented that the Urban Fare grocery store/café is “like a local community center, where families meet and socialize” (personal interview, January 9, 2008), indicating the effective blend of uses in the community. The community also features 12-foot-wide sidewalks and double rows of street trees (Baker, 2005). “I can walk to work and to day care,” says [another] local resident. ‘Plus, my wife and I have a night life’” (Gragg, 2005), pointing to the attractiveness of this neighborhood for families.
Figure 15: Exterior and Interior Images of Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre

Source: S. Loewus, personal photos, January 9, 2008
Figure 16: Dorothy Lam Children’s Centre

Source: S. Loewus, personal photo, January 9, 2008
About 20% (1,380) of the total 7,800 new housing units are non-market units reserved for low-income residents and spread throughout the site, and “there is no exterior distinction between affordable and market-rate housing” (Baker, 2005), thus not stigmatizing residents (City of Vancouver, 2003). 25% of the units must be two bedrooms or larger and located to overlook play areas to accommodate families (Gragg, 2005).

The City required Concord Pacific to include and build all of these amenities, as well as related necessary infrastructure, in its new development, amounting to about C$18 for every square foot of development (or C$250 million total) for required public benefits (Dietrich, 2003a; Gragg, 2005). Indeed, “One of the most notable achievements of Concord Pacific Place, from the public perspective, is the remarkable range and scope of civic amenities which were required of the developer through the rezoning process” (City of Vancouver, 2003).

“The resulting master plan incorporated several key urban design strategies, reflecting a set of [the City’s] organizing principles. Prime among these was the desire to create a series of local neighborhoods along False Creek, each focused on a bay and separated by a large public park” (City of Vancouver, 2003). These distinct areas helped with phasing of development and breaking up “the potential deadening effect of a single master planned community” with a rich variety of built forms, public spaces, and creative design elements (City of Vancouver, 2003). Another important design principle was massing, whereby the mass of the towers is not fully apparent at street level since they are set back. The street level view is “of the scale and rhythm of the townhouses and retail functions, and the bulk of the towers becomes apparent only in the longer view” (Fader, 2002). With regard to density, Concord Pacific Place’s developer acknowledges, “It isn’t the height; it’s what happens on the first three floors” (Fader, 2002). In addition, “The development of Concord Pacific Place affirmed the urban design principle that public streets are the primary ordering device of city building, accommodating incremental development, providing robust flexibility and helping to integrate new development with the surrounding urban structure” (City of Vancouver, 2003).

The City of Vancouver (2003) is proud of this development while also recognizing its challenges, commenting:
…perhaps the most notable aspect of Concord Pacific Place is what it has done to reinvigorate downtown Vancouver as a vibrant, mixed use community. Concord Pacific Place will add over 20,000 new residents to downtown when it is fully built out and this, combined with many more thousands moving into the other areas undergoing redevelopment in the downtown peninsula, is responsible for Vancouver becoming an international model of inner city revitalization. There is the inherent sustainability advantage that comes from bringing people and their place of work close together: more and more people are walking, cycling or using public transit on the downtown peninsula. Recent surveys now show that over 60% of all downtown trips are done without the use of a private vehicle. Concord Pacific Place is making a major contribution to the emergence in Vancouver of a new urban paradigm.

If there is a criticism of Concord Pacific Place it may be that it suffers to a degree from its own success. So much new development has happened so fast that it does convey a somewhat immutable, untouchable quality, almost too pristine. All great city neighbourhoods develop, over time, a patina reflecting the full diversity of human endeavour and creativity, and this has yet to take hold in Concord Pacific Place. But in the grand scheme of city building this is barely the beginning of time for this major sector of downtown.

Concord Pacific Place is rapidly coalescing as a model of high density inner city urban living, while demonstrating a remarkable degree of civic amenity. It only remains for time to work its wonders in creating the sense of a truly lived-in community with all its human diversity, colour and complexity.

Ultimately, “The experience at Concord Pacific Place demonstrates that public and private development interests at the waterfront are not mutually exclusive. Through careful site planning and urban design, public access to the waterfront, and views to and from the waterfront, can be preserved while satisfying the market and security needs of private housing development” (Fader, 2002). This project demonstrates the potential for carefully planned, well-designed, dense, pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use urban communities. In addition, at the right density and height, sufficient return is generated for the developer to provide an assortment of public amenities.

The north shore of False Creek has become a neighborhood of dense housing in Vancouver’s downtown, significantly increasing the population living downtown by about a third. While “the market for Concord Pacific residences was [initially] skewed toward overseas and other investors as the concept of a presale was new to the Vancouver market, …as the amenities have been built and the form of the community has become visible,
demand has shifted to more local sources and purchases for primary residency have increased,” giving way to the new, vibrant, urban community (Fader, 2002). A variety of buyers have been attracted to the project’s range of housing types and prices. Now, “Buyers are mostly Vancouverites, ranging from first-time homebuyers to families, empty nesters, and move-down buyers,” and the majority of purchases are for owner occupancy (Fader, 2002). With respect to families, couples seem to live there first and then stay when they have children rather than move there as existing families with children (G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008; Anonymous Concord Pacific Place resident and parent, personal interview, January 9, 2008). A multi-faceted post-occupancy evaluation5 (still in progress) indicates that a high level of people are mostly satisfied with living in Concord Pacific Place, its amenities, and urban lifestyle, but additional progress could be made by continuing to work on community building and management/maintenance issues (e.g., accommodation for dogs in parks) (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008).

With a development period of over twenty years for the entire project and over C$3 billion in total development costs at completion, a few towers are still under development and the last building is expected to be finished and sold by 2010 (Fader, 2002; Gourley, 1997). At its completion, Concord Pacific Place will be home to about 20,000 people in a combination of townhouses, low- and mid-rise flats, and about 47 towers of varying heights, as well as more than 50 acres of public parks and open space (City of Vancouver, 2003; City of Vancouver Planning Department, 2004; Concord Pacific, 2007; Fader, 2002).

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5 This study is being conducted in the School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP) at the University of British Columbia.
Figure 17: Concord Pacific Place, False Creek North – Site Plan 2

Source: City of Vancouver, 2003

Figure 18: Aerial View of Concord Pacific Place, False Creek North

Source: The Hulbert Group Int. Inc., n.d.
Figure 19: Various Images of Concord Pacific Place

Source: The Hulbert Group Int. Inc., n.d.
Downtown Living: For Families?

Chapter 4

Source: The Hulbert Group Int. Inc., n.d.

Source: City of Vancouver, 2003
Source: City of Vancouver, 2003

Source: City of Vancouver, 2003
Although Vancouver measures up well to internationally established best practices for urban planning, the city is not without its challenges. The city is blessed with natural beauty, planners have dedicated their efforts toward high-density urban living, and other factors previously discussed have led the path for its praise as one of the most livable cities in the world and the doubling of its downtown population over the last few decades. Does downtown Vancouver truly deserve its “miracle” status, is it all just an illusion, or does this example city provide valuable lessons about the dilemmas of success and how Vancouver’s livability strategies have created their own set of paradoxes? Many have embraced dense city living, but it is not for everyone and may come at the expense of other societal objectives. The sections below describe the main challenges facing urban livability for families in Vancouver.

5.1 **Who Benefits From Vancouver’s “Success?”**
**A Look at Housing Affordability**

Vancouver is indeed a beautiful city that people flock to, driving up the demand for housing. In a trend that started with the development of False Creek North, luxury condos now line Vancouver’s downtown streets and new ones constantly spring up. The demand for housing in Vancouver is evident through its rising prices, as well as strong absorption and low vacancy rates.

However, this “success” has come at a price. The resulting increasing housing prices, driven up to levels seen nowhere else in Canada, are unaffordable to many and contribute to gentrification and prominent income/class divisions (Anonymous Concord Pacific Place resident and parent, personal interview, January 9, 2008). As the most expensive housing market in Canada, downtown Vancouver’s average sales price for a condo
was C$419,750 in 2007 (up 14.6% from 2006), whereas it was C$241,818 in Toronto and C$201,818 in Montreal (Baker, 2007b). Vancouver is increasingly becoming a city for the wealthy, as indicated by a rise of 48% in the number of homes selling for more than C$2 million in 2007, with foreign and second-home buyers fueling this high-end market (Baker, 2007b). “Vancouver may be one of the most livable cities in the world, but fewer and fewer people can afford to live there” (Groc, 2007a).

In fact, Vancouver Federation’s (2006) “Vancouver’s Vital Signs 2006,” a snapshot of the city’s wellness and livability that rates the city’s performance in 12 key areas, rated the city a “D+” for housing on its annual report card (Groc, 2007a). Housing received the worst grade, while most of the other 11 key indicators received “B” grades. In giving this rating, the Vancouver Foundation (2006) considered such priorities as the cost of housing, housing affordability, vacancy rates, availability of low-cost housing, and housing for people with special needs. Vancouver is “severely unaffordable” according to Vital Signs’ ratio of housing prices to median income (Shore, 2007); the median house price in the Vancouver CMA is currently 6.6 times the median income, which is almost double the overall average of 3.6 for Canada’s major cities (Vancouver Foundation, 2006). Vancouver also has the highest percentages of homeowners and renters in Canada spending more than 30% of their income on housing, at 24% and 44% respectively (Vancouver Foundation, 2006). The incidence of core housing need6 is particularly acute for certain populations: 50% of single person renter households, 45% of senior-led renter households, 43% of Aboriginal renter households, and 37% of new immigrant renter households are in need (Metro Vancouver, 2007). As evidenced by these numbers, a significant gap exists between the rich and poor (Shore, 2007; Vancouver Foundation, 2006).

As of 2006, a total of 21,378 units of non-market housing existed in Vancouver, of which 8,330 are designated for families. The majority of these and low-income market units are located downtown (14,086), with an average of 185 non-market units per year added in the downtown area between 2000 and 2005 (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007c; Vancouver Foundation, 2006). These figures pale in comparison to the total average

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6 “CMHC defines a household as being in ‘core housing need’ if the housing requires major repairs, if it has insufficient bedrooms for the size and makeup of the occupying household, and/or if the shelter costs (including utilities and fees) consume more than 30% of before-tax household income and if the household would have to spend 30% or more of its income to pay the average rent of alternative local markets” (Cooper, 2006).
number of units (2,009) built annually downtown between 2000 and 2005 and the total number of units (12,054) completed during this time (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007a). Non-market units account for less than 10%, on annual average, of all new housing developed during these years. By December 2010, however, the City of Vancouver expects total non-market housing to increase by 20% in the downtown core, where 21 projects are under construction or planned that would add 1,347 non-market units (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007c).

Affordable housing is also a concern that may be exacerbated with the development and growth associated with the 2010 Winter Olympics. Controversy has surrounded the development of the Olympic Village at Southeast False Creek, where the amount of affordable housing initially agreed upon has been recently reduced through the final rezoning process due to concerns about cost and a decrease in government financing for low-income housing (Baker, 2007b; Groc, 2007a). Gordon Price, former Vancouver councillor and present director of the City Program at Simon Fraser University, remarked, “the city erred by abandoning its commitment to maintain a 33 percent low-income housing mix in the Southeast False Creek Site” (Baker, 2007b). After initially housing athletes during the Olympics, the site “is to be converted into condominiums and town houses selling for $600,000 to $6 million” (Baker, 2007b). As demonstrated by this reneged commitment, social sustainability objectives for the Southeast False Creek project have become quite questionable in implementation.

Affordable suburban homes have receded even farther from the city center (Blore, 2001), pushing away those who cannot afford to live downtown or anywhere in the central area, while increasing commuting time and expenses for many. High prices are pushing out both low-income residents (through such circumstances as the loss of single-room-occupancy rooms to make room for new projects) and middle-income renters and buyers (Baker, 2007b). Not all have the option to choose where they want to live and partake in the urban lifestyle that draws many of the current middle- and upper-income residents to downtown. At the same time, in a market like Vancouver’s, where all housing is expensive overall, “condos offer entry-level buyers a chance to get into the housing market” (Christie, 2005). On a per square foot basis, condos may still be more expensive than single-family homes, but in total price, condos are generally less expensive than single-family homes (Christie, 2005).
Another problem is that even though larger units have been built to cater to families wanting to live downtown with the intent that they would be occupied by families, there is no guarantee that these units will be sold or rented exclusively to families. Some residents (without children) may just purchase these units because they want larger homes to live in or for investment purposes, leaving families with fewer units available to consider, reducing density, and potentially driving up prices further (when units are snatched up for investment). Moreover, for family-size units that are actually occupied by families, “parents say the units, mostly two-bedrooms, are too small,” especially when there are two or more kids (Baker, 2005), which may pose additional problems for retaining families downtown.

The condo boom and resulting lack of affordable housing also impacts population diversity – socioeconomically and culturally – downtown. Boddy (2008) argues that the city’s creative cultural class is being pushed out, along with businesses, as described below. He says, “What a strange new city we are making: chock full of boomers preparing retirement nests; hub to global investors transforming their dollars/euros/pesos/yuan/rupiah into condo walls. But as a direct result, we are also shrinking core-area offices and studios, the very spaces where culture is created and where new businesses are grown.” This image hardly represents the diverse, family-friendly urban living environment so commonly advertised in Vancouver. Artists and art galleries struggle to find affordable spaces. Although some arts groups, such as the Contemporary Art Gallery and the Vancouver International Film Centre, have benefited from the condo boom by taking advantage of public-private partnerships that allow developers of adjacent properties to obtain additional floor area in new buildings in exchange for providing arts facilities, “these arrangements do not create low-cost housing or work spaces for individual artists – studios with good light for painters, soundproof rehearsal space for musicians and actors, shops for designers and crafts people” (Boddy, 2008).

The City and higher levels of government have not always had a limited role in ensuring the availability of affordable housing. In fact, “the city pursued a policy of setting aside 20 per cent of the land in large development sites for social housing. But because senior governments have largely moved out of the affordable housing business, many of the resulting sites remain empty and forlorn” (Boddy, 2008). With the federal withdrawal from social housing subsidies (as described in Chapter 3), and therefore limited funding, securing the 20% affordability component has been a challenge, let alone trying to reach a 30%
affordable component, which is now considered to be a more appropriate target (Punter, 2003). Since the City has limited involvement in building social housing, developers contribute cash to the City to buy land for future development, but many of these sites remain empty as they wait for developers or higher levels of government to build affordable housing on them. The City also has limited ability to raise funds since it only generates property tax revenue, while provincial and federal levels of government retain the remainder of tax money. Yet, “cities are taking on the burden of services the province/federal governments used to provide but they haven’t been given new revenue streams to pay for them” (L. B., comment on November 8, 2007 to DeWolf, 2007). Even with the new developments that do include a percentage of affordable housing, the overwhelming majority of new housing caters to the luxury market.

