

Canadian Architect Compares Tulsa and Vancouver

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HEARTLAND CITY: Alan Hart sees Tulsa as a city located in the middle of the tall grass prairie, founded on the shores of a river with few noticeable developmental constraints. The result is urban sprawl as compared to Vancouver, which has a densely populated downtown.

Tulsans interested in downtown redevelopment gathered in September at the Tulsa County Library's Aaronson Auditorium to hear renown Canadian architect Alan Hart talk about Vancouver, the city he helped evolve from a blighted community into the most livable city in North America. He was here to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities of inner-city redevelopment and speak on the unique challenges of Vancouver and Tulsa. He came at the invitation of Tulsa Now and Sustainable Tulsa, two non-profit civic organizations devoted to raising the quality of life for all Tulsans. The title of his presentation was "Time to Twilight Zoning? Building the Beautiful Back into Tulsa."

Hart's presentation began by exploring the similarities and differences in Tulsa and Vancouver by sighting the unique elements specific to each city. Vancouver is a coastal community located on the western edge of Canada. It is boxed in by mountains to the north, a river and other regions to the east and the United States boundary to the south. Tulsa is geographically located in the middle of the vast tall grass prairie, founded on the shores of a river and consequently serves as a crossroad community with seemingly few noticeable developmental constraints. Vancouver's geological constraints resulted in vertical development of high-rise, mixed-use structures while Tulsa has become a typical midwestern American city of horizontal development, suburban sprawl and the accompanying expressway infrastructure supporting it all. Vancouver covers a total of 43 square miles while Tulsa covers 200 square miles. While both downtown areas cover

approximately the same 1.35 square miles, Vancouver's hosts 58,000 residences and Tulsa's residences number less than 1,500.

A topographical map of Tulsa showing the flood plane of area creeks and rivers reveals an important fact, according to Hart. He says, "If the city restricts development on the flood plains of all the area tributaries it becomes apparent that the city has many hidden constraints to horizontal development." This was a lesson learned in the 1980s, as residential overdevelopment of flood-prone areas culminated in Tulsa's traumatic Memorial Day flood of 1984. The resulting storm water management master plan that came about from that event has become an exemplary model for other cities and Hart believes provides proof the community can come together to address major issues facing the city.

Whatever the circumstances confronting the revitalization of a community, Hart contends the plan of action must include a long-term vision for land use and transportation, protection of natural assets and farmland and must include identifying what he calls areas of smart growth defined by economic, environmental and human considerations. And finally the community must establish and adhere to consistent rules of engagement and governance that encourages and respects citizen input and participation.

Building code issues are always paramount to the infill development associated with inner-city revitalization. Throughout its rise to prominence as a leading quality of life city, Vancouver adhered to what Hart termed comprehensive or performance based codes for development as opposed to the traditional use based zoning found in Tulsa and most cities in the United States. It is a building code protocol based on simplified categories defining what one can build by complying with well defined aesthetic standards and addressing the visual impact on the cityscape rather than the more complicated, quantitative-use-based zoning system defining what one can't do, and specifically how the property must be used. A view of the Vancouver skyline is all one needs to see the beneficial effect realized from embracing performance-based building Codes.

As for the conflict that inevitably arises from different factions involved in the revitalization of a community, Hart has ample advice. "To be successful, a community must maintain the ability to address changing issues and priorities by adopting a way of planning that involves total civic engagement—a community driven by "loving the question." The questions must be seen as providing opportunities to come together and solve rather than factionalize the citizenry. Citizens and developers must learn to look beyond their property boundaries and see a planned vision defining a mutually beneficial future." Other factors must also be nurtured. According to Hart it is essential to provide certainty and protection for both community and developers by providing continuity and cohesive development policies for public and private spaces. In addition most important is the fostering of a collaborative, trusting relationship among citizens and developers.

Tulsa has a good start with the same kind of incremental development that drove the Vancouver revival. “Cherry Street, Brookside, Blue Dome District, Pearl District, Brady District and the promise of the East Village are all initiative components of what can become Tulsa’s inner-city renewal,” says Hart.