

BY ARDEN HENLEY

ON APRIL 6TH, URBANARIUM CONVENED CLIMATE CHANGE EXPERTS TO BRAINSTORM IDEAS FOR OUR NEXT COMPETITION BY DISCUSSING WHAT CAN DESIGN DO FOR CLIMATE CHANGE?

THIS JOURNAL ENTRY IS A REFLECTION BASED ON CONVERSATIONS AND NOTES SHARED AT THE WORKSHOP WRITTEN BY ARDEN HENLEY OF GREEN TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION CENTRE WHO IS WORKING TO CREATE A CLIMATE RESPONSE CENTRE IN VANCOUVER.

THIS WORKSHOP TOOK PLACE AT THE MUSEUM OF VANCOUVER BUILT ON A STOLEN SQUAMISH VILLAGE CALLED SENAKW. THE BC GOVERNMENT MADE THIS LAND A RESERVE IN 1877 NAMING IT KITSILANO INDIAN RESERVE NO. 6. IN 1913 THE SENAKW COMMUNITY WAS FORCED OUT OF THEIR HOMES AND BARGED TO OTHER NORTH VANCOUVER AND HOWE SOUND RESERVES.

AFTER THE WORKSHOP T'UY'T'TANAT CEASE WYSS, INDIGENOUS PLANT DIVA FROM THE SQUAMISH NATION, GAVE US A TOUR OF THE UNITY PLANT GARDEN SHE CREATED IN THE CENTRAL COURTYARD OF THE MUSEUM THAT BRINGS INDIGENOUS PLANTS, LIKE CHOCOLATE LILIES THAT USE TO COVER SENAKW, BACK TO THE LAND.

As the impacts of climate change and reconciliation become more apparent, more frequent and more intense will the built environment learn or stand still and mute awaiting its fate? Will an evolving built environment evoke hope or its intransigence add to despair?

In a room at the Vancouver Museum, overlooking the Salish Sea in early spring, Urbanarium gathered architects, designers, planners, academics and more to imagine what a climate change responsive, built environment in Metro Vancouver could look like.

Architects and city planners speak the lingua franca of the built environment, whose intimate effects on us we take for granted, rather than appreciate as one of the ways our consciousness takes material form and links to the natural world. Architects and planners translate dreams and stories into the language of pattern and structure, the language of shape and line, form and materials, canals and roads, land use and zones. They are artists who work within the constraints of function and code. Their conversations create, re-create and maintain our homes, places of work and whatever sanctuaries we afford ourselves.

What changes to the built environment do city planners and architects imagine in response to the impacts of climate change? They do not see an impoverished world, but a different, more local conception of space, more densely inhabited, but, at the same time, on a more human scale. They see living neighbourhoods where arts, public services and commerce are integrated; neighbourhoods with corner stores and boutique manufacturing sites, centres of art, culture and community, schools and university annexes, health centres and recycling depots. Criss-crossing this city of the future, they see walkways, bicycle paths, automated vehicle corridors and electrified public transportation. Underlying it are grey water recovery systems and cisterns. This much quieter urban space invites birds to sing, coyotes to howl and the wind to rustle through the leaves of trees.

Vancouver is an environment where the intimacy of sea and strand is always present. The shapers of this intimacy envision regions of the shoreline becoming Indigenous managed marine parks with traditional buildings serving as centers of community-based, Indigenous-led education. They imagine the return of marshlands better equipped to absorb the impacts of more aggressive king tides and rising water tables, as well as inviting eel grass and ducks to return. They see wetlands effortlessly merging into canals lined by trees and gardens carrying sea levels into the city and off the shore and serving as, yet another, form of urban transportation and recreation. Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Cultural Advisors guide the re-Indigenize the planted environment. Desalination stations dot the shoreline.

This city of the future is not futuristic, but timeless, eschewing uniformity and embracing honky-tonk. Housing is widely varied with an emphasis on repurposing structures, rather than tearing them down and re-using materials, rather than consigning

them to the landfill. Building space is staggered rather linear. The latest trends in residential buildings resemble the Ottoman houses of Istanbul with brightly coloured front doors like in Dublin. Many streets have become gardens with walkways and bicycle paths. The gardens are sources of local food security and centres of social life where neighbours stop by to chat. Street life is vibrant, public and witnessed by many eyes from infants to elderly. Each neighbourhood manages its own micro-grid with spaces in local parks allocated to wind and solar. Patches of brush and forest drawdown carbon.

“A LOOSELY LINKED SET OF NEIGHBOURHOOD-BASED CLIMATE RESPONSE CENTRES DRIVES THIS TRANSFORMATION OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT PROVIDING THE ADAPTIVE VISION, EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES NECESSARY FOR CHANGE ON THE SCALE DEMANDED BY THE IMPACTS OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS.”

As the office culture of the past gives way to neighbourhood-based, shared work spaces, skyscrapers and parking lots transform into vertical farming sites and food markets. Other downtown buildings become centres of increasingly localized production of dry goods, hardware and medicines. More and more downtown buildings are repurposed and disassembled. Deserted parking lots become markets and expand into plazas like the agoras of city states.

A loosely linked set of neighbourhood-based Climate Response Centres drives this transformation of the built environment providing the adaptive vision, education and community development resources necessary for change on the scale demanded by the impacts of the climate crisis. These Centres are the hub of many different organizations with expertise and interests in climate change issues from advocates of cycling to practitioners of environmental law. During climate emergencies, they become cooling centres and sources of refuge. Climate Response Centres exemplify carbon minimalism combining the best of sustainable design with intelligent recycling of materials. Recognizing changes in the built environment accompany changes in the social and emotional worlds of people, Climate Response Centres include a range of programs designed to enhance resilience, wellness and community life.

These designers, in the mediums of wood, tile and steel, in fact, in the mediums of soil and sand, know transition to this new paradigm will be disruptive and stressful and that solutions will entail breaking many of the current conventions that govern the organization of space, the design of buildings, the deployment of materials and the use of lands. They know that sometimes change is born of cruel necessity. But, it is clear that they have gifts to share, creative ideas in abundance and willingness to reshape the built environment in ways that fit a zero emissions future and a new time.