Not only is housing affordability a major issue, but homelessness has also become an increasing problem in Vancouver (growing since the 1980s, but particularly critical recently), with rising property values and associated shortages of appropriate, adequate, affordable housing partly to blame. Housing the homeless population is complicated by other factors that contribute to rising numbers of homeless people such as “de-institutionalization of persons with mental illness without corresponding increases in community supports and supported housing” (Cooper, 2006), physical disability, and issues of addiction. The number of homeless people in the city increased 106% from 628 to 1,291 between 2002 and 2005, which is significantly higher than the 81% growth in other areas of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (Vancouver Foundation, 2006). “The number of shelter beds is greatly exceeded by the number of people living on the streets” (Shore, 2007). With 702 shelter beds currently existing in the city, 46% of Vancouver’s homeless do not have access to shelter on any given night (Vancouver Foundation, 2006). The City of Vancouver has a “Homeless Action Plan” and has been working to reduce homelessness through community grants, development of social housing, improved shelter facilities and support services, relocation services, involvement with a regional homeless committee, and a range of other policy interventions (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2008a). However, “housing and homelessness are primarily provincial responsibilities,” and British Columbia’s welfare system is also in need of meaningful improvements (Cooper, 2006).

Vancouver’s critical challenge is to remain a desirable city where people want to live (fueling demand that drives higher property prices), yet still provide enough affordable
housing so people from a variety of backgrounds have the option of living downtown. Thus, this is one of the dilemmas that makes Vancouver a victim of its own success – maintaining affordability as demand and resulting housing prices soar. Lisa B. notes, “We could design the city to be awful so that no one wants to live here and property prices stay low and affordable, but that’s not much of an answer. The trick is how to provide affordable housing in a desirable city?” (comment on November 8, 2007 to DeWolf, 2007). This is going to be “an ever-increasing challenge as pressures from growth are maintained and the city’s supply of land for redevelopment becomes ever more limited” (Punter, 2003). According to many sources and public opinion, the related areas of housing, homelessness, and poverty are the most vital issues that need to be addressed to improve the overall quality of life in the city (Vancouver Foundation, 2006). Affordability is a vital element of family-oriented urban livability needed to draw families of all income levels to Vancouver’s downtown, while retaining the existing families and curbing the negative impacts of gentrification.

5.2 NOT FOR EVERYONE: OBJECTIONS TO DENSITY

Those who are fortunate to not have the affordability concerns addressed above are able to let lifestyle choice preferences weigh more heavily into their housing location considerations. While it may be a dream come true for many city planners to contribute to initiatives that spark the success of thriving downtowns and urban living, density is not popular with everyone, especially families who want to raise their children in the suburbs due to its real or perceived advantages. This is not so much a problem as it is a consideration for policy makers and planners when they are devising comprehensive strategies to think about how this population can also be accommodated in livable ways that discourage extensive sprawl.

To promote density as beneficial for both residents and the environment, planners have been developing tools and associating density with a higher quality of life. Increasing density in new developments is one way since there are no existing residents who may object and hinder the development process. Vancouver encourages density in existing neighborhoods through its EcoDensity Initiative and makes it attractive with the additional
public amenities, infrastructure, and mixed uses that density supports to deliver complete, vibrant neighborhoods (Groc, 2007a).

High-quality urban design is also key in attracting city residents to help counter the tradeoffs involved with urban life. One of the large design challenges that remains for families used to the suburban lifestyle, but contemplating relocating downtown, is the difference in home size and availability of private open space. Planners and developers are thinking of innovative ways to provide the same conveniences in the city by incorporating such features as more flexible space (i.e., to have the ability to decrease permanency and move interior walls as needed) and private garages for storage, off-street parking, and workspace in townhouses at the bases of apartment towers (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008; G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008), which have become a signature icon of downtown Vancouver.

Although Vancouver is doing much work – more than most cities in North America – around smart growth and densification, the challenge remains to find more creative ways to improve sustainability and density so that it is desirable to more families. The development of Southeast False Creek near downtown, the site of the 2010 Winter Games Olympic Village, offers an opportunity for creativity in green design, while it also poses the housing affordability challenges described above in section 5.1. Furthermore, it will be a good EcoDensity experiment to compare the ecological footprint of this site with other areas to determine whether new approaches truly make a real difference (Groc, 2007a).

5.2.1 Diverse Narratives: Too Sterile Environment Without Enough Excitement vs. Just Right

Residents’ experiences living in the city significantly differ. Some argue that downtown is boring and sterile, particularly for young professionals, while others love the area. Comments by local residents include the following divergent opinions:

Downtown Vancouver is not much of a downtown since it has no sense of community and not that much to do. The nightlife is weak and the whole downtown is a wasteland of condos, homeless people, drugs, prostitutes and crime. The only things I like in this area, which local people [call] downtown, are Stanley Park and Vancouver Library. This area is a disaster! I’d rather be in Detroit since it’s cleaner and safer than Vancouver. Downtown Detroit really has improved significantly in the last few years, and it’s more
interesting than Vancouver’s (P. Trubell, comment on November 8, 2007 to DeWolf, 2007).

To offer a counterpoint to Paul – I live in downtown and love it. I live carfree and plugged into the community. I’m on a quiet residential street in the West End with everything just minutes away. It’s the best place I’ve ever lived, so experiences differ (L. B., comment on November 8, 2007 to DeWolf, 2007).

A third narrative combines both the positive and negative views about Vancouver:

Sure, it has its critics, who accuse it of transforming downtown Vancouver into a bland condoscape, or of promoting residential construction at the expense of office and industrial space, but you can’t deny that Vancouver has dealt very well with some pretty massive population growth and development pressures over the past twenty years. As other young, fast-growing cities have sprawled like crazy, Vancouver has densified, creating a functional urban core where a car-free life is now possible (DeWolf, 2007).

Perhaps such arguments as limited nightlife in Vancouver may be a negative consideration for young, single professionals, but may actually enhance the quality of life for families with children. Others living downtown, particularly families with children, comment that while everything is right outside their front door and it is a nice environment with friendly neighbors and quite a few opportunities in walking distance, housing units are quite compact and offer too little space for larger families (i.e., more than two kids) (Blomfield, 2006).

5.3 **Public School Availability**

Crucial to families considering living (or staying) downtown is the presence of local schools for their children to attend. Herron (2006) acknowledges, “Schools form the heart of any livable community, yet in the matter of urban planning, and most important, delivery, they get short shrift as the disgraceful Yaletown situation exemplifies.” Furthermore, “Libraries, community centres, parks and good restaurants are all essential components and part of any new community development, but when you neglect to build schools, in advance
of well-publicized burgeoning urban population, you seriously undermine the livability of
that part of the city” (Herron, 2006). With the increase in families with children living
downtown, available neighborhood public schools in the downtown core are at capacity and
parents are stuck finding alternatives for education – either enrolling kids in public schools
in other areas of the city outside their neighborhood and having to travel there or enrolling
them in expensive private schools7 (Spencer, 2007). In 2006, over 100 parents faced this
problem just in the Yaletown neighborhood of downtown and this number has greatly
increased since (Herron, 2006). The newest school, Elsie Roy Elementary, opened in 2004
in the False Creek North/Yaletown neighborhood and accommodates about 350 students.
Elsie Roy was immediately quite popular and has been filled to capacity since it opened
(Steffenhagen, 2008). The next new downtown elementary school is not scheduled to be
built for several years, with an opening scheduled for 2011 (Herron, 2006). However, this is
only a proposal to build the new school and the Ministry of Education has not yet granted
funding approval (Steffenhagen, 2008).

Much of the delay in building needed schools is due to the regulations and policies of
the Ministry of Education in Victoria, which does not grant funding in advance to urban
school boards with increasing populations and requires closing or downsizing of under-
occupied schools in other areas of the city before allowing construction to proceed in
another part of the city (Herron, 2006). The district must reduce excess capacity elsewhere,
through proposed closures or program changes to redistribute enrollments, before there will
be consideration of additional classroom space or new schools downtown. With a district-
wide vacancy rate of 20% (accounting for 10,000 empty seats in a total of 93 public schools),
this is “an unacceptable drain on resources,” according to former Board Chair Ken Denike
(Steffenhagen, 2008). Furthermore, “Excess capacity also halts new school construction in
parts of the city with growing student populations because the province won’t pay for new
buildings unless nearby schools are fully utilized” (Steffenhagen, 2008).

For example, the school board adopted a plan for Elsie Roy in 1990, but the Ministry
of Education did not grant funding approval until 10 years later in 2000 (Herron, 2006).
Although Elsie Roy is full, neighboring schools still have more than 500 vacancies, including
384 at Strathcona Elementary, which is located less than 3 kilometers away from Elsie Roy in
the Downtown Eastside neighborhood (outside of the downtown core) and 57% empty

7 18% of Vancouver’s school-aged population attends non-public schools (Spencer, 2007).
Downtown Living: For Families?

(Spencer, 2007; Steffenhagen, 2008). As Spencer (2007) puts it, “Elsie Roy needs to get bigger, while Strathcona is oversized.” Strathcona has plenty of selling points including a French immersion program and after-school care, but its low enrollment may be explained by parents’ fears (real or perceived) of the surrounding Downtown Eastside neighborhood, which is reputed to have serious crime and drug problems (Rolfsen, 2008). Thus, the real school problem is not lack of capacity overall, but room for students in specific, highly desirable schools within the immediate vicinity of new downtown neighborhoods. Even if the other schools with vacancies are not in the immediate neighborhood vicinity for local children, the board of education considers them feasible options with space available for nearby residents and will not propose building new schools in high-density areas like Yaletown until plans are in place to address excess capacity in other areas of the district.

5.4 Downtown Eastside: Not Such a Desirable Neighborhood

Briefly referenced above as the location of Strathcona Elementary, the Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighborhood, adjacent to Vancouver’s central business district, conveys a very different image from the much touted “model city” typically represented in praises of Vancouver. Despite its visual successes in urban design, Vancouver is not without its social ills, which are clearly visible in some areas. Homelessness, as mentioned, is a significant issue that plagues the Downtown Eastside. This neighborhood is an area of concentrated poverty that is also afflicted with drug dependence and dealing (Kuiper, 2006). According to Kuiper (2006), “Within a few blocks are more than a thousand homeless people, an estimated 40-70% of whom are mentally ill, a significant proportion of whom are indigenous and most of whom are drug-dependent. There are people on the footpaths and in the alleyways shooting up, smoking crack pipes and doing deals.” A few local Vancouver residents also mentioned in conversation that this neighborhood is rife with crime, disease, unemployment, prostitution, and drug problems, hence their labeling of the area as “the combat zone.” DeWolf (2007) attempts to provide an explanation for the problems of the DTES in pointing out that “the current state of the Downtown Eastside is definitely a failure not just on the part of Vancouver’s planners, but on the part of higher levels of government who have failed to deal with the social problems that take people to the DTES in the first...
place.” Furthermore, the City is “in a tough position to solve the difficult problems of areas like the DTES given their limited ability to raise funds” (L. B., comment on November 8, 2007 to DeWolf, 2007).

However, the City of Vancouver (2008) acknowledges the area’s struggles in its Downtown Eastside Revitalization Program, which is a “multi-faceted approach to restoring the area to a healthy, safe and livable neighbourhood for all.” The efforts of this program are “focused on developing and implementing long-term approaches to community health, community safety, housing, and economic development” (City of Vancouver, 2008) through various strategies and initiatives with a number of partners to “create a functional and balanced low-income community” (Kuiper, 2006).

5.5 **Age Gap: Lack of Planning for All Youth**

Vancouver appears to function well “as an early childhood community,” but “it does not necessarily do as well in terms of retaining school-age children who need to move independently in larger spaces and cannot be easily accommodated in small condo units and existing playgrounds” (Groc, 2007b). Once children reach school-age, many families move out of downtown because they need more space, better schools, and/or additional amenities suitable for their children’s changing needs. This adds to the transient nature of the downtown community, taking away from the ability to sustain community building, stability, and long-term relationships (Groc, 2007b). Addressing the needs of middle childhood (ages 6 to 12) is difficult for planners; with many families leaving downtown by the time their children reach this age, specific strategies have not yet been formulated to accommodate this age group. “While planners may have done a good job to make downtown a good place for early childhood, they have yet to make child-friendly downtowns more sustainable so that kids can actually grow up there” (Groc, 2007b).

The City also “needs to provide more facilities for teenagers” (Baker, 2005). While there are several community centers, parks, and other public spaces (e.g., Robson Square) where teens can hang out during the day, there are a lack of safe, comfortable, social spaces where teens can hang out at night after local community centers close (Blomfield, 2006). One teen affirms, “At night, it’s pretty dull for teens” (Blomfield, 2006). As a result, many
teens hang out at David Lam Park at night and do drugs (Blomfield, 2006), creating additional problems to deal with. Most places that are open late are only for adults and others are too costly for teens to afford (Blomfield, 2006). Attesting to this problem, an employee from the Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre states, “It is hard for kids to engage in a positive way without having to spend a lot” because it is expensive to take part in the commercial activities that are available and kids don’t have much money (Blomfield, 2006).

Vancouver and other cities have not yet contributed much to strategies and environments that are appropriate for children of various ages. To retain families downtown, children of all ages must be considered in planning and development processes.

5.6 Too Much Emphasis on Housing Downtown? What About Business?

Significant transformation has occurred since the adoption of Vancouver’s “Central Area Plan” in 1991, which aimed to revitalize the downtown core through emphasis on housing diversity, livability, and bringing people and activity to the streets and other public spaces. The “living first” strategy described in Chapter 4 has surely worked in the sense of rapidly increasing population and new housing development over the last several years, as well as Vancouver’s numerous awards for livability. However, has this focus on downtown living come at the expense of business?

While more people are coming to live downtown, less are coming to work downtown. Boddy (2005c) comments, “…the city we are shaping in the current boom is something quite different from any notion of what a ‘downtown’ is, was, or will be….This will fix our destiny as a shortsighted residential resort, not the diverse and lively mixture of living and work that is a real downtown.” The condo market is booming and development of residential buildings seems to barely keep up with demand, yet “no new office tower has started construction or even been proposed by developers for [the] downtown core in the new century” (Boddy, 2005b). In addition, several existing commercial buildings have been converted into condominium apartments. “Downtown Vancouver is proving to be a brilliant place to live, visit, party, retire and convention, but a lousy place to do business” (Boddy, 2005a). As a “magnet for urban condo dwellers, …it runs the risk of ceasing to
serve the other purposes downtowns have traditionally served – as centers of commerce, corporate employment, jobs and overall economic life” (Peralta, 2006). In fact, a recently released jobs and land use study by the City concluded that “the downtown peninsula could run out of job space within five years under current zoning regulations” (Baker, 2007a). Vancouver stands to risk losing the commercial vitality of its downtown and becoming a victim of its own success if residential development continues at the same pace.

Both planning policies and the market are responsible for this shift from downtown being considered a center of employment to a center of living. In a reinforcing cycle, policies have helped fuel demand for an expanding residential market, while the strong market has encouraged these policies. Included in the “living first” strategy was the rezoning of much of downtown Vancouver in 1991 to permit housing in almost all areas, including commercial areas (Boddy, 2005c). City leaders and planners have favored and encouraged residential uses downtown over the past few decades.

Policies are only part of the equation, however, as the market has also heavily favored residential development. Boddy (2005b) explains: “According to condo and live/work tower developer Ian Gillespie, there is now a five-to-one ratio between the economic return per square meter of new condominium apartments built in downtown Vancouver versus a square meter of new office space.” Furthermore, “Vancouver businesses pay five times the municipal taxes per square meter than houses and condos do – by far the highest such ratio among major Canadian cities” (Boddy, 2005b). Thus, developers are highly unlikely to develop office towers when they could profit significantly more from building housing and not be hit with such skewed property tax assessments, at least in the current market. In addition, with the lack of head offices in Vancouver’s office market and a large number of relatively small tenants who do not occupy large blocks of space, local developers are reluctant to build office towers on speculation and fearful that office growth is not viable (Baker, 2007a). As a result, business in the core may suffer as fewer and fewer available sites provide the appropriate size and location for office towers to be developed in the future.

