

An aerial photograph of a dense urban area, likely an old town, showing a grid street pattern and a mix of building heights and colors. The text is overlaid in the upper center.

PROTECTING THE URBAN FORM AND SETTING OF OLD TOWN

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SITUATION BRIEF # 18.1

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Throughout Greater Victoria, more - and more diverse - housing is becoming a collective regional agenda. But care for urban quality and contextual scale should be integral to that quest.



Continue gathering a healthy concentration of downtown growth, but there is no need for emphasis on excessive vertical tall towers. Keep to moderation, and foster vital streetscapes.

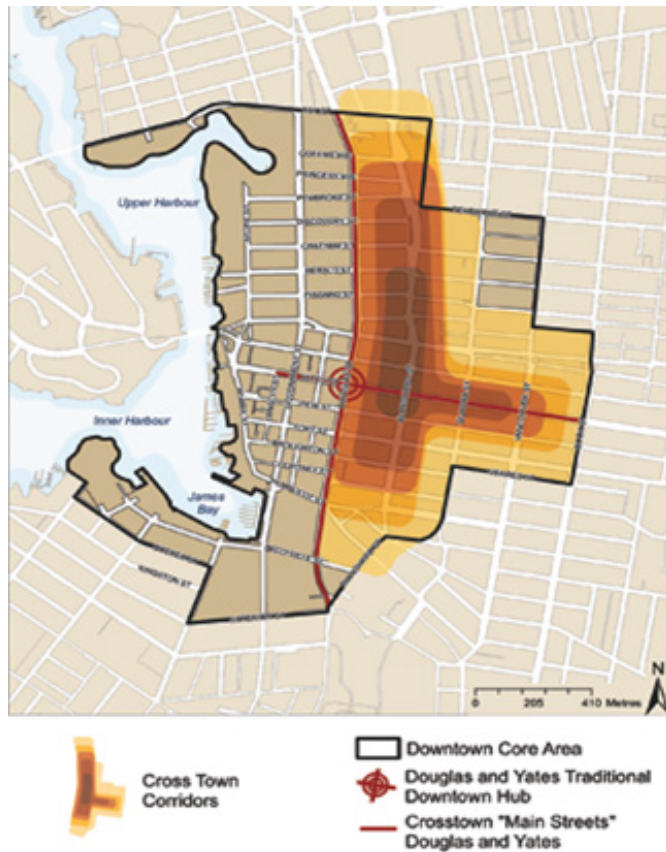
A chief assignment for me as a former senior planner for urban design in Victoria was to identify criteria for patterns of urban intensification — and building types suited for growth for more than 30 years — for an enlarged, distinctive, yet familiar and welcoming downtown.

The city centre would face daunting challenges: More than 10,000 new residents, and more than one million square metres of new building floor area, in the precinct bounded by Bay, Superior, and Cook streets. Continuing to the north, the area has potential to accommodate more than half of the city's anticipated growth for decades ahead.

How to proceed? How to preserve a vulnerable historic centre? How to integrate new buildings in a downtown celebrated for fine-grained pedestrian scale? How to complement our compact city-centre geography? How to maintain good faith with generations of Victorians decrying abruptly tall buildings? How to safeguard qualities distinctive for Victoria?

Increases in height and density were inevitable — but how to alleviate the impacts of height, and to seek compatibly framed streets?

Four options for urban form were considered: In-Town, Across-Town, Up-Town, Cross-Town. After some years of public consultations Cross-Town was selected as the most coherent strategy – to strictly retain the historic low-scale Harbour, Old Town, Chinatown, and Rock Bay districts, while featuring a back-drop of two spines of growth: a dominant corridor between Douglas and Blanshard, pulling development northward, and a more modest secondary corridor centered on Yates Street, filling in the Harris Green neighbourhood.



City Of Victoria – ‘Crosstown’ diagram – growth, away from historic areas

Heights were constrained, with a maximum of the 72-metre Hudson project, a commencement of the primary northward corridor. Heights and densities would then diminish, stepping down block by block, toward surrounding neighbourhoods. Height allowances were identified as discretionary maximums, to be fine-tuned within their contexts, with various public advantages to be gained in rezoning negotiations; they were not offered as entitlements.

A modest skyline was envisioned: a backdrop to our historic downtown, gradually rising from the south and the north, and descending to the east in an undulating contour, reflective of Victoria’s hilly setting, rather than a steep vertical thrust, as now characterizes cities like Calgary and Toronto.