Much of Vancouver’s corporate sector, along with its office building developers, have already left for the suburbs and surrounding municipalities, taking jobs with them. Surrounding areas have been much more aggressive in attracting new offices and jobs, which are ironically drawing some workforce from people living downtown in reverse commuting.
patterns that counter some of the goals of downtown livability (e.g., mixed-use neighborhoods, reduced commuting, and walkability to work) (Boddy, 2005b). “The intended goal was not to encourage people to live downtown for the sake of living downtown; it was supposed to be getting people to live closer to their work and cut down on commuter-driven pollution. Instead, city planners have created a highrise suburb with an exodus of commuters fleeing the downtown peninsula to work each morning and returning home at night” (Hart, 2005).

Downtown Vancouver may ultimately not provide the traditional employment center typical of most large cities’ downtowns, and may instead find itself as an expensive residential hub rather than a place to live and work. Residents may also suffer from less tax revenue available to finance neighborhood services and infrastructure. In fact, “The condo-boom-inducing downtown lifestyle depends on huge investments of our taxes in parks, transit, theatres, galleries, and schools, but with no success attracting office development, downtown might soon become a net importer of money for services and infrastructure” (Boddy, 2005b). While it is important to note this concern, business taxes still account for 57% of Vancouver’s total tax revenue, exceeding the 41% from residential property taxes (Penner, 2005). In comparison to Seattle, for example, these numbers are almost exactly reversed, with 66% of Seattle’s property tax revenue from residential properties and 34% from commercial properties (City of Seattle Finance Department, 2003). Critics argue that the focus on residential livability has progressed as short-sighted, poor planning that may ultimately not afford a diverse, lively mixture of living and work uses that make up a real downtown; downtown Vancouver may indeed become just a “high-rise suburb.”

Larry Beasley counters this argument, saying that “it is housing that has been key to revitalizing downtown’s nightlife, as well as its retail and growth” (Penner, 2005). He says that there is room to continue developing housing and increasing the downtown population without crowding out most commercial space, adding that “since 2000, developers have [actually] built two million square feet of office space downtown...which is ‘nothing to be sniffed at’” (Penner, 2005). This new space may not be as obvious to some because the offices being developed are not in the form of “typical triple-A-class office towers of the 1970s or 1980s, because there is less demand for such space” and “the size of Vancouver’s average business office has shrunk to 7,000 square feet, compared with Toronto’s average of 12,000 square feet” (Penner, 2005).
A few years ago, City officials actually took an important step and put a moratorium on new housing near the business district, where residential or commercial development was previously optional (Baker, 2007a). However, there is still not enough commercial space in the pipeline and City officials will have to continue taking action to plan for this shortage (Baker, 2007a). Brent Toderian commented that “a successful downtown is a balanced organism…We are now at a different point in the evolution toward balance, as we shift gears to protect office capacity…Nevertheless, encouraging new office construction will not be an easy task” (Baker, 2007a).

While planners have recently begun to address commercial use and job issues in Vancouver’s downtown core through commissioning reports and plans, as well as consideration of zoning changes and incentives to developers, “Vancouver needs its council and mayor to wake up, and prevent the cosy closed loops of police department committees evaluating failures in police policy, and senior planners evaluating the success of their own downtown development strategies” (Boddy, 2005b). The amenities that make downtown an attractive place to live – “waterfront parks, mountain views and a lively dining and entertainment scene – now threaten local economic growth” and “it’s in everybody’s interest for the commercial sector of the real estate industry to be increasing with the population” (Baker, 2007a).

### 5.7 Transportation Challenges

Related to the lack of commercial development downtown is the issue of transportation. The livability strategy is “creating a multitude of traffic patterns impossible for mass transit to service efficiently. Without more commercial development downtown, our world-class but expensive rapid transit system is wasted” (Boddy, 2005a). Vancouver has a radial public transportation network that centers on accessing downtown for jobs, shopping, and entertainment.

However, “ridership projections for this latest [RAV] line predict more people leaving downtown to work in Richmond than coming into the centre” (Boddy, 2005a). The fastest growth in demand for transit may actually be for suburb-to-suburb travel patterns rather than into or out of downtown (Boddy, 2005a). With fewer jobs in the downtown
core and more jobs in suburban office parks with poor transit access, residents who rely on transit to commute to and from work face serious challenges. This is the reality of current development trends to accommodate residents and businesses that cannot afford to locate downtown or prefer a suburban environment. These development and travel patterns also have impacts on local congested bridges and plans for suburb-to-suburb freeways, which do not promote dense, transit-oriented, sustainable development.

In addition, “A persistent complaint of people living, studying in, or visiting Vancouver is the time required to move around the city using the transport system, the exception being the southeastern corridor, which is well served by the SkyTrain” (Punter, 2003). One resident went so far as to complain, “Public transit is overall horrible…I rarely take transit – only just when it is easy or direct” (Anonymous Concord Pacific Place resident and parent, personal interview, January 9, 2008). Other residents complain about the high price of transit passes and thus the transit system’s inaccessibility and ineffectiveness (Blomfield, 2006). The need for new rapid transit lines throughout the city is clear. Detailed studies and plans have been undertaken over the last decade to initiate new transit development, but final decisions are still being discussed. These realities and concerns need to be addressed before severe traffic congestion and inefficient public transit take over the city.

5.8 MECHANISMS FOR FINANCING GROWTH

Punter (2003) argues that there is a need to raise development cost levies and levels of community-amenity contributions upon rezoning well above the current amounts. Under debate is whether the full financial burden should be placed on the development industry or alternatively, higher property taxes, or a combination of the two to provide essential amenities and infrastructure, and deliver more social housing to maintain the city’s quality of life (Punter, 2003).
5.9 **Socioeconomic Challenges**

Another crucial challenge is maintaining peaceful, inclusive diversity, and ensuring that the diverse needs of the city’s relatively new and growing ethnic community are met in planning, design, and development strategies now and in the future (Punter, 2003). With most of Vancouver’s projected population growth expected to come from migration and immigration, as well as the city’s current socioeconomic challenges, “Vancouver will need to find new ways to ensure all populations are represented and engaged in all aspects of civic life, from electoral politics to community organizations and schools” (Hay, 2006). City leaders must ensure that all residents’ needs are met through offering support services and fostering their inclusion and capacity development (Hay, 2006). City officials must collaborate with higher levels of government, as well as non-profit and private sector organizations, to contribute to effective initiatives that lead to social and economic sustainability.

5.10 **Moving Toward a More Sustainable Future**

Vancouver has been consistently ranked as one of the world’s most livable cities, but the city faces many challenges, as described above, to keep this title. Gordon Price remarked, “Vancouver’s ranking is a culmination of several considerations and doesn’t necessarily mean Vancouver is the best in each area…‘We do moderation really well. We’re not the best but we’re far from the worst’” (Sinoski, 2007). Vancouver is perceived as a beautiful, livable destination and has many great qualities, but residents still have many complaints.

While Vancouver has been a leader in sustainable planning and development, the city can “realize a deeper commitment to sustainable forms of development” by addressing a wide range of issues and sustainability targets (Punter, 2003). New energy technologies, more green building techniques, new forms of neighborhood sustainability practices, and green economic development can be implemented. With greater experience, urban design can be informed and planning and building regulations can evolve to ensure sustainable development citywide into the future.
One of the biggest challenges is sustaining the way of life in the city while meeting demands for affordable housing, effective transportation, and a high level of government services as the population continues to grow. As Catherine Clement, spokeswoman for the Vancouver Federation, acknowledges, “The city’s healthy environment and climate are big draws for people living here; yet many are also disgruntled with the traffic problems and rising house prices. ‘Who is it livable for? For all or just a group of people?’” (Sinoski, 2007). Herron (2006) furthers this point by stating, “The lack of affordable housing, the increasingly prohibitive cost of living in the city, the crisis in child care, plus the failure of many civic entities to urge Victoria to build schools on time, are combining to make parts of Vancouver a city that is rapidly becoming unfriendly to young families of all but the wealthy.” Vancouver must continue to devise strategies to manage existing and anticipated challenges in order to plan for a vibrant, livable downtown that caters to residents – including families – of all backgrounds and fosters the additional mix of uses that make downtown truly downtown.
CHAPTER 6: LESSONS LEARNED FROM VANCOURVER FOR OTHER CITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Vancouver has established an exemplary global reputation for its planning achievements, particularly with respect to its collaborative, responsive, innovative, and design-led approach to urban revitalization. While Vancouver is not the perfect city it appears to be from the various reports praising its livability, Vancouver has been successful in many areas of sustainable urban planning through high standards of design and an integrated planning model that has become known as “Vancouverism” (Kuiper, 2006). Leadership, effective and collaborative governance, vision, foresight, and innovative thinking have been crucial to Vancouver’s achievements in urban livability. These traits have been epitomized in Vancouver’s city planning leaders, among others, but particularly the recent Directors of Planning: Ray Spaxman between 1973 and 1989 and Larry Beasley and Ann McAfee during the 1990s through 2006. The Vancouver experience offers many lessons for other cities, both in what it takes for this model to be effective and the associated challenges – some related to the ensuing dilemmas of success.

6.1 LESSONS LEARNED: WHAT IT TAKES TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS VIA THE “VANCOURVER MODEL”

Punter (2003) summarizes the reasons for Vancouver’s success in its ability to “create and sustain such a multi-faceted, elaborate, and demanding system” through the following six factors:

- The environmental quality of the city’s site, setting, and location
- Sustained economic growth and demand for quality property
- Shared public and political beliefs in environmental quality, the livable city, and participatory planning
- Independence and delegated powers to establish technical excellence and incentives for design
- An encapsulated planning and design community where there is substantial peer pressure to conform and perform
- Gifted, committed long-serving politicians, planners, and architects with a shared ethos.

Price (2003) also describes several lessons that have been learned from the success of the “Vancouver Model.” One is the city’s high-density community that offers a housing choice for new and existing residents, as well as a sustainable way of living that keeps the downtown alive. Although residents of most cities in North America challenge proposals for increased density, “Vancouver, because of its geographical constraints and absence of freeways, found it necessary to reinvent the processes that allowed development to occur at high density but that reinforced the community’s values – and, with good design, could improve the quality of life” (Price, 2003). New residential towers also help take some of the pressure off of existing neighborhoods to accommodate new growth and lessen competition from newcomers for existing housing stock.

This growth also helps pay for new growth. The requirements for developers to include amenities (e.g., waterfront walkways, parks, school sites, childcare centers, community centers, and public art) in their projects and pay development levies to fund public benefits improve livability for the public and make the developers’ products more attractive. In a reinforcing cycle, “public benefits, in short, add value, and that value helps pay for the public benefits” (Price, 2003).

As key public goals, affordable and family-friendly housing have been integrated into these new neighborhoods through City requirements, but there is still much need for additional affordability in Vancouver’s expensive market. “Reductions in senior-government programs for non-market housing have delayed plans” and limited funding availability for off-site affordable units (Price, 2003).

With the projected continued population growth in the downtown peninsula, as well as in the region, the Greater Vancouver region will likely have to duplicate the densification achieved downtown appropriately in other areas of the city (Price, 2003). In doing so, the city can learn from its previous experience to work toward making other neighborhoods even more successful.
6.1.1 Vancouver’s Unique Circumstances: A Singularity?

Some of Vancouver’s successful qualities are related to the city’s specific context. As described in detail in the following sections, Vancouver’s history of progressive planning, governance structure and collaboration, available land, and early investment, as well as its beautiful natural setting that attracts people from all over the world, have all contributed to Vancouver’s success in planning and downtown livability. The entirety of these unique circumstances may not be replicable elsewhere, making Vancouver a potential case of singularity.

In specific reference to Vancouver’s natural beauty, Punter (2003) asks, “Would this model work as well in cities without magnificent views from every apartment tower? Would the high-rise apartments be so marketable?” He concludes that “the model might work, but demand for the apartments might be less – with obvious implications for project viability. Everything would depend on the quality of the project and the neighborhood – its amenities, facilities, and design quality” (Punter, 2003).

In addition to Vancouver’s desirable environment, it is the well-timed combination of the other circumstances mentioned above that has laid the foundation for Vancouver to achieve in several areas. While other cities may incorporate one or a few of these characteristics, it is unlikely that they will have the fortune of having them all at once, as Vancouver has. Therefore, they will have to focus on areas where they can have more influence such as project quality and design, as cited above.

6.1.1.1 History of Progressive Planning and Policies

Historically, Vancouver has been progressive in its planning initiatives, with regulation from the beginning to shape urban design. Beginning with the first city council in 1886, their first resolution was “to petition the Federal Government for the dedication of 404 hectares of the downtown peninsula as Stanley Park” (Kuiper, 2006). The priority placed on open space in an urban area this far back is indicative of their forward-thinking planning. Stanley Park, the largest city-owned park in Canada and the third largest in North America, has served as a globally recognized recreational and relaxing natural outdoor space for several generations of residents and visitors to enjoy (Vancouver Park Board, 2008).
In addition to open space, no freeways run through downtown Vancouver (an intentional planning strategy), which has encouraged people to live in the city for accessibility to employment and urban amenities without having to spend a lot of time commuting (A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). Unlike Vancouver, most cities in the United States have freeways running through them so it is easier to enter and leave the central city to the suburbs, which promotes suburban rather than urban living.

In recent decades, Vancouver has provided evidence that increased density in its city core can be designed well when there is good planning. “Vancouver has embraced density…and developed mechanisms so that the pursuit of private gain would bring with it public benefit” (Price, 2003). With newly hired Director of Planning Ray Spaxman in 1974, followed by Co-Directors of Planning Larry Beasley and Ann McAfee, downtown livability was prioritized with carefully crafted urban design guidelines and the development-permit process was revised from top to bottom to “fulfill the political commitments of a Council majority that had promised more citizen accountability” (Price, 2003). Vancouver’s process empowered planners to “use a discretionary zoning system to determine what would get built and what wouldn’t. In the beginning, what was required, and what was ultimately achieved, was a mechanism that allowed planners to negotiate on behalf of the public throughout the development-approval process. By making everything in the downtown core conditional with no as-of-right density, approvals became dependent on the quality of design and the response of the project by the public realm as judged by professionals through the development-permit process” (Price, 2003). Although this is hard to pull off, Vancouver has made this process work. Eventually, “much of what was once discretionary has now been codified or incorporated into guidelines” (Price, 2003).

The Vancouver planning mantra has been to not just build housing, but build “complete neighborhoods…for an adult to be able to look around and say, ‘Hey, I could raise a family here’” (Gragg, 2005). By focusing on human-scale design, livability, and sustainability, Vancouver’s high-rise development has resulted in quality living spaces and attractive public spaces (Kuiper, 2006). In fact, Kuiper (2006) comments, “A ‘city of glass’ can…not only be more socially, ecologically and economically sustainable, it can also be an engaging place of beauty and pleasure.” Since the 1950s, Vancouver has built mixed-use communities with high-rise residential towers in its downtown, thus keeping the downtown alive (Price, 2005). According to J. Lennox Scott, chairman and CEO of JL Scott Real
Estate, “Density brings energy to downtowns…It revitalizes neighborhoods and causes cafes, clubs, galleries, and boutiques to spring up and serve the increased population” (Christie, 2005). By identifying a desire for family-friendly urban amenities early on, and thus initiating a path different from other cities at the time, Vancouver has enticed people to live there by developing entire mixed-use, diverse communities with desirable urban design features and amenities already in place (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008; A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). Development and subsequent occupancy of the City-owned land on the south shore of False Creek demonstrated a market for family-oriented housing, which led the way for development opportunities on the downtown peninsula (A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). “By the 1990s, …people of all ages and families of all kinds, including those with children, were choosing high-rise living as a viable choice” (Price, 2005). Through careful, innovative, and pro-active planning, Vancouver has developed mechanisms to ensure that public benefits for these new residents are provided as a condition of private development (Price, 2003). Although Price affirms, “By and large, the policies have been a success” (Blomfield, 2006), much work remains in such problem areas as housing affordability, homelessness, mismatch between employment and housing locations, and transportation infrastructure.

6.1.1.2 Governance Structure, Coordination, and Collaboration in Planning and Development Processes

Because Vancouver has its own charter, the City is not as influenced by the provincial and federal governments as other municipalities (Kuiper, 2006). This allows the City much room for its own decision-making to achieve its vision, with less constraints and political imposition by other levels of government. The City Council also operates with a highly engaged, discretionary regulatory framework with a focus on guidelines and incentives for development, whereby landowners must negotiate development rights, which has been a vital component of the City’s planning approach (Gragg, 2005; Kuiper, 2006). Kuiper (2006) explains, “While cooperative, this planning has been highly interventionist. Crucially, the development assessment process is depoliticized. While the City Council is responsible for overall policy, final approval for major projects is given by the Development Permit Board, of which no member is a politician.” Moreover, “it was considered inappropriate for a politician to even be in the same room as the decision-makers” (Price, 2003). Although the
formal approval process may not involve politicians, it is unlikely that politicians have not had any influence in these decisions, but it appears that they may have less power than in comparable American cities. A group of citizens, industry representatives, and professionals also assists the board in its decisions in an advisory role (Price, 2003). In addition to the board is the Urban Design Panel, which is a purely advisory professional body appointed by the City Council that meets separately from the Development Permit Board. “Key to its success…was that the director of planning was not the chair of the panel and that only design professionals were members” (Price, 2003).

“Important to the survival of the development-permit and urban-design process was the assessment on the part of the development industry that the politicians would support it, and that the citizens would support the politicians. Of course, it was always in the developers’ own interest to cooperate” (Price, 2003). According to local developer Michael Geller, “Most developers accept the ‘social engineering’ conditions that the city has imposed” (Baker, 2005). Developer Negrin, who worked on the False Creek North project from its beginning, calls the city’s negotiating style “gun-to-the-head,” yet adds, “But in hindsight, what they demanded was instrumental in creating the family-oriented neighborhoods…Did it work out for us? I have to say, it worked fantastically” (Gragg, 2005). Negrin also remarked, “We’ve found that our developments are more successful because we worked closely with the City…The success of Vancouver is that at the end of the day, we come to an agreement we can all live with. It’s a long process, this collaboration between City and developer, but it does work” (Price, 2003). Even with the additional required family-friendly amenities and public benefit contributions, developers are making handsome profits in downtown Vancouver. Geller says, “Nobody is losing any money” (Baker, 2005). While projects still take a significant amount of time to get through City Hall, developers have certainty that their submissions will not be “unduly delayed or negotiated to death with additional demands at the last moment” (Price, 2003). The process is basically complete once the director of planning or the Development Permit Board gives approval, as there is no appeal to the City Council (unless there is an error) or an extra-municipal body that would cause delay or renegotiation of projects. Although some zoning is still conditional, the checks and balances, as well as absence of political intrusion, that have been built into the system have limited criticism of the process and been mostly well-received by citizens (Price, 2003).
Planning also appears to be coordinated and integrated at both city and regional levels. For example, a joint transit agency, TransLink, brings together the 21 municipalities of Greater Vancouver (Kuiper, 2006). Neighbourhood Integrated Service Teams (NIST), a concept adopted by the City Council in 1994, are another example of integrated planning. NISTs are composed of staff from the City’s planning, police, fire, engineering, permit, and licensing departments; community centers and libraries; as well as representatives from such external agencies as the Vancouver School Board and the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority (Kuiper, 2006). The NIST initiative, which received the United Nations Award for Innovation in Public Service in 2003, facilitates information sharing and coordination of efforts with residents by “working across organizational boundaries to help communities solve problems” (City of Vancouver, 2007; Kuiper, 2006). Having coordination regionally and between City organizations allows planning to proceed in a cohesive manner, whereas other cities may have more fragmented planning.

City officials emphasize the importance of coordination and collaboration among governmental departments, community organizations, the private sector, and citizens in their planning processes to shape urban design and development, as well as serve both public and private objectives (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008; Kuiper, 2006). With multiple stakeholders able to engage and provide input, issues of concern can be addressed in the early stages of projects and initiatives, thus facilitating smoother implementation after buy-in from the various stakeholders. This cooperative planning approach has enabled planners to achieve much of their vision for Vancouver.

6.1.1.3 Available Land and Early Investors

Vancouver had the fortune of a large, contiguous parcel of downtown land (False Creek North) available to plan around after the Expo ’86 World’s Fair and used this opportunity to leverage benefits from the rezoning of this land, which was sold to developer Li Ka-shing for a bargain price. By rezoning the site to allow high-density residential use and maximize the number of units to be sold or rented, the City was able to negotiate several public amenities and infrastructure improvements, while incorporating family-friendly standards. These benefits were put back into the community through tapping into excess land profits and leveraging money from the private sector, without additional cost to existing taxpayers (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008; Price, 2003). Significantly,
“Vancouver’s ‘buoyant economy’ helps allow for the imposition of these kind of development conditions and changes” (“Family Housing,” 2006). These requirements and development levies have also been imposed on other development sites in newly rezoned areas.

Besides Li Ka-shing, much additional investment capital – primarily from Hong Kong – has continued to fuel Vancouver’s development of high-rise residential buildings and associated amenities. This influx of capital has made massive development possible in a short period of time. Overseas investment has been both developer- and individual-led, as individuals initially purchased two to three condo units for dual occupancy and investment purposes (A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). With the coordinated timing of the availability of the False Creek North site, several overseas investors, substantial immigration, and a strong market, Vancouver’s downtown was ripe for beginning implementation of the “living first” strategy.

### 6.2 Applicability of the “Vancouver Model” to Other Cascadia Region Cities: Seattle and Portland

#### 6.2.1 Fundamental Differences Between Canadian and American Cities

Several differences between Canada and the United States contribute to the planning and development that have occurred in each countries’ respective cities, as well as their future potential.

First, the ethos differs in that attitudes toward urban density and communitarian culture are more accepted in Canada, particularly when comparing Vancouver to Western cities in the United States (G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008). Whereas it is a commonly accepted notion that kids should not be raised in cities in the United States (at least since the flight to the suburbs post World War II), and politicians and city officials often follow this bias in their planning decisions, decision makers in Vancouver have embraced urban density and effectively planned for it to make their city livable (G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008). Vancouver has a more widespread culture of urban living and regional leaders who “really get it,” resulting in its “cosmopolitan, delightful urban environment” (G. Johnson, personal interview, January 14, 2008). “It is not surprising that
some people fear increased density, associating it with increased traffic, parking problems and noise or with the poor-quality flat development of previous decades, but Vancouver shows that, with good planning, high density can result in quality living spaces and attractive public space” (Kuiper, 2006).

After the trauma of increasing poverty and white flight to the suburbs, many American inner cities deteriorated and only recently, have attempts been made to revitalize them. In contrast, similar white flight never occurred in Canada, as it does not have a legacy of slavery or similar levels of ethnic struggles. Canada never had massive public housing projects or urban renewal like the United States, crime levels are much lower in Canada, and immigrants that come to Canada tend to be more middle class and from dense cities where they are used to density (G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008). As a result, Vancouver did not face the same social conditions as failing inner cities in the United States.

In addition, the geographic constraints of Vancouver have encouraged urban livability due to the need to accommodate the city’s increasing population. Once the realization was accepted that Vancouver had no choice but to develop more densely, the debate changed from whether there should be high-rise development to how to do it well downtown and create complete communities, thus taking the pressure off of existing housing stock in order to maintain some affordability in some other areas of the city such as the West End (G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008). While it has still been a tough sell to move people from large homes outside the central city to downtown, Vancouver has sustained a high demand for urban housing because it is a highly desirable place to live and high-density urbanism works well enough to be suitable for middle-income families with children (G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008). In fact, the consumer reaction and demand for urban living have exceeded expectations in Vancouver, with the thousands of young residents as one of the testimonies to its success (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008; G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008). One Concord Pacific Place resident and parent commented, “it turned out even better than expected – even more kid friendly….It’s a real community, where we know lots of families and watch each other’s kids grow up – just like the suburbs” (personal interview, January 9, 2008).

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8 While there is still a racial divide between Whites and Aboriginals in Canada, it has not been as highly expressed geographically as racial divides in the United States (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008).
Second, Canadian cities tend to have much more regulatory power and less private property rights than the United States, and people more readily accept this regulation in the development process due to a different mindset and mutually shared objectives (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008; T. Doss, personal interview, January 4, 2008; G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008). Canadian cities have used this power and exercised their legal authority for public benefits through prescriptive requirements (Anonymous Social Planner for the City of Vancouver, personal interview, January 10, 2008). By crafting and implementing these regulations early on, Vancouver has helped make them more acceptable since they reflect the understood procedure of doing business for most of the city’s history (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008). Downtown development in Vancouver has been viewed as more of a privilege than a right (G. Johnson, personal interview, January 14, 2008). Furthermore, Freedman noted, “An interesting observation is that generally, Canadians are more deferential to government, relying on it for support” (Chodikoff, 2007). In many American cities, such as Seattle, there is more of a sense of confrontation between developers and the City due to the emphasis on private property rights, as well as interest-based planning and problem solving rather than cooperation (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008). Thus, the underlying governments and traditions differ in their ability to control growth, planning, and development. This difference does not necessarily preclude similar family-oriented development in the United States; it may just require an alternative approach that works under America’s distinct conditions.

Third, on a related note, Vancouver’s weak mayor system (where there are 10 councilors and one mayor and the mayor only has one vote) facilitates a different environment for policy (A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). With a stronger council in place, changes in mayoral election cycles do not create as much of a shifting policy environment as in the United States (A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). For example, instead of having a “mayor’s plan” for the city, there will be a “city’s plan.” Therefore, longevity and sustained objectives over several decades have been key to Vancouver’s success to carry through support for fundamental planning and development principles, despite electoral changes (A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008).

Finally, Canada has a larger emphasis on social goods than the United States. Thus, the resulting higher taxes in Canada should provide more resources and public expenditures
to support a higher quality of life (T. Doss, personal interview, January 4, 2008), in addition to the amenities required by private developers. Ironically, “However, in the US, there are actually more government-funded programs that municipalities can go after than there are in Canada. For example, the HOPE VI public housing program involved a large amount of federal money where a variety of municipalities were seriously competing against each other for these precious dollars” (Freedman cited in Chodikoff, 2007). In addition, “American cities have many more interesting ways of raising revenue to take care of their own business – whether it is straight taxation or instruments like tax-increment financing. A lot of people in Ontario are talking about it, but these tools haven't taken off. Another thing is that a city like Pittsburgh has incredible philanthropic foundations that throw dollars at where they think they can make cities better. This is lacking in Canadian cities” (Freedman cited in Chodikoff, 2007).

While Canada and the United States are not immensely different, their cities’ distinct conditions have influenced diverse paths of development and more readily facilitated Vancouver's achievements in urban livability by establishing a foundation of values and resources to build upon.

6.2.2 Comparison to Seattle, Washington and Portland, Oregon Overview

Although it is difficult to directly compare Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland, given their unique circumstances, these cities are often compared since they are the three largest cities located in the Pacific Northwest/Cascadia region and are all considered somewhat similar due to their geographic, historical, and cultural characteristics. As described above, Vancouver's combination of unique circumstances and proactive approach created opportunities to implement several ideal urban planning and family-friendly principles beginning three decades ago, while Seattle and Portland are still in the early stages of planning for family-oriented development.

Despite having very similar total city populations of 545,671 in Vancouver, 563,374 in Seattle, and 529,121 in Portland, as of 2000 Census data (2001 data in Vancouver), Seattle and Portland’s respective downtown populations vary considerably from Vancouver’s, where its downtown share of city growth has been significantly higher (City of Vancouver Planning Department, 2003). Vancouver's downtown residential growth has been booming for about the last two decades, while Portland and Seattle have only recently begun to see moderate
downtown growth. In the 1990s alone, Vancouver’s downtown population increased 215% to 70,091 in 2001, while Seattle only increased 54% to 18,983 and Portland increased 35% to 12,902 in 2000 (City of Vancouver Planning Department, 2003). Since 2000, significant growth has occurred in all of these cities’ new downtown neighborhoods, but downtown Vancouver continues to maintain over four times the downtown population of both Seattle and Portland (City of Vancouver Planning Department, 2007).

Seattle and Portland may never reach quite the scale of intense downtown growth that Vancouver has achieved, but experts believe that the intent is not to exactly replicate Vancouver and these cities have their own unique opportunities to realize many of Vancouver’s successes in family-friendly urban livability within different contexts over time (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008; A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). Although the conditions differ now, urban leaders can help create the circumstances that attract this type of development through such strategies as leveraging more money from private developers who benefit from increased property values after rezonings. It is a matter of timing, resources, political will, and sustained long-term objectives, based not only on policies, but also behavioral shifts toward embracing urban living (A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). While Portland is a recognized leader in many facets of urban planning and sustainability and still has various opportunities to continue improving in the areas where Vancouver has been successful, many believe that Seattle is a missed opportunity with poor planning and in need of a lot of help (Anonymous Social Planner for the City of Vancouver, personal interview, January 10, 2008).

6.2.2.1 Case Study: Seattle

While geographically close and often compared, Seattle and Vancouver are very different cities. To start with, they are located in two different countries. John Rahaim, Seattle’s former planning director, describes one significant difference about Vancouver: “They have far more ability to demand amenities than we do” (Cohen, 2006a). Despite the overall popularity of living downtown Seattle that has increased dramatically over the past 20 years to a current population of about 20,0009 (Dietrich, 2003a), particularly in such new desirable neighborhoods as Belltown and mixed-use developments as Harbor Steps,

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9 This figure compares to Vancouver’s downtown residential population, which is four times higher than Seattle’s, despite a metropolitan area with only two-thirds the population (Dietrich, 2003a).
households with families have not been adequately accommodated. While Vancouver has put a lot of faith in planning and spent several years “taking tangible actions to ensure that families with children can find suitable places to live right in the core of the city,” Seattle is more reactive in its planning and is lagging behind in amenities essential for livability (Hinshaw, 2003). There are few downtown parks, limited waterfront access, less lively streets, fewer housing choices, less pleasant urban design, and limited transportation options (Dietrich, 2003a). As former Seattle City Council member Peter Steinbrueck said, “Unless you plan for it, it’s not going to happen” (Dietrich, 2008).