Maximum Building Height	Approximate Number of Commerical Storeys	Approximate Number of Residential Storeys
72m	19	24
60m	15	20
50m	13	17
45m	11	15
30m	8	10
20m	5	6
15m	4	5

City Of Victoria - Downtown Skyline diagram – a modest backdrop

A smaller secondary skyline area was identified for the Songhees hilltop, and a third small-profile skyline south of the harbour — all surrounding a low-scale harbour and historic core, creating the “view basin” of an “urban amphitheatre.”

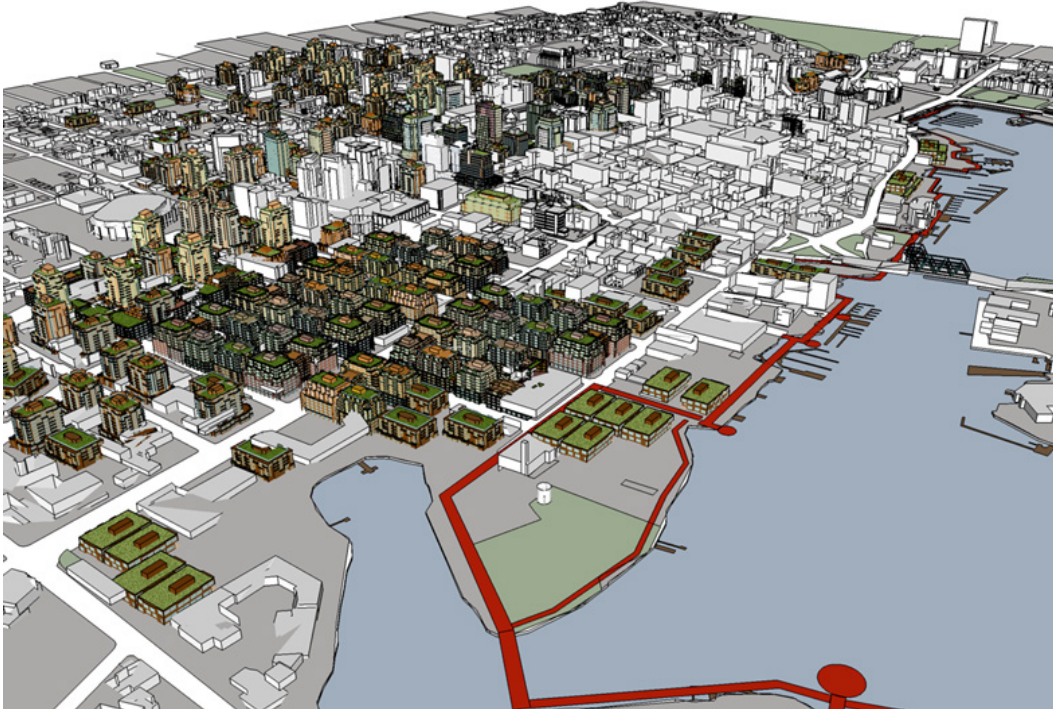


City of Victoria – ‘Urban Amphitheatre’ diagram – complementing the harbour

The long-dormant old-industrial Rock Bay area can take on a low-scale redevelopment pattern to recall the modest-height, but concentrated warehouse and loft-type building forms characteristic of older working inner-city areas complementary to adjacent Chinatown and Old Town. The recent Ironworks building is an excellent example of this potential.



Conceptual illustration of evolution of Downtown Core Area Skyline



General criteria for buildings were established. Respected urban commentators Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl have long noted that pedestrian-friendly, retail-successful street-frontages are in the low-rise range of three to five storeys.

Many urban designers see that combined low-rise and mid-rise (six to ten storeys) areas of cities are the liveliest and most sustainable. They are typically known for walkability — for good “propinquity,” the condition of amiable interpersonal activity. This is certainly a condition not found in dense high-rise tenement areas like suburban Hong Kong, or the Bronx Projects — and not praised as a virtue of Burnaby’s super-high-rise Metrotown.

Allowances for floor areas for lower building levels were maximized, limiting higher levels, emphasizing lower and mid-rise building forms, to avoid large bulky high-rises such as View Towers. This leads to terraced forms, which reduce the visual impact of set-back taller buildings; counter wind downdraft; and provide more sunlight and sky views — all important factors for attractive,

well-used streets, particularly in Victoria's winter climate.