Seattle’s political history is partially to blame for its comparative lack of amenities and progressive planning. With a less coordinated metropolitan area and less deference to government and authority than Vancouver, Seattle has suffered. Portland developer John Russell comments, “Seattle has an ethic of passivity…People throw up their hands and say there’s nothing we can do” (Dietrich, 2003a). Another Portland resident comments, “I went up to Seattle and there’s no planning….It’s a hodgepodge. There’s nothing happening there” (Dietrich, 2003a). With a strong mayor-string council form of city government, Seattle’s leaders have frequent delays in decision-making (Dietrich, 2003a). In contrast, Vancouver’s director of planning has “far more charter power than his counterpart in Seattle…He’s the kind of Czar whose authority would be regarded with grave suspicion in Seattle, but who has the power to demand top-grade development” (Dietrich, 2003a). Seattle also makes poor planning decisions (e.g., spending $14 billion to replace the Alaskan Way Viaduct instead of a more sustainable solution that is urban design-friendly) and does not take advantage of public-private partnerships to gain the same public amenities that Vancouver has to help create livable urban neighborhoods (Dietrich, 2003a). Through Vancouver’s close relationships with developers, the city has “won concessions Seattle has never dreamed of” (Dietrich, 2003a).

In recent years, however, the City of Seattle has embraced a new strategy for Seattle’s downtown core and its surrounding neighborhoods called “Center City Seattle: Livable…Walkable…24/7.” This strategy recognizes that the central area “represents a new urban identity for Seattle – a place with enormous energy, remarkable variety and dramatic potential. It also recognizes the significant advantage a strong core provides in a highly competitive global economy. A strong Center City represents smart growth at its best, fighting regional sprawl and building a sustainable economy and community” (City of
Seattle, 2007). The City’s vision for this area incorporates several planning and development objectives including more family-friendly amenities and services such as a new community center, more green space, and increased police patrols for safety. However, Seattle’s recent condo boom has not produced kid-friendly buildings with sufficient space and infrastructure for families (Cohen, 2006b). To increase the number of family-friendly apartments and condos, the City needs to partner more with developers and create incentives to make building them more worthwhile financially. One developer acknowledges, “We’re kind of waiting for the demand to materialize to support larger units...We would love to deliver [a] product for families” (Cohen, 2006b).

As of the 2000 Census, only 4% of households in Seattle’s urban core included a child, compared with 20% in the city as a whole, 37% for King County, and 25.7% on average for large cities nationwide (Cohen, 2006b; Egan, 2005). In fact, “Seattle had the smallest percentage of children of any major U.S. city except San Francisco,” according to the 2000 census (Hinshaw, 2003). It appears that “the divide between the childless and those with children is bigger than race, gender or age” (Dietrich, 2003b).

Downtown Seattle is not currently attracting many families, which is bound to continue until the appropriate infrastructure (i.e., schools, parks, and other necessary amenities) is provided and cultural biases against raising children downtown are reversed. The attitude is that why should an urban family market be forced when infrastructure is already in place in single-family neighborhoods throughout the city (G. Johnson, personal interview, January 14, 2008). Efforts to provide a range of multifamily alternatives have been hindered by the “region’s traditional favoritism toward single-family housing” (Dietrich, 2003b).

Although most downtown condos in Seattle are sold to young professionals and empty nesters rather than families with children, as is common elsewhere, there are still some pioneer families who are willing to sacrifice some space for an easier lifestyle with more time in the city (Cohen, 2006b). “In return for accepting the aggravations of an urban center, downtown dwellers live in the epicenter of culture and commerce, surrounded by some of the state’s most powerful people and institutions” (Higgins, 1997). Downtown living also offers an alternative to car reliance and the terrible traffic congestion in Seattle. However, “One of downtown’s secrets is that many of the more affluent condominium

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10 About 60% of Seattle is single-family zoned (G. Johnson, personal interview, January 14, 2008).
owners have second homes in the San Juan Islands or Cascade Mountains, allowing them to enjoy the best of both worlds” (Dietrich, 2003b). Therefore, perhaps the number of full-time residents downtown is actually less in reality.

In contrast to the large parcel of downtown land available for redevelopment after Expo '86 in Vancouver and the standards required to make new residential development there family-friendly, Seattle’s core does not have large areas in need of rezoning for redevelopment (Cohen, 2006a). In addition to Seattle not having the land available that Vancouver had, “Vancouver has kept its downtown condo prices lower by the near gift of cheap government land and allowances for tall buildings, giving developers more floors to sell, and allowing shoebox-sized 800-square-foot units to get moderate-income buyers in” (Dietrich, 2003b). Seattle City officials have been hesitant to raise height limits on downtown buildings, despite an expired voter approval to do so, which limits supply and keeps condo prices high and unaffordable to many (Dietrich, 2003b). Even with the inclusion of affordable family units, Seattle may still face the same problem that Vancouver’s attractive downtown neighborhoods have recently created: huge increases in housing prices and rents, making the vast majority of market housing downtown inaccessible to low-, moderate-, and even middle-income residents.

Furthermore, Seattle has not developed a form of urban housing and amenities suitable for and desirable to families. The townhouse style with direct ground access that is common in Vancouver is not found in downtown Seattle. “While Seattle has directed high density into downtown – in part to protect single-family neighborhoods – little has been done in the way of dramatically altering the place in ways that would attract and sustain households with children” (Hinshaw, 2003). Traffic calming measures have not been implemented and there is an insufficient amount of public open space downtown for children (Hinshaw, 2003). In fact, Seattle’s core has less public open space than any large city in America (Dietrich, 2003b). Parks, schools, grocery stores, childcare centers, playgrounds, safe streets, and good public transit are missing in Seattle’s core, making it difficult for families to live there (Dietrich, 2003b).

However, with increasing density in Seattle, improvements will hopefully come. “More housing begets more housing in an urban center,” comments one local Seattle developer and former city planner (Boyer, 2005). He further comments, “The more housing downtown occurs, the more desirable that lifestyle becomes because of the benefits that
come from high residential density – better shopping, better restaurants, better safety” (Boyer, 2005). Another developer adds, “We’re just starting to mature as a city and as we mature, we’re going to see more kids. It’s inevitable…More young couples who’ve lived downtown are going to start seeing raising kids here as more of an option” (Hinshaw, 2007a).

Price’s (2005) article “Seattle, Vancouver South?” prescribes advice for downtown Seattle based on planning lessons from Vancouver, stating, “It’s not density or height that matters; it’s the way you do it.” He goes on to describe the thin, glass, human-scale, Vancouver-style towers that characterize downtown, which are staggered to maintain views, minimize overshadowing, and maximize privacy; the need for a mix of low-, medium, and high-rise buildings to add variety and scale; a focus on transit, and pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly street design; the inclusion of affordable housing through increasing overall supply and subsidies; the inclusion of public, semi-private, and private green space; the restriction of off-street parking to underground spaces; and the amenities that make quality, safe, clean, family-friendly neighborhoods including good schools, child care, and parks (Price, 2005).

Price (2005) also emphasizes the importance of having “enough people – at least 10,000 – to ensure the health of a neighborhood retail core. Above all, you need a medium-sized supermarket to give definition and character to urban communities. Residents should be able to walk not only to work, but also to shop.” Hinshaw (2003) adds to this checklist the need for Seattle to tame traffic; create a true community center; and civilize the sidewalks by providing indoor waiting space for social service agency clients so that they do not have to form long queues along public sidewalks, allowing pedestrians to feel more comfortable.

After describing the main elements that characterize Vancouver’s urban neighborhoods, Price (2005) tells Seattle, “Don’t necessarily follow us prescriptively. Do it better, reflect your values, use your home-grown talent. In a few years it might be Vancouver saying, ‘It’s time we built a Seattle-style neighborhood.’” Boddy (2005c) further cautions Seattle “that all the answers to the future of your downtown are not to be found here in Vancouver…please be careful not to undertake overscaled rezonings like ours, as under the pressure of the current housing bubble they have undermined the best intentions of two generations of Vancouver planners,” referring to Vancouver’s over-emphasis on condo development and lack of attention to office space and business growth.
A blog in response to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer article “Kid-Friendly Downtown” furthers this point about Seattle needing its own solutions, saying:

The fact of the matter is Seattle isn’t Vancouver and will never be. Plus, Vancouver has something Seattle doesn’t, a long established downtown residential neighborhood with infrastructure and community services to support it. Rather than compare ourselves to Vancouver, Seattle (the city) needs to look inward to determine if the downtown area can truly support urban family living for all classes. And, if so, the city needs to develop solutions rather than rely on developers or wait endlessly before the demographics change (Kakimoto, 2006).

This blog author also points out that while parents and developers partially blame the lack of family-friendly living in Seattle’s downtown core on the lack of larger units and schools (and schools countering with a lack of demand in what becomes a catch-22 cycle), would providing a new school and larger units truly bring families downtown? The author argues:

Certainly, bringing schools to the area will provide a foundation for families to consider urban living. But, should the city invest into a new school that currently would have very little demand, especially at a time when other schools are closing? Will building larger units, as some parents claim, bring them to the downtown area? Considering that 2-bedroom units at Rollin Street Flats and Escala start at $800,000, it reasons that only uber-wealthy families could afford a 3-bedroom “family-sized” condo. And, would children who live in million-dollar condos attend public rather than private schools? (Kakimoto, 2006).

This comment alludes to the need to focus on family-friendly development for all income levels. “Parents say they need condos built with families in mind. Developers and families say they need a downtown school. And school district officials say they need to see some demand” (Cohen, 2006b). Ultimately, “someone needs to go first” to get more families to live downtown Seattle and stay when their children reach school-age (Cohen, 2006b). However, Seattle is taking steps to address this dilemma. The new Seattle Public Schools Superintendent recently hired a demographic consultant to conduct research that examines student population trends to assess school demand for both current and projected demographics (G. Johnson, personal interview, January 14, 2008). In the meantime, the
Seattle Public School District has no immediate plans to open a new downtown elementary school.  

Ultimately, “Seattle’s potential has barely been tapped” and there are several areas for high-density residential development (Dietrich, 2003a). “What’s lacking is vision, will and political and business partnership. What’s lacking is certainty: about what we want, and what we guarantee developers can do” (Dietrich, 2003a). However, “Portland is doing – almost routinely – what Seattle keeps dreaming and arguing about” (Dietrich, 2003a).

6.2.2.2 Case Study: Portland

Over the last decade, Portland has been redeveloping its former industrial sites and railroad lands into new urban neighborhoods – the Pearl, River, and South Waterfront Districts – with thousands of new housing units and urban amenities, drawing many empty nesters and young professionals to downtown life, yet there are few children (Gragg, 2005). While Vancouver initially made children a top priority in its planning decisions, Portland has only recently begun to initiate strategies for making its downtown more family-friendly and there are few empty sites left for redevelopment opportunities (Gragg, 2005). According to school demographers, only 54 school-age children lived in the Pearl District, as of October 2006, and fewer than 20 babies are expected to be born per year, despite the approximately 6,400 units of new housing that have been built there in the last 10 years and thousands of additional units in the pipeline (Gragg, 2005; Groc, 2007b). These figures pale in comparison to downtown Vancouver, where there are more than 7,000 children and birth rates approximate 50 to 90 per month, with an expected 1,000 new children each year (Beasley, 2007; Gragg, 2005). These children and their families are accommodated in some of Vancouver’s 37,233 new downtown housing units that have been built (or are under construction) since 1990 (City of Vancouver Housing Centre, 2007a).

However, it is difficult to directly compare urban development in Portland and Vancouver, as Vancouver has had a much more intense urban housing boom, City officials have more regulatory control over development rights, and there was a huge influx of investment capital from Hong Kong to meet the City’s demands. Portland, in contrast, has had a more uncertain urban housing market and fewer regulatory impositions beyond zoning requirements and incentives for developers (Gragg, 2005). The political situation in Portland does not facilitate the same level of regulation seen in Vancouver. Developers such as Hoyt
Street Properties (the River and Pearl Districts’ largest landowner and developer) wield more control with City officials in Portland, arguing the need for “maximum ‘flexibility’ to respond to the market” (Gragg, 2005). Sam Gailbraith, former Portland Development Commission housing director, argues that the choices of City officials and developers have led to downtown Portland’s childlessness (Gragg, 2005). For instance, past implementation “has focused narrowly on the mix of income levels rather than family demographics” (Gragg, 2005). Since the 1970s, there has been a “Portland-opic view that nobody with a family wants to live in the city,” claims Gailbraith (Gragg, 2005), and developers have not been convinced that there is a strong market for families because this is a relatively new and untested market (B. Gates, personal interview, January 16, 2008; S. Miller, personal interview, January 16, 2008).

However, recent market studies to determine demand for family housing in Portland’s Central City indicate significant demand for affordable family-sized units and a desire of families with children from throughout the metropolitan area to live downtown if the appropriate amenities are provided (Ferrarini & Associates, Inc., 2006; Johnson Gardner, 2007). Ferrarini & Associates, Inc.’s (2006) market analysis also points to the need for developers to build the right product at the right price in order for family-oriented units to be feasible from both a market and financial standpoint. At the appropriate price point, developers can build high-quality projects and maintain reasonable profit margins, while adding to the city’s market-rate and affordable housing supply, as well as its family-friendly urban livability. Furthermore, Susan Miller of Hoyt Street Properties noted that about 60% of resident families stay in their buildings when they have children, while about 40% leave (personal interview, January 16, 2008), pointing to a realized demand for urban family living. However, it also depends on the number and age of children in the family, as those with more children and/or school-age children are more likely to move to larger homes in the suburbs (S. Miller, personal interview, January 16, 2008).

Portland is now focusing more of its efforts on creating a more family-friendly environment downtown, but still has a long way to go in providing the appropriate housing units and amenities needed for families with children. The city’s recent achievements include:
Adoption of “developer bonuses and potential tax abatements for ‘family-size’ units and children’s play areas in new residential projects” (Gragg, 2005);

Negotiations with Hoyt Street Properties for a master plan to encourage the inclusion of family housing, 30% affordable housing with a focus on affordable family units, and a new charter school in its new development on its remaining land in the Pearl and River Districts;

New neighborhood parks with play facilities aimed at families (e.g., Jamison Square, which has already been very successful at drawing families with children from all over the city);

Commissioning of Ferrarini & Associates, Inc.’s marketing study discussed above;

Public forums and other opportunities for community input; and

Local non-profit initiatives, by the Central City Concern organization with assistance from the Enterprise Foundation, for affordable family housing development in the Central City (Gragg, 2005; S. Miller, personal interview, January 16, 2008).

In September 2007, the Portland Bureau of Planning conducted an urban design and development charrette for the North Pearl District Plan and associated plan area to seek stakeholder input into the creation of an urban design framework plan (City of Portland Bureau of Planning, 2007b). During the charrette, participants raised a number of concerns about the area, including issues related to family-friendly development, and came up with ideas for the area. While expressing that the Pearl District has potential to be a good home for families with children, the participants identified several ways to improve including development of:

- Housing projects designed for flexibility in building and unit configuration to allow growing families to remain in the district.
- Housing projects that provide family-sized units and amenities which families with children would rely on such as secure on-site play and gathering spaces.
- Family-oriented retail and services such as grocers, restaurants, and daycare.
Family-oriented public amenities that serve residents or district employees such as schools, community centers, daycare, and playgrounds (City of Portland Bureau of Planning, 2007b).

Central City Concern, with sponsorship from the Pearl District Neighborhood Association, Portland Development Commission, and Zimmerman Community Center, also hosted a public forum in May 2006 to engage the community and further the understanding of needs and opportunities for families in the Central City in order to build more family-friendly urban neighborhoods. Through the use of a large neighborhood floor map, forum participants – both parents and children – creatively discussed and drew possibilities for the neighborhood. This forum and other collaborative engagement with neighborhood stakeholders has helped rally targeted support for much needed neighborhood amenities: primarily affordable family housing, child care, and a community center – confirming the same needs addressed in earlier City-adopted neighborhood development plans that have not yet materialized (B. Gates, personal interview, January 16, 2008). Furthermore, results from a survey at this forum indicate that some people would sacrifice space for urban living and there is a market for smaller multi-bedroom units; 50% of families who attended the forum would accept a 10% reduction in living space (B. Gates, personal interview, January 16, 2008).

These needs have been translated into Central City Concern’s plans for a mixed-use, mixed-income, high-rise, urban family development project in the Pearl District that will provide affordable housing for 175 diverse families, a public community center, and a childcare facility (Central City Concern, 2007). If successful in site acquisition, Central City Concern anticipates construction beginning in January 2009 (Central City Concern, 2007). This project and focus on family-friendly urban livability through public forums will hopefully continue to generate interest, thus helping to define the housing and amenity needs that will keep families living in downtown Portland, as well as attract new families to downtown.

What Portland and Vancouver do have in common are similar concerns from parents about limited space, unit layouts that are conducive to raising children, housing affordability, and the future of their downtown neighborhoods. Yet, Portland is seemingly not as land constrained as Vancouver, so downtown areas available for development stretch a little further and there is potential to use this land for new family-oriented development (T.
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Doss, personal interview, January 4, 2008). However, while Portland’s downtown may not appear as land constrained, this may be due to the fact that “it’s much harder to tell where the downtown stops and other central neighborhoods and districts start,” as explained by Carl Abbott (Sohmer, 1999), whereas Vancouver’s downtown has very precise water boundaries since it is located on a peninsula. Thus, Portland’s downtown illustrates the shifting definitions and boundaries of downtowns, as discussed in section 1.2 of Chapter 1. Like Vancouver, Portland has focused on parks, safety, cleanliness, and lively streets downtown, while encouraging “developers to build what is called ‘ground-related’ housing: apartments and condominiums with stoops and gardens right on the sidewalk,” a “traditional form of urban housing [that] brings with it residents who have a direct stake in the safety, comfort, and cleanliness of streets” (Hinshaw, 2003). Vancouver has many amenities, a family population in place downtown, and the draw of convenience from living downtown, but downtown Portland still lacks sufficient outdoor play space, a community center, and many children (Gragg, 2005). “The Pearl is a wonderful learning environment for kids, …But it’s also a really hard place,” said one of the few parents living in the Pearl District (Gragg, 2005). However, “The neighborhood would love to have more kids, that’s probably at the top of our wish list,” said Joan Pendergast of the Pearl Neighborhood Association. ‘We don’t want to be a one-dimensional place’” (Egan, 2005).

With its recent strategies, Portland is moving in the direction toward achieving a more family-friendly downtown, but still has several years before most of its initiatives are implemented and transformed into reality. Also a victim of its success, like Vancouver, “improvements from Portland’s beloved light rail line have contributed to rising real estate prices, defeating the broad goals of the mayor’s effort to bring and keep young families in the city” (Egan, 2005). While Portland attracts many educated people, “real estate is becoming outrageously expensive…then you get wealthy singles and wealthy retirees. What’s missing are kids. And that feels really sterile to me” (Egan, 2005). As “one of the nation’s top draws for the kind of educated, self-starting urbanites that midsize cities are competing to attract,” Portland should take advantage of its great setting to ensure that it retains enough families with children to help maintain its urban vitality, keep public schools running, and keep “parks alive with young voices” (Egan, 2005). It remains to be seen whether Portland’s downtown can offer a quality of life and enough amenities to attract a
volume of residents – consisting of parents and children – relatively comparable to that of Vancouver.

6.3 **Recommendations for Vancouver and Other Cities to Improve Urban Livability**

To address its challenges, as discussed in Chapter 5, Vancouver can improve through the recommendations described in the following sections – some of which specifically address Vancouver’s needs, while others are more general for all cities. Other cities hoping to learn from Vancouver can take similar steps toward successful urban livability, but must do so in ways that serve their unique needs, opportunities, and constraints.

According to Price (2003), “Regardless of the particular form, however, there are some basics that must be in place before a planning process can deliver results that are both humane and profitable.” He proceeds to list these “preconditions for improvement,” as follows:

1. A community that makes clear its values and lays out clearly the public benefits to be achieved. That is the reason for a plan, not just planning. Citizens must have a chance to identify those values and goals they want to see achieved over time. If those values can be integrated into a comprehensive plan to which individual development proposals can respond, people may more readily accept growth and change.

2. Risk takers with vision. In other words, developers. Community groups may not always like them, but you can’t do without them. Developers in turn must recognize that public benefits add private value, and be prepared to fund community needs that come with growth.

3. Risk takers with money. In other words, the bankers and investors – who along with lawyers are often the designers by default. You want ones who understand the longer term and the greater good, not just the mechanics of mortgage-backed securities and single-use zoning.

4. Skilled professionals. That means everyone from the planner who writes the codes, to the architect and engineer who design the project, to the realtor who markets the product, to the laborer who pours the concrete. The success of suburbia and the failure of public-housing projects led to the loss of a generation that could design, build and sell inner-city high-density accommodation. Those skills have to be found or relearned.
5. A market. One can only build what others will pay for. The evidence so far, however, shows that there is a vastly underestimated market of people who wish to live in revitalized urban centers, with a premium on amenities and security.

All of these factors came together in Vancouver in the last three decades, mediated by an approval process that restored public confidence. It may not all be appropriate or adaptable to other places. Nor is design alone sufficient in the making of a good and great city; other social, economic, and environmental factors play as important a role (Price, 2003).

The following sections address additional considerations and recommendations to improve sustainable urban livability for both Vancouver and other cities in general.

6.3.1 Comprehensive Downtown Planning and Long-Term Vision

To truly foster livable downtowns and attract families, comprehensive planning must be in place that incorporates the voice of families, engages citizen/family interests, and encourages youth participation in the planning process. To work toward the success of Vancouver, yet avoid its pitfalls, “how to achieve that perfect mix of housing and traditional downtown activities still remains a mystery,” but having a downtown plan in place and following it will help (Ross, 2006). “A downtown plan expresses and reinforces the value, role, and future of the downtown to the larger community. A plan not only outlines the community’s vision but also sets forth an actionable, measurable strategy for turning that vision into a reality” and “creating and sustaining a mix of uses in the downtown” (Ross, 2006). Planning must include a detailed assessment of housing and business needs, how the markets work, high quality urban design, and the amenities to attract both residents and employers to craft an overall strategy with a localized response that addresses needs specific to downtown. Diverse, affordable housing choices for all citizens must be planned for and developed, but housing should not be the only focus when trying to attract residents. Former Seattle Planning Director John Rahaim “argued that families don’t need a particular kind of home, they need a community around it. ‘It’s having a school nearby and having kid-friendly open space nearby,’” explains Rahaim (Cohen, 2006b). Consumers need to see that these and other amenities (e.g., child care) and infrastructure are already in place before they consider moving and raising their families downtown (G. Johnson, personal interview,
January 14, 2008; A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). Housing variety and affordability, safety, open space, schools, good public transit, human-scale buildings, walkability, diverse neighborhood retail and entertainment, recreational activities, inviting urban design, vibrant streets, and coordinated stakeholders are crucial features of livable urban communities that are suitable for families.

In addition, cities must be patient and have long-term views. Vancouver began planning for urban livability in the 1970s and is now enjoying its successes three decades later. Portland is not there yet, but it is on the right path and with time to grow, it may also be able to achieve similar successes in urban livability (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008). However, Seattle is behind Portland, as it just started to make inner city changes three years ago, and it still has a long way to go before the appropriate combination of conditions is in place to affect urban change (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008). Both political and market realities are mechanisms that are necessary to accomplish this (B. Gates, personal interview, January 16, 2008). “As downtowns continue their renaissance, it is time to take advantage of the energy and excitement in the community” to focus on downtown planning (Ross, 2006). “Great communities and downtowns take hard work, foresight, and commitment” (Ross, 2006).

### 6.3.2 Public-Private Partnerships and Funding for Public Amenities

Fostering public-private partnerships helps cities gain public benefits without additional costs to taxpayers. “Public/private partnerships have been essential in achieving changes in downtown living. The existence of productive interplay between focused interest groups, especially the growing number of business improvement district leaders, and public planning and economic development units has resulted in bold, imaginative, creative and thoughtful approaches to creating housing opportunities” (Birch, 2002). By leveraging private investment through such mechanisms as rezonings that increase land value, cities can negotiate valuable urban amenities with developers, as the case of Vancouver has demonstrated. Spreading development fees collected from developers across many different public amenities (i.e., not just affordable housing or schools) is also key for building complete downtown communities (Price, 2003).

Funding for major public amenities requires collaboration among local and regional public officials, as well as large developers. Public amenities are especially challenging to
fund because they are expensive to build and maintain, yet generally do not provide the
economic returns that developers seek. However, these amenities also increase the value of
nearby developments, creating additional gains for developers and homeowners, and
allowing developers to recoup some of the extra amenity costs. For the funding sources that
are available, downtown neighborhoods face competition with other surrounding
neighborhoods in the city, as well as regionally, to receive these funds (Callender et al., 2007).
Therefore, creative regulatory and incentive programs must be developed to maximize
private sector participation in contributing to local civic amenities.

6.3.3 Utilization of Available Land

Although other cities may not have Vancouver’s fortune of having large parcels of
downtown land available for development, new residential development and family-oriented
amenities can be built on infill sites. Smaller vacant lots, parking lots, and single-story sites
with such uses as stand-alone grocery stores can be creatively redeveloped with family-
friendly housing above or in place of underutilized uses. In particular, locating housing
above markets creates a built-in market of consumers, generates active streets to promote
vibrancy and safety, and limits auto use for shopping, thus generating fewer negative
environmental impacts. Furthermore, older commercial and industrial buildings can be
converted to residential use, a trend now popular in many cities to create loft spaces. Cities
can also offer incentives for developers to build on these sites to promote density and urban
living, while limiting sprawl.

6.3.4 Conducive Zoning Codes

The zoning codes of the last several decades make it appear “as is there has been a
deliberate effort to make downtowns and the surrounding neighborhoods unfriendly to
households with children” (Hinshaw, 2007b). With large minimum lot sizes, “probably the
clincher has been that small houses on small lots have been made illegal in most cities”
(Hinshaw, 2007b). Although Americans have historically lived in attached row houses for
hundreds of years, these codes eliminate this urban housing form as an option. Small lots
offer the opportunity to still own a decent sized home, but also live in “right-knit
neighborhoods, with most goods, services, schools, and entertainment within walking
distance” (Hinshaw, 2007b). Furthermore, “because financial institutions determine the value of the house to be several times greater than the value of the land, we have also eliminated a potentially affordable housing choice” (Hinshaw, 2007b). Reexamining policies and changing zoning codes to bring small lots and row houses back to cities would offer more choices to families wanting to stay in or move to urban areas, while also maintaining density at a human scale that still supports the local economy and public transit.

### 6.3.5 Housing Affordability

All desirable cities and cities working to make their downtowns more attractive to residents likely face problems associated with insufficient affordable housing. Cities need to be able to work with developers and residents to facilitate development of well-designed projects with a variety of affordable and market-rate housing designed for families. Affordable housing is particularly challenging in urban environments, where construction costs are high and land is limited. However, strategies are needed to increase affordable housing for both owners and renters to ensure that thriving downtowns do not become gentrified neighborhoods for only the wealthy to live, while long-time residents who cannot afford rising prices are pushed out. In conjunction, strategies should be developed to reduce the overall cost of constructing family housing (Callender et al., 2007). Market studies must also be conducted to determine the actual demand and desired characteristics of potential residents in each unique city. In dense downtown areas, securing sites for new development is a challenge that must be addressed with creative approaches and re-use of underutilized sites. The following issues and recommendations offer some strategies for how Vancouver might address these problems to ensure that affordable housing for families is available downtown, thus providing an example for other cities encountering similar challenges.

Many organizations and sources, including Metro Vancouver, cite affordability, homelessness, and other related issues as the most critical problems facing Vancouver, particularly with the limited availability of subsidies and increasing housing prices and construction costs. Metro Vancouver (2007) identifies the following key housing challenges that must be addressed: ongoing demand pressures for both affordable ownership and rental housing, ongoing tight rental market conditions, limited new purpose-built rental housing construction, loss of existing affordable rental housing stock, diminished access to entry-level ownership opportunities, growing disparities between owners and renters, and an
increasing incidence and duration in homelessness across the region. Metro Vancouver’s (2007) key goals are to: increase the supply and diversity of modest cost housing, eliminate homelessness across the region, and meet the needs of low income renters. While Metro Vancouver (2007) provides multi-level government actions for implementation in considerable detail in its “Metro Vancouver Affordable Housing Strategy” report, following are the key strategies, which the proposed detailed actions fall under, that are suggested to mitigate these housing problems:

- **Fiscal actions** designed to improve the economics of housing production and/or create a source of equity for generating additional affordable housing units. This could include the use of municipal assets or financial incentives to leverage funds from other sources to expand the supply of affordable housing.

- **Regulatory actions** which rely on the regional and municipal planning and development control processes to encourage an increase in the supply and diversity of housing at key points along the continuum thereby helping to provide an expanded range of housing choices and increased affordability over the longer term.

- **Education and advocacy** designed to build community awareness and support for affordable housing and to advocate for solutions to respond to needs which are not currently being met through existing government programs.

- **Direct service provision** through the Greater Vancouver Housing Corporation with a focus on creating an expanded range of choice for renter households with low to moderate incomes who are unable to find suitable and appropriate housing in their communities and who are in need of subsidized housing. Direct service provision could also include services and supports to assist those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Moreover, expansion of social and non-market housing programs, as well as developer incentives, are necessary to improve affordability in Vancouver and create better bonuses for additional affordability beyond existing requirements (G. Johnson, personal interview, January 14, 2008; G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008). There is particularly a need for a middle-income homeownership program, such as a market-based, limited equity scheme (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008). With decreasing rental housing availability, the City also has to better guide policies for condo conversions to
ensure that enough rental stock remains in the city for housing choice and affordability (A. McAfee, personal interview, January 11, 2008). Furthermore, “Any resolution of affordable housing issues has to be a broad-based initiative and has to consider not just specific subsidies for social housing but the supply of small, relatively inexpensive housing units across the city, especially for young people. It must encourage secondary suites in single-family neighbourhoods, secondary housing units in back lanes, multiplex and apartment housing intensification on arterial roads, as well as rezoning in and around new neighbourhood centres” (Punter, 2003).