In addition, Victoria's long-standing and very useful requirement of a 1/5 setback envelope from street faces above 10 meters was maintained, but updated for more urbanizing conditions, for general downtown street faces to 15 meters, and for wider streets to 20 meters - another measure that encourages stepping, set-back building forms, as well as set-back penthouses for taller buildings. Otherwise, clearances between buildings were encouraged to be intentionally snug, for an evolving, intimate, fine-scale cityscape.



City of Victoria - Building Street Setbacks Diagram and Examples of Setback Building Forms

Street frontage standards also promote the predominance of continuous retail frontages, typically tight to the sidewalk to help sustain continuous retail energy and pedestrian vitality.

Diverse - and visually lively, high-quality architectural design is highly encouraged, within the general context of these general urban design strictures.

A 3D study model confirmed that such buildings, within height limits, would readily house the intended count of new residents, with capacity for additional growth. 3D mock-ups of 30-storey towers were glaringly out-of-scale for Victoria.

So how would great increases in building height allowances, such as currently proposed for several new tower developments (about twice the proscribed height limit for two Yates Street proposals!) improve on planning objectives developed with conscientious public consultation and confirmation through more than 10 years?

What answer is offered for long-known isolation problems for high-rise family and assisted housing?

A pre-eminent issue here is that of over-all civic identity. High-rise clusters in unwary provincial cities have become naïve urban clichés of the early twenty-first century. There is little doubt that the towns which will retain their distinctive identities and qualities, and their timeless best allure for visitors, through generations to come, will be mid-rise central cities which have fended off high-rises - like Florence, Oxford, Salzburg, Valencia, Antwerp, Prague, Budapest, Vienna, Santa Barbara, Savanna, Santa Fe, Quebec, - as well as older low and mid-rise areas of well-regarded, much visited, larger places such as Rome, Paris, Berlin, Athens, Boston, etc. Why should Victoria not choose to keep to this better company?



Observations

- The low-rise harbour front is under intense pressure to break through height restrictions. Recent private-sector redevelopment solutions to the high costs of restoration is to increase density and thus heights. Unfortunately, precedents have already been established with the recent Wharf Street Gold Rush Warehouses project which added extra stories to two of the City's oldest masonry structures.
- New policies and programs at both the federal and provincial levels are pushing for urban densification as a solution to the national housing shortage. In Victoria this is reflected in the race upwards as developers exploit the City's cross-town densification plan to maximise heights without reference to the plan's call for modulation of the skyline. In addition boundary creep is gaining ground threatening low-scale heritage neighbourhoods such as Fernwood, James Bay and Fairfield.
- Examples of proposals needing to be brought into conformance with wise urban design planning for Victoria: the two Starline projects along Yates Street seek a concentration of new inner-city housing on those sites, but their extreme narrow heights severely conflict with the evolving surrounding, moderate profile Harris Green context. Similarly, a currently proposed narrow point tower addition above the old BC Power Commission Building does not provide for the stepped-form, and side-wings massing that is a characteristic of the Art Moderne idiom at its base. Proposals for high-rise towers next to Capital Iron would confound the essential concept of a low-scale urban 'basin' set over the harbour and its adjacent historic precincts, and do not promise to reinforce the qualities of a long-time urban industrial area, as so successfully evoked in the recent, carefully scaled Ironworks project.
- Urban Capital, a prominent journal of city business, identifies that the

most successful economies are in lower scale towns, and asserts: “It’s generally accepted that mid-rise development creates friendlier cities”.

- It is intemperate high-profit drivers that propel the form of extremely vertical towers. Legitimately, these various projects are proposed for areas due increased density — but could each be adjusted readily, by removing the top third of proposed high-rise and point-tower heights, instead arraying expanded adjacent lower floor areas – creating lower podiums, and stepped building forms, with a mid-rise emphasis — while still achieving intended unit counts. All could be reasonable revisions to achieve sympathetic buildings, to complement Victoria as a unique place, rather than a counterfeit understudy to high-rise cities like Calgary and Vancouver.

Resources

Old Town Core Area Urban Design Guidelines, City of Victoria, 2018

<https://www.victoria.ca/EN/main/residents/community-planning/heritage/old-town-design-guidelines.html>

Downtown Core Ara Plan, City of Victoria, City of Victoria, 2020

<https://www.victoria.ca/EN/main/residents/community-planning/downtown-plan.html>