Currently, non-market units are generally not integrated within market buildings in Vancouver (L. Beasley, personal interview, January 9, 2008; Anonymous Social Planner for the City of Vancouver, personal interview, January 10, 2008). Yet, there is not much discussion toward policy change for integrated housing in Vancouver due to perceived difficulties in marketing and sorting management and operations for different types of units within the same building, as social housing is run and operated separately from market units by non-profits, the City, and the Province (Anonymous Social Planner for the City of Vancouver, personal interview, January 10, 2008). In this respect, the United States is superior with its initiatives that focus on inclusionary mixed-income housing (Anonymous Social Planner for the City of Vancouver, personal interview, January 10, 2008). Programs are needed for on-site, mixed-income housing within the same building in Vancouver (G. Price, personal interview, January 8, 2008). The increasing shortage of affordable housing and studio space for artists in Vancouver could also be improved by requiring fixed percentages of permanently affordable housing to be integrated within new residential buildings rather than the City requiring developers to contribute funds to general revenues, which can instead result in concentration of social housing in other neighborhoods, if built at all.

In order to ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing, particularly for the currently neglected rental supply, increasing the role of the federal government to intervene in the housing market at a level closer to its prior involvement from the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s has potential to improve the current housing system. Without additional subsidies and incentives, the private sector is not going to voluntarily build low-cost housing. In addition, without long-term investments in quality, affordable units, households in need will not have sustainable solutions to their housing problems.
As Hulchanski (2002) argues in “Housing Policy for Tomorrow’s Cities,” increasing federal expenditures through the five avenues of supply, affordability, supportive housing, rehabilitation, and emergency relief would provide justifiable social and economic benefits for the Canadian community at large. He specifies amounts for each measure and estimates that these measures altogether would only increase spending on social housing from the existing 1% of the federal budget (about C$2 billion in 2002, which accommodates 5% of Canadian households) to 2% – a modest relative increase to help so many in need and increase the quality of life for all residents.

For immediate homelessness assistance, additional funding is needed to provide shelter and services for homeless people through permanent supportive housing and emergency relief. However, a long-term focus on prevention of homelessness and successful movement to permanent, stable, affordable housing will reduce the need for expensive emergency relief programs. Homelessness and housing policy should be integrated in order to make investments for both short- and long-term needs.

There is no single solution to the challenges of housing and homelessness. Several authors discuss the need for a new Canadian housing framework/vision and cohesive national housing policy to alleviate the housing problems in Canada and more effectively deliver housing subsidies. Coordinated and integrated leadership and participation are essential at all levels – federal, provincial, municipal, and community – to successfully address persistent housing issues and create and implement effective, sustainable solutions. At the same time, localities need the flexibility to address their own unique conditions. Moving toward simplicity by reducing the complexity of federal programs and excessive administrative bureaucracy would maximize resources for their intended use of housing provision.

Finally, there is a great need for a holistic, sustainable approach. Housing issues, particularly homelessness, do not just involve physical bricks and mortar solutions. They must be accompanied by a holistic approach that addresses all systemic and individual needs beyond income and shelter to help people achieve stable, adequate housing situations, as well as meet their other needs. In addition to affordable housing, downtown neighborhoods need a mix of uses that do not just cater to yuppies, but cater to all income levels, such as inexpensive stores and restaurants. Steps must be implemented to make current efforts sustainable over the long term in order to limit the reduction and prevent the erosion of
existing affordable units. Focusing on sustainability will redirect efforts toward creating a greater amount of affordable units and not just replacing the existing housing stock as it falls into disrepair or becomes no longer affordable. New program initiatives should focus on integrating these recommendations, as well as incorporating deeper and ongoing subsidies.

### 6.3.6 Flexible Residential Space

Urban living necessitates significant consideration of space tradeoffs. For market units, smaller units may be acceptable if this drives down the cost of housing and the units are well laid out with access to basic on-site amenities. Market research involving surveys of families considering moving to Portland’s Central City indicates that while their most important design priorities are having enough interior living space and bedrooms, “developers need to build condominiums with more than two bedrooms priced below what these units currently sell for in the market” to attract this group to the Central City (Ferrarini & Associates, Inc., 2006). Furthermore, “The solution is to build smaller units with multiple bedroom and den options that are affordable to younger families but also remain financially viable to developers” (Ferrarini & Associates, Inc., 2006). In developing family-oriented housing, developers face tradeoffs such as the above examples and, as a result, they will potentially have to sacrifice fewer units for larger units.

Maximizing the space of urban housing units can be achieved through adaptable living floor plans, where interior room divisions can be re-arranged for multi-functional use to suit family needs as necessary. As one parent with two children living in downtown Vancouver commented, “Flexible space – making each square foot work day and night – is the secret to living in a small space” (Blomfield, 2006). Living areas in individual apartments can also be designed to utilize adjacent spaces to assemble larger common spaces for use by neighbors to facilitate in-home day care and other uses (CEOs for Cities, 2007).

### 6.3.7 Inviting Public Space and “Public Living Rooms”

Outside the home, several improvements could make exterior and interior public spaces more inviting to families.

Ample, well-designed, urban open space is vital for families and children to play, exercise, and learn. Types of open space include large public parks, small neighborhood
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parks and gardens, waterfront promenades, beaches, playgrounds, skate parks, public/private plazas, rooftops, viewpoints, and athletic facilities (DPD, 2006), which all offer opportunities to participate in healthy activities. A large, contiguous amount of space is not even necessary to improve open space in cities. In fact, bigger parks “may not even be sustainable over the long term given the costs of maintenance, water, and energy. Smaller, thoughtfully designed, and well-managed spaces can serve families with children within urban neighborhoods quite well” (Hinshaw, 2007a). Within these open spaces, accessible, child-friendly play areas must be creatively developed to allow both programmed play and unstructured activity for youth of all ages with various needs to “play spontaneously and freely in the urban environment” (Gleeson & Sipe, 2006). In addition, to maintain a clean environment in such public spaces as parks, cities should ensure that trash bins are adequately provided – a problem area where Vancouver could improve, according to local teens (Blomfield, 2006).

Quality, safe, multi-purpose, family-friendly streetscapes and pathways are equally important as routes to destinations within the city as well as social/play destinations in themselves. The Dutch term *woonerven* aptly defines shared streets as *living yards*, where traffic calming measures are in place on neighborhood streets to re-claim streets for community use and pedestrians and cyclists are given legal priority over motorists. With less of a focus on vehicles downtown, main streets could be better utilized as vibrant social spaces or “public living rooms” for people to interact with each other and their urban surroundings while strolling, browsing vendors, resting on public benches, or dining in a sidewalk café (Hinshaw, 2007a). Car-free zones could be established permanently or temporarily during off-peak traffic times after business hours and on the weekends to provide areas for safe, pedestrian-oriented, family-friendly spaces (CEOs for Cities, 2007). These areas, as well as plazas, could be used for play, public markets, programmed and temporary events, cultural events, street performers, exhibits, and expansion of outdoor seating areas for restaurants and other retail. These types of public streets have existed for hundreds of years in many cities throughout the world. In such older American cities as New York and Boston, examples include Fifth Avenue and Newbury Street, respectively. Vancouver's Granville Mall, Seattle's First Avenue, and Portland's N.W. 23rd Avenue also offer similar lively pedestrian experiences with a variety of retail establishments lining the sidewalks.

In addition to accessible public buildings, increasing the quantity and quality of public building services, such as providing more well-maintained restrooms and lockers in
places where families spend time, would allow families to participate in public recreational activities without having to worry about the inconveniences of not having these services available. Signage and kiosks could be used to initiate learning and games around the city such as puzzles, scavenger hunts, history information, trivia, and easy-to-read maps/trip planners (CEOs for Cities, 2007). These improvements in public spaces both benefit urban residents and provide incentives for families living in the suburbs and other visitors to come into the city and add to its liveliness.

6.3.8 High Quality Urban Design

Within housing units and residential buildings, design elements could include such details as durable finishes for walls and floors, larger kitchens and eating spaces, flexible spaces, landscaping, individualized unit entries, and common areas designed to safely and interestingly accommodate children’s activities (DPD, 2006). Not only should individual spaces be properly designed, but linkages among them and the entire urban fabric should also weave together in inviting, artistic, lively, safe, usable, and flexible ways, with consideration of the hierarchy of public, semi-public, semi-private, and private spaces. Sustainability should be a fundamental component of design and development, from both a holistic perspective and with attention to specific high performance green building features. Throughout the design process, various stakeholders should be involved to ensure that the needs and wishes of all parties are appropriately accommodated.

Attention to creating and enhancing family-friendly design elements in interior and exterior spaces will significantly contribute to elevating the attractiveness and inclusiveness of urban neighborhoods. In addition, ensuring that new development is contextual to its surroundings is important to maintain neighborhood cohesiveness and authenticity, as well as to encourage interaction among neighbors by not creating divisive boundaries. These efforts are vital for the future of vibrant, livable, sustainable downtowns. Many publications go into much greater depth about designing child-friendly spaces and cities, as well as the associated social, physical, mental, and emotional benefits. However, the aim here is to provide an overview of applicable design elements rather than a very detailed, all-encompassing list of specific standards.
6.3.9 Alternative Transportation

Reducing automobile dependency is a primary goal of promoting high-density urban environments. To foster this, cities must ensure that good, effective, convenient public transit is in place, as well as well-maintained pedestrian and bicycle pathways. In particular, planners should ensure that transportation options meet parents’ needs. Time-share car companies such as Flexcar and Zipcar also offer an alternative to vehicle ownership through shared vehicles that can be reserved only when needed, thus cutting down on ownership, maintenance, and insurance expenses, and limiting the number of cars on the road and in need of parking.

6.3.10 Availability of Quality Schools and Child Care

The availability of good public schools and quality, affordable childcare facilities, as well as safe routes to these destinations, are essential to accommodate children living in central cities. Although public school districts often have limited resources, they could at least plan more effectively to accommodate new child residents in urban neighborhoods by conducting surveys, demographic studies, and market research to determine demand from existing and projected families living downtown.

Ironically, “school districts have been subsidizing sprawl by insisting upon standards that can only be met in outlying locations” (Hinshaw, 2007a). There is a need to revise these requirements and/or allow greater flexibility based on location to reinstitute the traditional, “small, urban school model with a compact footprint and multiple stories,” which adds to walkability, while enhancing safety and learning in urban neighborhoods (Hinshaw, 2007a). Cities can also look for atypical locations for schools such as older vacant buildings through adaptive re-use or within new developments on the ground floor of residential buildings or tied to community centers. Including a school within a new development may be negotiated with the developer as a public amenity, and may actually lessen development costs if it is part of an already planned building rather than constructing it off-site.

To help with some of the challenges associated with urban schools, cities should promote public-private funding partnerships and institutional collaboration. In addition, families living in the city have the advantage of more broadly defining education to include learning that occurs in everyday situations outside of the classroom. Cities could leverage
these assets to improve the city itself as an educational experience, particularly in bringing to life underutilized public spaces, in addition to improving school systems. Schools could be involved in integrating classroom learning with neighborhood activities. Downtowns provide numerous accessible opportunities for youth to take in many aspects of public life and gain firsthand exposure to the city’s diversity, unique experiences, and cultural amenities. In turn, children may be “better prepared for life’s challenges and will be in a better position to succeed in an increasingly competitive world” (CEOs for Cities, 2007).

To solve downtown Vancouver’s school capacity problems, the local Vancouver School Board must be more pro-active in negotiating with the Ministry of Education, civic officials, developers, and the provincial government to ensure that neighborhood schools are built when and where needed. While school improvements have not traditionally been included in required benefit agreements in conjunction with development since education capital funding usually comes directly from the Province, the provincial government’s retroactive approach to constructing schools, after “kids have moved in and clogged every other nearby school in the system, does not serve the needs of the citizens of Vancouver” (McCormick, 1998). School facilities, just like all other public benefits, need to keep pace with neighborhood family growth. “Families need schools; without them, families and neighborhoods will continue to suffer” (McCormick, 1998).

6.3.11 Accommodating Youth of All Ages

To better accommodate teenage residents in Vancouver and other cities, more social spaces with late hours should be developed, such as lounges with pool tables, to provide safe spaces for kids to hang out (Blomfield, 2006). In Vancouver, teenagers complain that there are currently not enough social spaces for them to spend time with friends, especially at night after community centers close (Blomfield, 2006). In addition, some public open spaces could better cater to teens, such as more well-maintained skate parks. An employee at Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre argued for the need to “make sure public spaces are claimed by young people and not by people who want to business we don’t want” (i.e., drugs) (Blomfield, 2006). Other kinds of places could also be created to cater to the needs of teenagers, as well as adults, such as a combination café, coffee bar, lounge, and nightclub that is either alcohol-free or has alcohol-serving areas separate from other social
areas like the dance floor so “teenagers can play grown-up in a place that is both safe and fun” (Hinshaw, 2007b).

### 6.3.12 Safety

CEOs for Cities (2007) identifies several strategies to improve safety for children in the city such as visibly clear safe routes to travel around the city, kid-friendly play areas, business certification for safe haven locations, pre-paid transportation passes (for both transit and taxis), emergency call boxes designed for child accessibility, and designated safe cars on trains or buses with increased monitoring. Density in itself can also offer kids more protection for certain seasonal activities like Halloween, when families can organize and send their children through their residential building to neighbors who they know personally rather than going to strangers’ houses outside (Hinshaw, 2007b). Parents could organize other activities inside their buildings or adjacent semi-private spaces as well.

Some families comment that downtown Vancouver does not have enough police patrol and illumination, making residents feel unsafe after dark (Blomfield, 2006). According to a resident and parent in Concord Pacific Place, Vancouver has limited street lighting and more is needed for a better perception of safety and to provide residents with better access to public spaces after dark (personal interview, January 9, 2008). In addition, many drivers speed through alleys in Vancouver, which makes residents feel unsafe (Blomfield, 2006). Increasing police patrols and/or installing speed cameras could deter people from speeding. The amount of pornography shops and drug use downtown also makes families uncomfortable, particularly because children are easily impressionable (Blomfield, 2006). These issues with safety in public space could be improved to make residents feel more comfortable in downtown Vancouver.

### 6.3.13 Neighborhood Retail

Mixed-use projects can help incorporate many of the amenities on-site that families desire, such as neighborhood retail. Neighborhood retail is essential for dense, urban environments to serve residents, workers, and visitors; maintain diversity; activate streets; and fit into the smaller, more compact, valuable sites available downtown. Small, locally-owned businesses, in particular, offer a diversity of selection and specialties not often
available in larger chain and big box stores. Historically, “North American communities have had a long tradition of small-scale entrepreneurial commerce…Thankfully, we are seeing this form of small-scale capitalism flourish again within dense urban neighborhoods” (Hinshaw, 2007a). Also, to maintain a vibrant environment, retail should enhance the urban atmosphere with active storefronts along sidewalks and limited off-street parking (surface lots). Ensuring that a wide variety of services are sufficiently provided nearby allows local residents to meet their needs while limiting commuting time, expenses, and negative environmental impacts to access these destinations in farther locations.

In particular, quality, full-service grocery stores are often not readily available in downtown areas, forcing residents to travel to suburban locations to reach them. When they are available, food prices can often be much higher than in suburban locations and thus unaffordable due to limited nearby competition. This can be particularly difficult for families who need to purchase items more affordably and thus may have to rely on private vehicles for transportation, which defeats one of the significant benefits of downtown living: reduced automobile dependency. Grocery stores, as demonstrated by Urban Fare in Concord Pacific Place, also provide a central, community gathering destination, which contributes to strong social networks.

6.3.14 Attitude/Value Shifts

Negative attitudes about urban density and raising families in cities are persistent in American culture – both with citizens and policy makers. The challenge is how to convincingly convey the benefits of smart growth and urban livability to foster a change in mindset and facilitate successful urban environments. While there is resistance to change, once attitudes shift and/or environmental and economic circumstances necessitate lifestyle shifts, change can be quick if urban areas offer desirable living environments and amenities, particularly if they can integrate some of the perceived benefits of suburban living (e.g., green, clean, and safe neighborhoods with good schools) with the benefits of urban living. When it is done right, it works and urban vitality ensues, creating increased demand for the urban lifestyle. After many years and much effort, urban livability is now Vancouver’s competitive advantage, but many other cities have a long way to go before reaching similar levels of success.
In addition to city neighborhoods needing to be clean, green, and safe for families to move there, the changing conditions of increasingly expensive gas and land will likely influence people’s views regarding where to live (Cohen, 2006a). While housing can be more expensive in downtown areas, decreased commuting expenses help balance overall expenses for residents choosing to locate downtown. For residents who leave urban condos – even large ones in neighborhoods with good schools and open space – once they become parents, perhaps the issue is “a cultural bias against raising children in condos…changing that might require gas to become so expensive and affordable houses with yards to be so far away that commuting takes too much time and money” (Cohen, 2006b).

For recent generations who grew up in suburban houses with yards, many want their children to also have this experience; “many head to the suburbs with their children simply because that’s where they were raised” (Cohen, 2006b). Most have “bought into the notion that downtown is not a place to raise children – that, instead, raising children requires a large house on a large lot” (Hinshaw, 2003). In addition, “many Northwesterners still find downtown more intimidating than exciting” (Dietrich, 2003b). Although, in recent decades, Americans have “become almost obsessed with the idea that families require lots of private outdoor space,” the United States “had a long tradition of dense urban neighborhoods” (Hinshaw, 2007b).

Getting families downtown will likely take more than bigger condos, parks, and schools. Most will stay in the suburbs, as long as they are close enough to the city, until they really have to move closer in when commuting becomes intolerable. In addition, “Officials say that the very things that attract people who revitalize a city – dense vertical housing, fashionable restaurants and shops and mass transit that makes a car unnecessary – are driving out children by making the neighborhoods too expensive for young families” (Egan, 2005). Urban housing is not only more expensive, but also generally has less space for a higher price. While “the right amenities would be enough for many families,” not “everybody would live that way,” said John Rahaim (Cohen, 2006b). Regarding the cultural influence, “People who live in core neighborhoods with kids, or are planning to, often come from places where this is more common” (Cohen, 2006b). For those who have not “grown up in a place where you can envision community life in the city, it just feels foreign,” said one parent who is planning to move to Seattle’s urban core (Cohen, 2006b).
On the other hand, those who lived downtown before having kids and then tried moving to the suburbs once they became parents to “follow the prevailing wisdom that that’s where families live” often dislike their new lifestyle (Hinshaw, 2003). One Seattle couple commented:

When we lived in the suburbs, we had to depend upon our car to do everything…Then we realized that the amount of time we spent in the car commuting and running errands was eating into the time we could otherwise spend with the children. We all felt stressed out. In our view, the convenience of living downtown actually allows for us to have a better life with our children (Hinshaw, 2003).

However, most consumers are not pioneers and these urban pioneers are not common in Seattle, but with time, more families may come to realize the conveniences of living downtown. Making children a design priority in downtown planning will help influence this trend. As Vancouver has shown, “children can be not only welcome but valued in dense urban settings” (Hinshaw, 2003).

Ultimately, living downtown has many tradeoffs. As Dietrich (2003b) comments:

High rises have stunning views but less space, fine finishes but fewer windows, less maintenance but less opportunity for gardening or woodworking, more friendliness but less privacy, more security (most buildings boast of zero burglaries) but more vulnerability on the street, from negotiating street people to crossing avenues against heavy traffic.

Those who have tried it say the result is cozy and communal, not confining – but again, this is a new lifestyle to most Northwestern natives.

In fact, “The whole idea of America – and especially the American West – was the promise to spread out: to sprawl, if you will. Trouble is, there’s just too dang many Westerners, and sprawling has become a transportation and utility nightmare” (Dietrich, 2003b). “The sheer force of demographic change is causing many cities and towns to reexamine their policies and codes to offer more choices” in urban housing (Hinshaw, 2007b). While attitudes about city living still exist, “many people are actively seeking different housing choices and once again, embracing the idea of urbanity” (Hinshaw, 2007b). Growing numbers of households appreciate urban living. This is evidenced by the almost
immediate response in the marketplace to communities that have addressed a broader range of values and needs by offering new urban living options (Hinshaw, 2007b).

Cities hoping to develop more family-friendly downtowns can learn from the Cascadia region cities discussed here and invest the leadership, vision, time, money, incentives, and other resources needed to make real, substantial changes and attract vibrant communities.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Today, as most city cores undergoing revitalization are being developed for singles and empty nesters, the needs of families of all income levels must not be ignored. As residents increasingly return to live downtown, there is an opportunity to capture new people and show how high-density neighborhoods can truly be livable by attracting and retaining families with children. To do so successfully requires an understanding of the needs of families and children, provision of essential neighborhood family amenities, accommodation of mixed incomes, cultivation of diversity, design for families with children, strong communities, and advancement toward sustainability (Central City Concern, 2007).

The pioneering cities that are working toward more livable, vibrant downtowns are following historical precedent, as the United States has a “long tradition of dense, compact urban neighborhoods, not only in larger cities but in ‘streetcar suburbs’ and even in small towns, in areas close to the main street” (Hinshaw, 2007a). After all, Jane Jacobs was a great proponent of vibrant, dense, mixed-use neighborhoods. “Nonetheless, since the middle of the 20th century we have become almost obsessed with the idea that families with children require lots of open, green space” (Hinshaw, 2007a). However, far from a “notion of living a peaceful, pastoral existence,” the suburban lifestyle has morphed into automobile dependent neighborhoods full of repetitive, “cookie-cutter” houses that lack vibrancy and diversity (Hinshaw, 2007a). Yet, the ingrained notion of needing large houses on large lots has formed biased attitudes that prevent higher densities or even different forms of housing in many communities (Hinshaw, 2007a).

These flaws suggest that “the dominance of the single-family suburban lifestyle is eroding. The trend is toward denser, more urban environments. Canadians are flocking back to their central cities. Not that the suburbs are going to vanish or that all suburban dwellers are packing up their minivans and heading into town, but of those who want to relocate, a growing number are looking downtown. In other words, Vancouver isn’t a West
Coast anomaly, just the shape of things to come’” (Blore, 2001). As Blore points out, people are not just moving to cities in general, but specifically to downtowns. In other words, this is not simply an urban-suburban dichotomy; it is a richer phenomenon.

Increasing the number of children in a city has implications for the vitality of the city overall, as well as for the funding and quality of various amenities such as public schools. Children also “create a constituency for parks, trails and public safety improvements…and their parents tend to favor upgrading those amenities through higher taxes” (Egan, 2005). Such realizations, as well as increased media attention to such issues as climate change (indicating a need for more sustainable living), childhood obesity (urban neighborhoods facilitate walkability and increase activity outside of the home), and rising fuel costs and tragic congestion, have prompted municipal leaders to consider how cities can best attract and retain more families by encouraging urban living, and they are taking steps toward implementing these strategies. Fortunately, “It is clear that many people are rediscovering city centers, not just as concentrations of commerce and culture but as places to live,” where communities can “embody the convenience, choice, and richness that density and diversity offer” (Hinshaw, 2007a).

Vancouver exemplifies how the dominant suburbia view is changing, as an increasing number of families make their homes downtown. Vancouver’s combination of opportunities and constraints, as well as the priority placed on excellence in planning and development, have generated a “Vancouver Style” that other cities would love to emulate (Price, 2003). A number of elements have contributed to Vancouver’s success. With visionary leaders, a beautiful and desirable natural setting, a strong charter and regulatory environment to guide the city, a supportive city council, continuity of policies and objectives, a common “living first” vision, a willingness to experiment, a booming economy, available downtown land, and an influx of investment capital from overseas, Vancouver has been well-positioned to embrace family-friendly urban livability and work toward achieving ideal planning, design, and development objectives. As DeWolf (2007) adds, “When it comes to urban planning, the so-called ‘Vancouver Model’ has a lot going for it: high-density downtown living, ample green space, public amenities paid for by developers, quality urban design and priority for pedestrians over cars.” Toderian notes, “Vancouver has a willingness to take ownership of the city, to shape it with a collective vision, and to use the tools at its disposal to take a strong position in negotiations about the future of the city” (Chodikoff,
While Vancouver’s approach to developing downtown family housing may be too demanding for some cities to follow, it does seem to be working” (“Family Housing,” 2006). In fact, “Nobody envisioned the sheer number of families who would move downtown,” said Sandra Menzer, director of the Vancouver Society of Children’s Centres (Gragg, 2005). “We built it, and they have come – but maybe a few too many” (Gragg, 2005). “Families have taken up the urban core beyond our wildest dreams,” said Senior Housing Planner Rob Whitlock (Groc, 2007b).

However, “Can the city maintain these achievements through the next phase of neighbourhood intensification? Can Vancouver continue to afford a high level of public amenities and quality infrastructure? Can it ensure that all citizens have access to affordable housing and pleasant, safe neighbourhoods?” (Punter, 2003). While Vancouver is frequently praised and fully in a positive light for successfully creating downtown living that accommodates families, there is also another side to the story. As discussed in Chapter 5, Vancouver is not perfect and still has many challenges to tackle. In many ways, the city has become a victim of its own success. “Despite the public benefits, downtown Vancouver is not a utopia, residents and planners say” (Baker, 2005). For example, “housing prices are skyrocketing” (Baker, 2005), creating increasing demand for limited affordable housing.

Hay (2006) comments, “While Vancouver has so much to offer, an increasing number of its citizens are being excluded from enjoying, taking part in and contributing to this vibrant city.” According to the report “Social Sustainability in Vancouver,” “Vancouver ranks high with respect to personal safety, health care, arts and culture, diversity, education, and infrastructure,” but “the social and economic trends suggest that Vancouver is moving away from – not toward – social inclusion and social sustainability” (Hay, 2006). Housing costs have become unaffordable for many families, even those with middle incomes, while non-market housing has been disappearing and homelessness has been significantly increasing (doubling in recent years) (Hay, 2006). A large number of Vancouver residents – one in 10 workers – have low incomes and rising average incomes have mostly benefited high-income households, thus increasing income inequality and the gap between the rich and poor (Hay, 2006). Among visible minority and Aboriginal populations, a high concentration of these low-income households exists (Hay, 2006). Vancouver’s other challenges include maintaining effective transportation systems, potential loss of commercial vitality downtown as residential development pushes out office space, and urban public school availability.
One teenager who lives downtown commented that the city has “come a long way, but still has a long way to go to build this place better for families” (Blomfield, 2006).

“No matter where you are in the country, cities are facing similar struggles and have similar aspirations. The big difference is in the tools or lack thereof that municipalities have applied to achieve their vision” (Toderian cited in Chodikoff, 2007). Vancouver has a unique set of circumstances that are not completely replicable and applicable to other cities, particularly in terms of the rapid growth and scale of its downtown residential community, as well as its highly sought-after beautiful setting. Some cities may, in fact, never come close to progressing in the same ways that Vancouver has. However, other cities, such as Seattle and Portland, can learn from Vancouver’s achievements and aim to prevent its dilemmas of success as they plan for their futures and work to enhance family-friendly urban livability.

The strategies discussed in this thesis are not a “fix-all” and individual cities must evaluate the costs and benefits of attracting different types of downtown residents and uses. They must also determine whether supportive incentives and/or complementary activities are needed and what might be the associated impacts. In the course of this evaluation, policy makers may discover that a downtown living approach and/or specific targeting of families may not actually be appropriate for their cities (Birch, 2002). In addition, if they do proceed, urban leaders must consider “how to spread downtown progress to nearby neighborhoods without provoking displacement or unwanted gentrification and how to resolve the inevitable political disputes that will arise with the newcomers” (Birch, 2002). Importantly, accommodating families of all income levels is essential to sustain vibrant downtowns and offer housing choices for all citizens. With most downtown housing in burgeoning cities targeting the wealthy and upper-middle classes, developers also need to build housing with lower-income families in mind. Overall, cities must take initiative to address the socioeconomic inequalities across North America.

As family-friendly downtown living is a very interdisciplinary and relatively new concept (in recent years) for most American cities, it raises important planning and development issues that still need attention. While this thesis tells the story of Vancouver, as well as provides case studies of Seattle and Portland, and touches on a breadth of key issues, all areas have not been addressed in detail. Related areas for additional research could include studies of existing family-oriented development and policies in other cities, demand and capacity studies and surveys for cities to indicate the feasibility of implementing family-
friendly strategies (which are currently in progress by the City of Seattle), creation of family-oriented development plans for selected cities, and comparative post-occupancy evaluations of family-friendly urban development projects in various cities (some are currently underway in Vancouver). Birch (2002) also identifies a need to research “information on the critical mass of residents required to make a difference in downtown life, the relationship between downtown housing units and employment, and the number of households needed to support community-serving functions.” Furthermore, “All of these issues lead to questions of balancing appropriate density for new development and quantity for adaptive reuse with other downtown functions like office, parking, retail and entertainment. No one really knows the proper composition of a balanced downtown” (Birch, 2002). Currently, several organizations have already begun exploring some of these issues in greater detail, such as CEOs for Cities’ “Kids in Cities” study and the American Planning Association’s 2008 survey on the role of planners in creating family-friendly cities and subsequent case studies of family-friendly communities (Israel & Warner, 2008).

In conclusion, attempts to foster family-friendly downtown livability create a series of paradoxes, which may be inevitable. Cities must strive for balance, as everything cannot be achieved at once. As the case of Vancouver has demonstrated, perceived successes create powerful externalities that may diminish the city’s achievements in the long-term if challenges are not properly addressed. Attractive cities will always be successful in some areas and have room for improvement in others – no city is perfect and seemingly positive strategies may also have negative implications. The problems that a city addresses and the solutions implemented must not be randomly chosen, but specifically selected to have the most beneficial effects and provide citizens with the greatest benefits. To have significant and lasting results, urban leaders should embrace a comprehensive perspective and anticipate challenges, as well as implications of their actions, from the beginning. With the case of Vancouver in point, “Downtown living is not a silver bullet for curing urban ills but one element of an ongoing planning and investment effort for a part of the city….All in all, the rise in downtown living is as complex and layered as any urban issue” (Birch, 2002).
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